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SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY AND GLOBAL LITERATURE: A READING OF MAHFOUZ'S *KHUFU'S WISDOM*

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Abstract

The term self-fulfilling prophecy refers to a prediction that directly or indirectly causes it to become true, by the very terms of the prophecy itself. Many myths, legends and fairy tales make use of this motif as a central element of narratives that are designed to elucidate inexorable fate. A common motif, a child, whether newborn or not yet conceived, is prophesied to cause something that those in power do not want to happen. This may be the death of the powerful person; or it is often the marriage of a poor or lower-class child to his own. The events come about, nevertheless, as a denouement of the actions taken to prevent them: frequently child abandonment sets the chain of events in motion. The best known example is from the Greek legend of Oedipus. Self-fulfilling prophecies appear in classical Sanskrit literature, in the story of Krishna in Bhagavata Purana. The story of Romulus and Remus is another example. There are several other examples from the modern literary texts too. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, it is revealed that a prophecy was made shortly before Harry Potter's birth, saying that the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord Voldemort would be born shortly. Efforts were made to stop the prophecy from coming true, but not succeed. Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz's *Khufu's Wisdom* (1939) is fabricated around a self-fulfilling prophecy. *Khufu's Wisdom* set in Egypt's old kingdom, is about the reign of the renowned Fourth Dynasty monarch, Khufu, for whom the Great pyramid of Giza was built. Khufu was told by a renowned soothsayer Dedi that after his reign his kingdom pass to no one of his sons but to Dejdef, son of the priest of the temple of the Sun God Ra. No matter what he does to change the fate, he is subjected to an inexorable and mysterious external power controlling his actions and at last the fate only triumphs. With the help of a comparative study, of self-fulfilling prophecy in world literatures, we can analyse the narrative techniques used to explicate the actions and behavior of the characters and the unexpected turn of events in the stories which cause the main character's fear into reality.

Key-Words

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy, Global Literature, Variations.

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This paper deals with the analysis and interpretation of conflict in self-fulfilling prophecy reflected in global literature. The term refers to a prediction that directly or indirectly causes it to become true, by the very terms of the prophecy itself. Although examples of such prophecies can be found in literature as far back as ancient Greece and ancient India, it is 20th-century sociologist Robert K. Merton who is credited with coining the expression self-fulfilling prophecy in his book *Social Theory and Social Structure* and formalizing its structure and consequences. Many myths, legends and fairy tales make use of this motif as a central element of narratives that are designed to elucidate inexorable fate. A common motif, a child, whether newborn or not yet conceived, is prophesied to cause something that those in power do not want to happen. This may be the death of the powerful person; or it is often the marriage of a poor or lower-class child to his own. The events come about, nevertheless, as a denouement of the actions taken to prevent them: frequently child abandonment sets the chain of events in motion.

The best known example is from the Greek legend of Oedipus. Oedipus was the son of Laius and Jocasta, king and queen of Thebes. Warned that his child would one day kill him, Laius abandoned his newborn son Oedipus to die, but Oedipus was found and raised by others, and thus in ignorance of his true origins. When he grew up, Oedipus was warned that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Believing his foster parents were his real parents, he left his home and traveled to Greece, eventually reaching the city where his biological parents lived. There, he got into a fight with a stranger, his real father, killed him and married his widow, Oedipus's real mother.

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Similarly, Perseus the legendary founder of Mycenae and of the Perseid dynasty was one of the first of mythic heroes of Greek mythology. the legend of Perseus opens with the prophecy that he will kill his grandfather Acrisius, and his abandonment with his mother Danae, the prophecy is only self-fulfilling in some variants. In some, he accidentally spears his grandfather at a competition - an act that could have happened regardless of Acrisius's response to the prophecy. In other variants, his presence at the games is explained by his hearing of the prophecy, so that his attempt to evade it does cause the prophecy to be fulfilled. In still others, Acrisius is one of the wedding guests when Polydectes tried to force Danae to marry him, and when Perseus turns them to stone with the Gorgon's head; as Polydectes fell in love with Danaë because Acrisius abandoned her at sea, and Perseus killed the Gorgon as a consequence of Polydectes's attempt to get rid of Danae's son so that he could marry her, the prophecy fulfilled itself in these variants.

Self-fulfilling prophecies appear in classical Sanskrit literature, in the story of Krishna in *Bhagavata Purana*. The ruler of the Mathura kingdom, Kamsa afraid of a prophecy that predicted his death at the hands of his sister Devaki's son, had her cast into prison where he planned to kill all of her children at birth. After killing the first six children, and Devaki's apparent miscarriage of the seventh, Krishna, the eighth son took birth. As his life was in danger he was smuggled out to be raised by his foster parents Yashoda and Nanda in the village of Gokula. Years later, Kamsa learnt about the child's escape and kept sending various demons to put an end to him. The demons were defeated at the hands of Krishna and his brother Balarama. Krishna as a young man returned to Mathura to overthrow his uncle, and Kamsa was eventually killed by his nephew Krishna. It was due to Kamsa's attempts to prevent the prophecy that led to it coming true, thus fulfilling the prophecy.

The story of Romulus and Remus is another example. There are several other examples from the modern literary texts too. According to legend, a man overthrew his brother, the king. He then ordered that his two nephews, Romulus and Remus, be drowned, fearing that they would someday kill him like he did to his brother. The boys were placed in a basket and thrown in the Tiber River. A female wolf found the babies and raised them. Later, a shepherd found the twins and named them Romulus and Remus. As teenagers, they found out who they were. They killed their uncle, fulfilling the prophecy.

In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), it is revealed that a prophecy was made shortly before Harry Potter's birth, saying that the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord Voldemort or 'he-who-must-not-be-named' would be born shortly. To stop the prophecy from coming true, the Dark Lord attempted to kill Harry while he was an infant, but his curse backfired on him, vanquishing him for 13 years in the process, and transferring some of his powers to Harry. This fulfills the part of the prophecy that says, but Harry will have powers the Dark Lord knows not. This would not have happened if

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Voldemort had not marked Harry as his equal, which he was only tempted to do because he heard the prophecy only half in the first place. Dumbledore tells Harry several times that the prophecy is only true because the Dark Lord believes it. Harry is free to turn his back on it, but the fact that Voldemort will never turn his back on it, and therefore never rest until he has killed Harry, makes it inevitable that Harry will have to kill Voldemort, or vice versa. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy because if Voldemort had never heard of the prophecy, he never would have given Harry the power to defeat him. On the other hand, if Voldemort had heard the whole prophecy, he might have decided against attacking Harry and giving him powers; and the prophecy would have become self-defeating instead of self-fulfilling.

In *Lost* (2004-2010), an American television series, Sayid attempts to kill young Ben Linus, because as an adult he will become a manipulative monster. However, Sayid's attempt to kill Ben only results in the boy's being healed by the Others, which causes Ben to lose his innocence and grow up to become the manipulative monster that inspired Sayid to shoot him as a boy. In the movie *Willow* (1988), warned that Elora Danan's birth will lead to her destruction, the evil Queen Bavmorda orders the baby killed; however, her attempts to achieve this result in her own destruction. In the movie *The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004), the Lord Marshal of the Necromongers hears a prophecy that a young Furyan child would eventually cause his downfall. In an effort to prevent this, he tries to kill all of the Furyan people, and ends up causing the main character, Riddick, to seek revenge on him.

Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz's *Khufu's Wisdom* (1939) is fabricated around a self fulfilling prophecy. Mahfouz woven the book's plot out of an Egyptian fable told in James Baikie's book, *Hordjedef's Tale*. *Khufu's Wisdom* set in Egypt's old kingdom, is about the reign of the renowned Fourth Dynasty monarch, Khufu, for whom the Great pyramid of Giza was built. At the outset of the novel, Khufu seems rather bored, and to entertain him prince Khafra brings Djedi the magician/ soothsayer to perform for him. Unfortunately the seer has some bad, bad news for Pharaoh: "Sire, after you, no one from your seed shall sit upon the throne of Egypt" (17) Djedi continued that after his reign his kingdom pass to no one of his sons but to Dejdef, son of the priest of the temple of the Sun God Ra. "He is an infant newly born, who had not seen the light of the world until this very morning" (17).

Pharaoh battled to preserve his legacy against the will of the Fates. He went to the priest's house to kill the newly born infant, but mistakenly killed his maid servant's son. Dejdef has reached the safe place by then and later becomes a military official in Pharaoh's army and happened to love Princess Meresankh, Pharaoh's daughter. Later he happens to save the king from usurpers of the throne (his own sons), and thus married to Meresankh, and becomes the successor of Pharaoh Khufu. No matter whatever the Pharaoh has done to change the fate, he is subjected to an inexorable and mysterious external power controlling

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his actions and at last the fate only triumphs. Self fulfilling Prophecy controls this novel and decides the ending. By making a comparative study, of self-fulfilling prophecy in world literatures, we can compare the techniques used to explicate the actions and behavior of the characters and the unexpected turn of events in the stories which cause the main character's fear into reality. Also whatever is the culture and wherever be the location and setting of novel, self fulfilling prophecies seems to be the same, creating the whole lot of action through out the text.

A variation of the self-fulfilling prophecy is the self-fulfilling dream, which dates back to medieval Arabic literature. Several tales in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, also known as the *Arabian Nights*, use this device to foreshadow what is going to happen, as a special form of literary prolepsis. A notable example is *The Ruined Man Who Became Rich Again through a Dream*, in which a man is told in his dream to leave his native city of Baghdad and travel to Cairo, where he will discover the whereabouts of some hidden treasure. The man travels there and experiences misfortune after losing belief in the prophecy, ending up in jail, where he tells his dream to a police officer. The officer mocks the idea of foreboding dreams but takes quiet note of the prisoner's dream. The officer convinces the prisoner that to follow your dreams is fool hardy, in which he agrees and returns to Baghdad. The officer returns home and discovers great treasures buried underneath his home. This is a story of what would have been had the man followed through on his self-fulfilling prophecy and ignored soothsayers. A variant of this story later appears in English folklore as the *Pedlar of Swaffham*.

Another variation of the self-fulfilling prophecy can be seen in *The Tale of Attaf*, where Harun al-Rashid consults his library, the House of Wisdom, reads a random book, falls to laughing and weeping and dismisses the faithful vizier Jafar ibn Yahya from sight. Jafar, disturbed and upset flees Baghdad and plunges into a series of adventures in Damascus, involving Attaf and the woman whom Attaf eventually marries. After returning to Baghdad, Ja'far reads the same book that caused Harun to laugh and weep, and discovers that it describes his own adventures with Attaf. In other words, it was Harun's reading of the book that provoked the adventures described in the book to take place. This is an early example of reverse prophecy. In the 12th century, this tale was translated into Latin by Petrus Alphonsi and included in his *Disciplina Clericalis*. In the 14th century, a version of this tale also appears in the *Gesta Romanorum* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*.

While the modern self-fulfilling prophecy echoes the past, most would agree that the normal use of the term translates to attitude about events to come. While one's attitude cannot necessarily influence the larger things, such as earthly disasters, one's attitude can influence the smaller things, like the way we relate to other people and their responses to one's expectations. In world literature, self-fulfilling prophecies are used as one of the best plot devices. And there is a great scope for that in the comparative literature since the

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device stands still where as the context, culture, region, society, epoch as well as characters are changed.

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