

## **The Fictionalised Life of Alexander the Great in the Novels of Valerio Massimo Manfredi**

**Shreya Chatterji**

*“History sometimes reproduces, at a distance of many years, the same combinations of circumstances that generate great achievements. But nothing ever repeats itself in exactly the same way.”* - Valerio Massimo Manfredi

Manfredi’s Alexander trilogy contributes significantly to the body of legends known as the *Alexander Romance*. They are a set of stories retold with varying emphasis and the trilogy works upon establishing Alexander the Great not merely as a conqueror but a man of godly proportions. In keeping with the tradition of this genre, magic and marvels are interwoven with the historical details of Alexander’s life. The books divide Alexander’s life into three stages:

- A prodigal child and a dreamer in the first book *Child of a Dream*(2001)
- An ambitious youth on the colossal expedition of world conquest in the book *The Sands of Ammon*(2001)
- A conqueror scaling *The Ends of the Earth*(2001)

The narrative builds upon the popular legend by asking the question: Who would have been born to conquer the world other than a God? But, what is more fascinating about Manfredi’s retelling of an ancient biography is that it models itself upon the Aristotelian model of popular drama. In every way, it establishes the credentials of the Alexander story as a very commercial plot with the protagonist as resplendent as a demi-god, who suffers the tragic flaw of consuming desires and insatiable hunger for victory and ultimately dies a premature death.

Manfredi’s version of Alexander’s life, though not as authentic as the version by Mary Renault, does lace tedious history with myth and creates a wondrous picture of the “in-between” times.

In the first book of the trilogy, *Child of a Dream*, Manfredi traces Alexander’s parentage. He was born to the great King Philip II of Macedon and his queen Olympias, the erstwhile princess of Molossia. The depiction of King Philip is that of a savagely motivated man and a borderline alcoholic, whose wounds do not sway him from his lofty ambitions of world conquest. He hands down his aspirations as the greatest legacy to his son. On the other hand, Olympias, who hailed from the Molossian tribe, tries to exert her will in political matters. Macedonia being a male dominated unit, spurns her

political ambitions. In her son Alexander, she finds a vent to exercise her will, control and unleash her latent talents.

The young Alexander is portrayed as privileged right from birth, and prevailed upon by ambitious parents. On one hand, his mother instigates all conspiracies and intrigues, paving the way for his ultimate ascension to the throne, and on the other hand, Philip, coaxes and challenges Alexander natural faculties to inculcate wisdom in military matters. Philip, as a ready idol, is a great warrior and leader of his people. His penultimate ambition is to unite all Greek nations and establish supremacy as far as the distant Asia.

Many oracles foretell stories of Alexander's intended greatness and that, like his ancestor Achilles, he is but to live a short but glorious life.

“...What is the meaning of my dream?” Olympias asked the priests of the sanctuary. They sat in a circle on stone seats, in the middle of a green meadow dotted with daisies and buttercups, and they listened to the wind through the leaves of the oaks. They seemed rapt in thought. Then one of them said, ‘it means that the child you will bear will be the offspring of Zeus and a mortal man. It means that in your womb, the blood of a god has mixed with the blood of a man. The child you will bear will shine with a wondrous energy, but just as the flame that burns most brightly, consumes the walls of the lamp and uses up more quickly the oil that feeds it, his soul may burn up the heart that houses it. Remember, my Queen, the story of Achilles, ancestor of your great family, he was given the choice of a brief but glorious life or a long and dull one. He chose the former, he sacrificed his life for a moment of blinding light...’ (*Child of a Dream*, p7-8)

Manfredi's account could have been just a historical document, but he fleshes it out with great dexterity by narrating it as a tale, than mere documentary. It positions itself upon the Aristotelian adage “Probable impossibilities are to be preferred to improbable possibilities”. Some of the myths that Manfredi introduces in *Child of a Dream* are to begin with omens of Alexander's birth. They are swiftly followed by the “myth of the serpent”. The serpent tale divorces Philip from the fathering of Alexander and establishes Alexander as a demi-god, born out of Olympias' involuntary but consensual coupling with a serpent, an incarnation of Zeus. It would be interesting to note here that Olympias was believed to be aligned with the Dionysian cult and the serpent could very well be a Freudian construct.

Alexander's destiny is greatness, and for this purpose, right from his boyhood, the prince is trained by stalwarts such as Leonidas and Aristotle to attain extraordinary

strength of body, mind and spirit. He is told stories of his descent from great heroes, such as Achilles (on his mother's side) and Heracles/Hercules (on his father's side). He is shown carrying a copy of the great poem *Iliad* with him always, which was a treasure trove of the legendary deeds of Achilles, the Trojan hero.

The other legend that anticipates his greatness is the story of his training the wild steed, Bucephalus, who was otherwise wild and untamable, thus, a clear indication is made of taming the Persians and other such barbaric nations.

Alexander aims to surpass his ancestors' heroism and honour, and chooses his companions such as the lifelong friend Hephastion, who are worthy of sharing his god-like fate. His rare bond of companionship with Hephastion strikes a familiar chord of a similar relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, Trojan warriors, mates and lovers.

Before we continue upon the quest of tracing the labyrinth of myth in Manfredi's next novel, it would be apt to quote from an article from *the New York Times* by Elisabetta Povoledo:

“...Manfredi has been challenged on his propensity to blur fact and fiction. ‘We all know that Cyclops or Mermaids or Scylla do not exist, but we would be infinitely poorer without *The Odyssey*, which forms a contextual base for western thought,’ he said, apologising for the ‘highfalutin’ comparison to Homer’s classic poem.

Manfredi added that he “uncovers his cards” in his authors notes at the ends of his books: ‘the reader knows what is based on historical sources and what is my imagination. The key thing is accuracy, because you don’t want to break the spell and risk splitting into the unwittingly comic. What makes the difference is pathos’, he said, ‘the ability to express larger than life emotions that let readers transcend their day to day life...’”

In his own words, Manfredi defends his stance by elucidating in one of his interviews on historical fiction:

“...Only god, if he exists, could write a novel that is not historical since he is supposed to have existed before history, all alone. But if you mean by “historical”, a story that is set in a considerably remote time, well the answer is why not? The first written text of western civilisation is a couple of historical novels in verses called *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and would you define Homer as an author of genre or *War and Peace* by Tolstoy a book of genre?

As we can see, it is only a question of quality, intensity, visionary capacity, and not a question of 'subject'. What really matters when we write a novel is the capacity and possibility to give the reader an alternative life in which he can be anybody and live anywhere and anytime. Our real life is not sufficient compared to our capacity of imagination: that is why we need other fictional lives in which we are allowed to experience emotions, adventures, feelings that our real life has denied us."(Pan Macmillan, 2012)

The second book in this trilogy is *The Sands of Ammon*. Herein, Manfredi doesn't really establish Alexander as a legendary warrior on his venturesome expedition of world conquest. To a certain extent, it portrays the realisation of his father's far reaching aspiration of the Asian invasion and the battles of Granicus and Issus. The central theme of this novel is the pitting of Alexander against a formidable enemy, Memnon, a Greek mercenary fighting on behalf of the Persians. Much like the Homeric Hector, of the Trojan War, Memnon is a brave and admirable enemy. It is a literary device akin to Homer's that Manfredi employs to portray Memnon, not only as a great enemy, but a greater hero. His formidability doubly affirms Alexander's greatness and godliness. Memnon is not only a striking war strategist whom Alexander finds indomitable, but is also, a loving man at home with a wife called Barsine. He is a man much attached to his two half-Greek, half-Persian sons for whom he incessantly worries. He wagers whether they would align themselves with the Greek or with the Persians. Manfredi really sculpts Memnon's character altogether because history offers only the peripheral outlines. Manfredi endows Memnon with a richer character and real human concerns. Like Hector, Memnon worries about the fate of his wife in the circumstance of his death, knowing that he is to lead an army against the invincible and infallible Alexander, the descendant of Achilles. The ultimate irony remains that Alexander does not kill Memnon to persuade us of his virtuosity, but Memnon dies of sickness and disease and Alexander seeks comfort in the arms of Memnon's much loved wife, Barsine.

This novel in its dramatic form, however, reads more as a Shakespearean hybrid of a tragi-comedy rather than the typical Aristotelian mode. In spite of its intensity of tone and profundity of sadness, plenty of light moments intervene the grave tenor of the novel. There is relief in the form of lighter moments, jocularly amidst friends and romantic interludes among lovers. The jokes incorporated in the text, in order to maintain the ancient texture, are barely comprehensible to the modern reader. One could also glean, perhaps, a deliberate attempt on Manfredi's part to approach the style of humour found in the comedies of Aristophanes.

Characterisation becomes the main strength of this novel which is otherwise slender in terms of historical truth. Alexander finds the Persian army insurmountable, with a

10:1 ratio and a formidable enemy in Memnon. Alexander, himself, though talked of as an invincible god, bleeds like a man when a javelin helms him. Nevertheless, he attains greater glories by being declared as the Pharaoh of Egypt. He also goes on to establish the city of Alexandria, and towards the end of the novel, in his pursuit of truth and knowledge of his destiny, goes to the oracle of Siwa.

Manfredi's attempt throughout the novel remains not to portray a historically perfect Alexander, but to provide an interesting story finely interlaced with myths, for readers who are enthralled more by the legend of Alexander than by historical facts of his life. He does include all necessary and accepted history of Alexander, but it is richly enmeshed with far more ancient histories and the unique flavour of his own narrative.

The third novel in the trilogy is *The Ends of the Earth*. The novel depicts finally the decline and fall of Alexander, the Great. When the oracle of Ammon informs Alexander that he is after all the son of Zeus, his tragic flaw of over-vaulting ambition is so fuelled that he commands his army to cross the Tigris and the Euphrates to reach Babylon. He turns to his darker side and like a plunderer, he marauds the beautiful palace of Persepolis and burns it down to ashes. He is no longer the benevolent, golden haired Alexander, but the havoc-wreaking demi-god who marks the end of Darius III's Persian empire. Alexander's portfolio of a Macedonian king, the Pharaoh of Egypt and the great king of Persia is further enhanced with the addition of the new dominion of the Pan-Hellenic league. His hunger for further domination is not satiated though. He adds to his imperialistic aspirations nations as far as India and Arabia. Irony strikes when his army begins to doubt his ideals. They seemed to have drifted far from the Macedonian vision, and Alexander's army is swarming with sceptics, who suspect his adaptations to Persian customs. His companions disapprove of Alexander's choices. Omens foretelling tragedy manifest themselves in quick succession. He loses his war trophy wife Barsine, his loved horse Bucephalus, his best friend and companion Hephestion and even his tutor Leonidas to utter brutal forces. Alexander is surrounded by conspirators who plan twice to kill him. He executes the warriors guilty of plotting against him and sentences his own friends to death who fail to keep him informed of such impending death assaults. Alexander morphs into devil's own messenger, from God to Mephistopheles. In this novel, he dons a cruel, grimacing and unforgiving mask.

His mental agues and demons torment him. He seeks refuge in his favourite *Iliad* for inspiration and faith. He stops eating and falls ill. His dream of world victory is resuscitated again by the adventure of falling in love again. He falls in love with Queen Roxane, who gives him the great gift of fatherhood by giving birth to his son, who is named after him, Alexander.

He goes on relentlessly to wage war against India but his warriors are homesick and war repulses them. He is forced to march backwards to Macedonia, a heartbroken and war-sick man, stretched beyond human capability. The last days of his life are that of a battle-wounded, sick and incapacitated man who is unable even to walk, a far picture from a heroic, lustrous king.

Alexander in the example of his life had defied all limits that God had set for mortals. His passion had helped him lead great armies and overwhelm cities. He had united a vast empire that had begun with his father's military campaigns and he had proved himself as the true heir of Achilles and Hercules. He aspired for a unified world, no longer distinguished and divided between victors and the vanquished. For such a larger cause, he sacrificed all that he possessed, his love Barsine, his beloved horse Bucephalus, his loyal hound Peritas and most tragically, his companion Hephestion. He comes to the realisation that he is as much a mortal as all his loved ones. When his army begins to doubt both his godliness and his invincibility, he is that much closer to a hitherto unknown enemy, called 'fear'.

In one of the interplay of dialogues between Alexander and his friend Ptolemy, Alexander acknowledges his morbid fear of his own mortality:

"...When Alexander turned, his friend looked firmly and deeply into his eyes and asked him, "so do you still love Philip, your father, now that you have become a God?"

Alexander sighed, "if you weren't here before me now, I would say that this question had come from Callisthenes, or Cleitus, the Black...give me a sword".

Ptolemy looked at him in surprise, but he did not dare to reply. He simply unsheathed his sword and held it out.

Alexander took the weapon and cut the skin on his arm with the sharp metal point so that a bright red rivulet started trickling down.

"What is this Ptolemy, if it is not blood?"

"It is indeed blood".

"Quiet. It is not the ichor which is said to run through the veins of the celestial gods," he continued reciting from Homer. "Therefore, my friend, try to understand me, and if you love me, then put an end to these pointless jibes..."(The Ends of the Earth, p2)

Thus, Alexander the Great, in Manfredi's trilogy, culminates into a true Aristotelian tragic hero. His life undergoes a change of fortune, not from bad to good, but inversely

from good to bad. He is presented to us as a virtuous man, who is morally blameless. Alexander, though eminently good and just, is a victim of misfortune, not due to vice or depravity, but due to error, frailty, and overvaulting ambition. In keeping with the Sophoclean manifest *Oedipus* which is the prescription for the *Poetics*, Alexander is also highly renowned and prosperous.

The Alexander trilogy is an enthralling narrative of the life of one of the world's greatest conquerors. The interplay of historical fact, educated opinion and the author's own vivid imagination renders it an epic of Alexander's heroic life, enlivened with compelling realism.

The series is remarkable primarily because the narrative is infused with several references of historical events and practices and yet is far from an uninspired, prosaic historic representation. The reader is absolutely convinced of the plausibility and veracity of all historical content that marks the growth of this bildungsroman. Dr. Manfredi is a renowned historian and archaeologist, and he dexterously paints his canvas with the closest simulation of ancient world and culture.

This series helps the mythical rendition of history which makes it so engaging a read. The question that needs to be asked at this juncture is, what purpose does this aesthetic telling of history serve? Is it merely a source of entertainment? The apparent answer in the negative also recognises the need for an idol and a hero. Myths and legends bring about the resurrection of hopes and values in the context of culture. They impart invaluable life lessons and provide an iconic figure to emulate and look up to. In the modern context, we can trace it to the neuro-linguistic, psychological models. The feelings that ensue are awe and admiration, and the need for confrontation with basic human truths. Such myths and their retellings afford elevated thought, learning and perhaps even an application in everyday life. Manfredi closely adheres to the Horatian precept that stories need to instruct and delight.

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