

The Place of the Setting Sun

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Abstract

The Place of the Setting Sun is a short story. It takes great inspiration from the rich mythology of the Middle East, particularly that surrounding the emergence of Islam, pre-science folklore, and relating to mythical beasts such as giant birds said to be large enough to devour elephants. The narrator is an older sister, unsure of her place in the world, looking out for her siblings who have known nothing but terror to a point of normalising and compartmentalising that part of their lives. We see the narrator transform into her own saviour, a contradiction to the environment in which she was raised. It is common for eldest daughters in Muslim families to carry the burden of generational trauma and become the parent, caring for parents and siblings alike. Rarely do they break free and present an alternative way of being to their siblings and distancing themselves from toxic familial relations due to religious stigma.

Keywords: mythology, Middle East, phoenix, beasts, Islamic, folklore, Persian, birds, childhood

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“And your Lord has decreed that you do not worship except Him, and to parents, good treatment.” – *Surat al-Israa, the Holy Quran*.

“Heaven lies beneath the feet of mothers”. - *Musnad al-Shihab, 119*, after Muhammed (SAW).

The Place of the Setting Sun:

My mother was an Anqā¹. A great bird of flaming wings flying over distant lands, illuminating night skies, returning to us but once in a blue moon. Anqā; translates to ‘she with the long neck’. Her

¹ Anqā is a large mysterious or fabulous female bird in Arabian mythology. She is said to fly far away and only appear once in ages. It is also said that she can be found at "the place of the setting of the sun". The word ‘anqā’ is the feminine form of ‘a’naq (أعناق) meaning "long necked" and "long and thick in the neck". It is sometimes also called a phoenix. Anqā’ is related to ‘anāq (عناق "misfortune, hard affair") and was, along

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Modigliani neck dipped up and down, her head barely moving as she lapped some cool pearls of Zamzam water². This is the closest she comes to Ka'ba³ without bursting into flames, ashes flying asunder. Ismail must have willed it so. He must have prayed to God that no *kāfirūna*⁴ approach the holy Ka'ba without spontaneously bursting into fires sent straight from Jaheem. Or maybe it was just Anqā who kept clear.

Anqā al-Mughrib; 'she with the long neck from distant, unknown land, from sunset, from dawn'. The Arabic language clings to single words describing many things. Mughrib is sunset, it is dawn, it is the beginning, it is the end. And there she was, with her great red feathers, her beetle-eyes gleaning, beak in a perpetual frown, waiting for us chicks to fall from the nest. Sometimes she squawks at us in frustration before flying off into the horizon, swooping down with that great ball of fire, plunging us into darkness. Other times, she parts at dawn, circles the nest thrice, then flies out until dark.

Anāq, another word of similar roots, translates to misfortunes and signifies dead ends. I tell my sisters this. When she squawks and nips at us, she is Anāq, setting our nest ablaze and singeing our undeveloped tail feathers, grounding us in the shadows of trees. When she dips into the ground and unearths glistening scarabs for us to eat, she is Anqā, she with the long neck, she who forages and scavenges for her young and delights them with displays of warmth and light. My sisters and I debate if we will ever develop our feathers beyond fluff strapped to our sides, if we will ever soar the skies and vanish into the setting sun. I tell them that we will learn to fly, teach ourselves if we must.

We cannot decide if we want to remain with Anqā. She had turned on us since our emergence into the world outside the egg. We had seen her chew and swallow our father like a great, fat worm, wriggling pink and weak, trapped in the eternity of her feathered throat. We wondered what he

with 'anqā' muḡhrib used to mean a calamity. The bird was said to be originally created with all perfections but became a plague and scourge.

² Zamzam water is holy water from a sacred well.

³ Ka'ba, often referred to as the Cube in English, is a stone building at the center of Islam's most important mosque and holiest site, the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It is thought that evil cannot approach it.

⁴ Kāfirūna is Arabic for disbelievers or heretics.

could have been like, whether he too was capable of vanishing into the sunset, if he was a star in the speckled sky or simply a lump of ash in her furnaced belly.

I want to fly free, to discover and explore, to forage and create exquisite nests and shelter other chicks who do not want to be nipped and burned by their blindingly bright mothers. I want to study the earth and research the ebb and flow of life. It was difficult to observe the world from this twigged prison, even more so now that the prison is an exposed patch of muck in the ground. We could leave, on our scrappy little feet, but something holds us back. We shouldn't, my sisters squeal in fright, this is our home, and we were told to stay put. I think something more than direct orders is holding us back. The powerful influence of Anqā is present even during her lengthy absence. Eyes all through the forest watch our every move. We are never alone.

My sisters are bored. They stopped listening to me a long time ago. They are happy here, despite the singed wings and bent beaks. They have grown to like this familiar state. It is the foreign they fear. But mother is foreign, I say to them. She is of distant lands, from the place of the setting sun. She does not know this land; she does not speak its tongue. She explores blind-of-eye the verdant pastures of east to observe the locals from above. We were born here. We are natives despite the discomfort of the here and now. She is not. I wonder if this difference in origins has made her resentful. She jabbed me with her sharp talons when I tried to step outside the nest one time, which is now but a hole in the ground, 'neath a tree. Not much of a home, I remember muttering softly when she flew away.

We are unprotected, I tried to say to her. She squawked louder still, refusing to hear me. Perhaps she was not simply blind of eye but hard of hearing, too. Maybe her bejewelled throat, growing by a foot every time she returns, is her only strength. Her warble is known around the forest, her friends, the cosmopolitan pigeons, the common jays, the small wrens all gather eagerly, in hopes of gaining this magnificent creature's approval. She was the queen of her realm, exotic and exciting, and I wondered how far her kingdom spread, if I could ever fly far enough to escape her dazzling influence. Her charisma has won over all the grey, clonal birds, like a star showering her adoring fans with petty praises and lingering laughter, enough to keep them hankering for more. I wondered how I was immune to this great power, this suffocating perfume of charisma, permeating the air around Her.

She is so beautiful, what a shame she has no man to treat her like the queen she is, the cackling pigeons said of Anqā.

They did not know that Anqā had swallowed him whole like a worm, sending him into the void of her great, tall throat. They thought that he had abandoned her with a nest full of babes to care for, to fend for herself.

What a poor, beautiful jewel, wasting away in domesticity. The whiteness of her elegant neck, bedazzled with rubies and sapphires, we should all be so lucky, the elders were hooting. *What a shame her daughters do not share in her beauty, wretched little things,* the mockingbirds cawed. *They are a disgrace to her, so ungrateful and useless, they cannot even fly.*

My sisters and I agreed on something. We did not like the denizens of the forest. They believed in Her above all else and refused to hear any of our pleading twitters. Once or twice, some would take pity on us during lengthy absences and regurgitate worms saved for their own young. But they remained under her spell, and we were seen as ungrateful. They had not seen Anqā drunk on coals, gargling flames, shooting great clouds of smoke into our lungs so that we splutter asthmatic and weak. They had not seen her push us from the tree, protofeathers aflame, squealing in fear. They had only seen her fly elegantly past, plastering ruddy jewels to her well-adorned throat, like a gilded sculpture on wings. They had been seduced into falsehoods and mythologies, seeing only the magnificent creature flying into the sun, and none of the infernos and wastelands she left behind.

Anqā once called me a dog-bird. I had been slowly growing out my wings and talons. My sisters whispered that I was going to fly one day soon. Anqā was unimpressed.

“You will bite the beak that feeds you one day. I can see it in you, you are evil at your core. You do not like your mother, rotten daughter. I can see you growing teeth, filled with venom. You are a venomous creature, more akin to serpent than bird. You deserve not a mother such as I,” she viciously bit my newly developing wings, drawing blood.

I growl. I deserve better than a mother who destroys. I had snapped, after centuries of babied patience, I had succumbed to instinct and animalistic impulse. Braving her revenge was a great risk, but I had gone too far to turn back now. I had never challenged her authority before this fated day. My growl was a sound never heard in this forest before. It reverberated and shook, bouncing off the shuddering trees. The very ground vibrated and cracked open like a gaping maw, cavernous and

black. I shot down and plucked my sisters from the air, saving them from the fall. My wings were bloodied and torn, but I had flown my maiden flight. I had broken free.

“Heaven is at your mother’s feet,” the pedestrian birds had squawked at us for years.

I never managed to reply, holding back my scaly tongue, retort at its tip: “not if hell is at her throat.”

Later, I heard a grey parrot - admirer of Anqā - call me ‘Simurgh’⁵ⁱ. Dirty-feathered, lion-dog, human-bird. I bared my new fangs at her, and she scattered away. Anqā had fled, leaving a ghost of soot and ash behind as she went, setting the forest on fire. We were different species and now we lead different lives. I put out her fire with a jet of bubbling water rising through my throat. My throat grew longer that day. I let out a roar through this elongated pipe, and the gap in the ground closed once more. I was the water that put out the fire, the loyal dog, the fierce lioness, the human with ambitions, the Simurgh from the East. I dove into the ocean, cracked open my gills, and swam away from the forest, towards the place of the setting sun.

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⁵ Simurgh is a benevolent bird in Persian mythology and literature. It is depicted in Iranian art as a winged creature in the shape of a bird, gigantic enough to carry off an elephant or a whale. It appears as a peacock with the head of a dog and the claws of a lion – sometimes, however, also with a human face. The Simurgh is unambiguously female.