Pouliuli Essay, Research Paper

In Pouliuli, a novel written by Albert Wendt, Faleasa Osovae awakens to find the life he’s been living all along is a mere fa?ade. Pouliuli invites readers into the Samoan community of Malaelua, which is turned topsy-turvy when Faleasa misleads his aiga and community by acting maniacal. Albert Wendt ties a famous Malaelua saga about a mythological hero named Pili to Faleasa Osovae’s life. In the myth as well as in Faleasa’s story, they both had the same goal, which was to live the rest of their life “free”. To accomplish this goal, they both had to accomplish three tasks. Pilis’ tasks were to eat a mountain of fish which the giant’s had caught that day, to race the giants down a river, and make himself disappear. Faleasas’ tasks were to destroy Filemoni, Make Moaula the new leader, and remove Sau and Vaelupa as council leader. Of course they couldn’t have done these tasks alone so both of them enlisted help from friends. Pili enlisted the help of Tausamitele, Lelemalosi, and Pouliuli. Faleasa enlisted the help of his long time friend Laaumatua and his son Moaula. Finally to get the freedom they so wished for they had to complete one last task. In Pili’s case it was to divide his kingdom among his children while Faleasa had to remove Malaga as congress of the village. In the end, they both end up with nothing. Both ending up in the darkness of Pouliuli.

In both scenarios there is a mirror image from Pili’s saga to Faleasa’s. In what way are the characteristics of the three allies Pili enlist to help him with his tasks similar to those of Faleasas’ allies? How are the tasks in Pili’s saga similar to Faleasa’s tasks? Why did Faleasa actually go with his plan when he knew that the end result in Pili’s story was tragic?

We first recognize the similarities between the mythological saga of Pili to Faleasa’s life as we are informed of the myth. In Pili’s saga as well as in Faleasa’s story they create a plan that would attain the freedom they are seeking. Pili wants to be restored into a human while Faleasa wants to live the remaining years of his life free from the duties he had as a leader.

“…If you set me three tasks and I perform them successfully will you lift the curse off me?” (96) In Pili’s myth, Pili goes up to the Ninth Heaven to ask for his father, Tagaloaalagi, to restore him into a human. Tagaloaalagi sets three tasks for Pili to do. Pili does all the tasks with the help of Tausamitel and Lelemalosi and gets his wish to be restored human. “…Faleasa had just described to his lifelong friend his plan and his transformation from what he called ‘cannibal meat’ into a ‘free angel’.” (16) Pili’s saga is similar to the story of Faleasa. Faleasa has created a plan that would relieve him of the duties as a leader. Both scenarios have three tasks to complete with the help from friends. Also as each tasks is completed the next one gets more challenging. Pili and Faleasa also has to watch out that no one finds out that they are being helped with friends.

As each tasks is completed the next task gets much tougher. Pili and Faleasa realize that they can’t complete these tasks alone so they enlist people that are friends and close to them.

I have other allies, Pili replied. Because he had been forbidden to associate with people he had befriended three spirits who lived near his home. They were Tausamitele-Insatiable Appetite, Lelemalosi-Strong Flight, and Pouliuli-Darkeness. It was with these friends that he devised his plans. (95)

The allies that Pili enlisted have characteristics that are similar to the allies that Faleasa has enlisted.

Lemigao was always hungry, or so it seemed to Osovae. Everywhere they went Lemigao searched for food before he did anything else…He never refused any offer of food even if he had just eaten a large meal…(21)

Laaumatua is a mirror image of Tausamitele. Laaumatua and Tausamitele both have unfulfilled appetite. They are continuously hungry and will always be willing to eat even though they’ve just eaten. They also won’t turn down any meal that is given to them. Moaula is similar to Lelemalosi in the saga of Pili.

Just before evening lotu Faleasa saw Moaula arriving from the plantation with a heavy load of taro. (He had always been amazed by his son’s physical strength.)…

…looking bigger still in falling gloom, he stretched his arms and back and looked over at his father. (29)

In Pili’s saga Lelemalosi is described as a person having strong flight. Lelemalosi is similar to Moaula because to be a strong person a person must have physical strength to be able to do things as carry a heavy load of taro into the village or fly Pili and Tausamitele up to the Ninth Heaven. Tausamitele and Moaula help Pili and Faleasa by helping to conceal what they were doing. Moaula by acting as the new council leader and meeting each matai leader to describe what action should be done at the next council meeting while Tausamitele helps Pili by completing his second tasks which he had to “race the giants down a river which was alive with treacherous rapids, whirlpools, and waterfalls.” (96)

In the end, Pili’s saga as well as Faleasa’s story comes up short in achieving their goals. Faleasa was aware of the tragic end to Pili’s saga and didn’t do anything to change the outcome.

That same night Pili vanished from Malaelua. Some Malaeluans claimed that he had jumped up and been swallowed by his friend Pouliuli and would refuse to become visible again.

The story does not tell us why Faleasa didn’t do anything to change the outcome of his plan so that it wouldn’t end tragically as in Pili’s saga. Faleasa examines some of the meanings of the saga and concluded that

…like Pili in his bitter old age, he too had voluntarily jumped up, as it were, into a living death, into the living darkness of Pouliuli. This conclusion did not frighten him: it was consoling, like being suspended in the core of a timeless sea, without a beginning or an end; and all was well. (97-98)

Faleasa believed that since Pili jumped into Pouliuli, Pili didn’t loose most of his vanity. He ended one life and then started a new one. Still, if Faleasa knew the outcome of Pili’s saga ended tragically why didn’t he do anything to change the outcome of his story? Could the reason why Faleasa didn’t change the final outcome of his plan be because he thought that myths were just myths and could not be possibly true? Was he so sure that his plan would work that he didn’t realize that his plan was exactly like Pili’s? Was he trying to shatter that myth by proving that he could obtain the freedom he so desired? Those questions will not likely be answered for only Faleasa knows the answer.

In Wendt’s novel Pouliuli, he introduces us to a seventy-six years old man that creates a plan that will allow him to attain freedom in the final years of his life. Wendt also acquaints us about a Malaeluan saga of a lizard that takes on three tasks to be converted into a human. They both enlist the help of friends that have similar characteristics to carry out each task. Each of them are successful but in the end comes up short and fail to achieve what they had set out to do. In conclusion things could have gone smooth sailing for Faleasa if he had noticed that Pili’s saga were similar to what he was going through and could have changed the outcome but instead followed the same steps as Pili into the darkness of Pouliuli.