

Symbolic Feminine Role in Indo-Persian Narratives

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When speaking of fables or tales, one inevitably thinks of India. Indian culture enjoys a vast and ancient tradition of narration. The Indian tales have travelled through the continents and have influenced the world's literature. Meanwhile the reciprocal effects of both Persian and Indian literature on each other are undeniable. A major part of Persian literature, prose and poetry, has been formed and developed through the support of the Indian governors. Thereafter the invasion of the Qaznavid (1020-1206 A.D.) to the sub-continent up to the decay of the Tymourid Dynasty (1526-1837 A.D.), the Persian language flourished in India and notable literary works were composed in Persian prose or poetry during centuries. The tradition of narration widely spread in India both at court, where professional narrators were always in search of new stories, as well as in the oral lore of the population. Thus many accounts and narratives of Persian origin were presented in several Indian versions, and a great quantity of Sanskrit stories were borrowed and translated into Persian.¹

You may have heard of Indian narratives such as *A Thousand and One Nights*, *The Book of Sindbâd* or *Sindbâd-Nâma*, *Shukâ Saptati* (The Seventy Tales of The Parrot), *Panchatantra*, *Sanghâsin Bettisi*, etc. in which much of the ancient sub-continental rituals, anthropological codes and thoughts are reflected and registered up to the present time.

As a whole, the most significant characteristics of these narratives are:

1. They mostly follow the multiple framing structures and consist of a series of tales within tales.
2. These narratives cover vast thematic fields and grounds such as historical, mythical, mystical, love and emotional themes; and they contain moral messages. So narratives were applied for pedagogical purposes and also for amusement.
3. They profit from a metaphorical language and transmit a rich allegoric cultural heritage.

These stories can be studied and compared just as any other narrative, according to various criteria; for instance, their geographical dissemination, the socio-cultural factors of their formation and their structure. A significant subject to be taken into consideration could be the matter of "women" in the Sub-continent; their sentimental relationships and individual or social presence reflected in their roles as personages of the stories. One of the most popular

themes concerning women is their guiles and tricks. The feminine characters constantly play tricks on their men, which functions as an engine and rescues the story from the blind alley.

Numerous tales are recounted in anthologies about women's dishonesty and distrustfulness, propagating the misogynist view over women in the oriental patriarchal society. Such machismo gets its origin from Buddhism and Hindu ideologies. According to Hindu creed, women obtain an inferior social position and don't have the right to participate in social and religious ceremonies. The woman character of the stories represents the man's object of desire, she takes part of man's properties; her existence depends on "his" will and "her" identity is described as "he" wants by negative qualities as: infidelity, stupidity and untrustworthiness. The woman is considered as the reason for man's miseries and is normally punished at the end of the story by being condemned to death; evidently because she walks out of the norm or breaks a taboo. The sad ending could be a common characteristic of such narratives in which the main character surpasses the habitual routine of the community.

In *Shuka Saptati* (*Touti-Nâma* in Persian), the parrot recounts tales about women's tricks to the heroine, expressing his sympathy and loyalty. But while pretending to support her lady's desire; the parrot intends to distract her from going out and betraying her husband. On the other hand, all the parrot's tales accuse women of being deceitful and dishonest. Another Persian story in prose named *Sindbâd-Nâma* expresses the same pessimism towards women; the prince is accused of having despicable intents towards the queen and is condemned to death; but the seven ministers (Vizir) of the king relate seven stories during seven days, recalling women's guiles in order to convince the king not to kill his predecessor son.

Two types of women are presented in these tales:

1. The introvert feminine character whose identity is proved in service of men, idolized as the out of reach personable and pure beloved, honored as an obedient wife and caring mother. This character is mostly silent; her personality rests vague or mysterious. As a virgin, the young lady is connected to the divine world either by religion, by choosing a hermit life or by disappearing in an inexplicable way. The quality of being unreachable adds to her value. These women more often have a positive relation with nature, they keep a pet animal (in most cases the parrot, the speaking bird) with what they share innocence and spontaneity and keep spiritual autonomy.

2. The second type is the extrovert feminine character that revolts against restrictions and tries to find a way out of the imposed social pattern of life (what the society names her destiny).

The feminine character is usually a young beautiful lady forced to marry a rich middle-aged merchant. The latter is mostly absent from home due to his voyages. The woman at this state endeavors naturally to find a way out of their imposed monotonous lonely life, and in order not to be caught red-handed and lose their honor, she plays tricks.

In marital relationships presented in Indian narratives, both men and women play tricks on each other. But the insistence is on women's faults. Many of the tales about adultery and extramarital sex declare persistently the women's deceitfulness; because in a fatherly society man is not to be questioned. He is free to get engaged into several relationships. The narratives talk of Polygamy as the man's normal right, whereas the subsidiary meaning of 'honor' for a woman is clearly distinct; it is described as "chastity", "purity" or the "reputation for this virtue". There's a general asymmetry in the major honor-cultures: men gain honor but women can only lose it (their honor is understood in terms of "shame"). For women honor is personal and mainly dependent on their sexual behavior. It is hard to speak of honor relationships for a woman in this context, since she and her worth are always taken to have second place in relation to men.

Back to our tales, various trickery objects are used by story characters: marble, jewels, magical tools. But, the tricky woman uses "words". Guile strategies are also portrayed in various modes: la mise en scène, magic and evasion, anticipation, lies, story-telling and wording.

Story-telling is actually the most common way of guile used in Indian narratives. This technique is used for the purpose of deferring an unpleasant event. In some instances, in addition to the overt narrator, the women characters also turn to be intradiegetic narrators who relate misogynist tales against themselves in order to survive and avoid death!!!! The well-known example is *A Thousand and One Nights*. The "récit cadre" (the frame story) is about the king Shahriâr who finds her queen by chance sleeping with a black slave. Ever since, the king's hatred towards women leads him to revenge. He marries a virgin girl each night and kills her at dawn by sunrise. Once it's the Vizir's daughter's turn, Shahrzâd, she dares to use a strategy of entertainment for the king; she becomes a story teller that recounts a story every night and leaves it unfinished by the sunrise. The king's curiosity doesn't let him kill

Shahrzâd and he waits for one more night to find out the end of the story. The procedure continues for 1001 nights. Eventually she's forgiven because the king falls in love with her. Many of Shahrzâd's tales confirm the king's pessimism towards women. In this manner Shahrzâd starts a therapeutic process to change the King's view by admitting his view. She is intelligent enough to get use of words for creating a trustful atmosphere and showing herself obedient.

Another use of words to deceive is to tell lies: to play with reality, try to recreate a new reality. This is often a risky game to induce the other in error by simulation or concealment and a more or less distorted usage of words. Lying is another form of narration escorted by "mise en scène" to outsmart people's beliefs, superstitions and naïveté.

Here comes an example for both:

An old merchant of Neyshâboor married a woman called Shahrârây, reputed for her fatal beauty among people. While the stupid merchant ignored her she was exceedingly lustful of other men. Soon her cuckold husband became aware of his wife's unfaithfulness and decided to trap her by a trick; he left home announcing he would depart for a long business trip, but secretly returned back home and hid under the bed waiting for his wife and her lover. When they joined together in bed, Shahrârây saw her fool husband's clothes left out under the bed, communicated in sign language with her lover about his presence and said:

"Oh! Brother! God is never pleased if you keep your carnal and sensual glance on me; keep in mind that if you're let into my intimacy, it's just and only because of what I dreamt last night; I saw an old wise man who revealed me a secret; he informed me of my dearest husband's death during his recent voyage and notified that the only way to release him of such miserable destiny would be the proof of my loyalty towards him by passing certain nights with another man without any adulterous involvement. I'm really grateful of your help, may you leave now!"

Next, the man left the house and Shahrârây pretended to sleep. Her husband came out of his hiding place, took her in his arms and treated her with great dignity and kindness.ⁱⁱ

We find the woman in a deceptive stance, inventing a "mise en scène" and profiting from narration and untrue words to hide her treacherous intentions under the guise of loyalty and innocence.

Some other women have a third strategy; they narrate the truth, but in a way that their husband does not believe in them. By giving some hints, the feminine character loses credibility and turns to be an unreliable narrator.

Exemple: A merchant's wife was in love with a man. Once they were busy with their love affair the merchant returned home. His wife hid her lover inside the safe chest and when the husband asked her doubtfully of what had happened in his absence, she related the truth and handed the key to her husband. You can imagine the merchant's fury on the one hand and the fright of the poor lover inside the chest on the other hand. At the crucial moment when the merchant got the key in his hand the woman suddenly said: "*Yadam to râ farâmoosh!*"

This expression reminds an oriental game that resembles breaking wishbones: apparently the wife and her husband must have promised not to accept anything from each other and the first person breaking the rule was considered as the loser.

By this hint, the man takes the entire story as a game and not seriously. In the above-mentioned example and in many more instances, the women's consciousness is observed in clever use of narration as a means of defence. They transform the reality into fiction, push the men forward into the imaginary world and convince them to accept the unreal as real.

The use of guile and its functions in women's lives are to be studied in two individual and social aspects:

1. Individual concept of tricks: human being perpetually works on himself to construct his identity, for what he needs: 1. Personal fulfilment, it means to make who he is compatible to his ideal image. 2. Social recognition which means to adapt who he is with who the others expect him to be. 3. Existential consonance; conciliate his personal expectations to the others' and avoid tensions between the two mentioned aspects. If the individual does not succeed in reconciling these three aims, he'll feel incomplete and unsatisfied. It's a sort of suffering we may call existential tension.ⁱⁱⁱ

So he may react in two ways: facing the truth and self-judgment or self-deceit. In the first case one auto-criticizes himself, admits the reality as it is and learns to live with it. In the second reaction one tries to justify himself, rationalize his behaviour to bear out his innocence and ignore his guilt and loss. Reinterpreting the events helps him believe in himself and his abilities. That's why he relates himself stories, tells lies to himself and forces himself to

assume it even if he knows inside himself that it's a lie. If he can't believe in it, he has to repeat it in different ways for convincing himself.

An interesting example is a tale from *Touti-Nâma* entitled: "The laughing chicken".

Emir of Kerman and his queen were once dining in the garden. The gardener brought a daffodil for the queen while the latter suddenly covered her face and said:

"Oh Lord! This flower resembles the form of the eye; I don't want anybody to see my beauty! I'm yours, just and only yours! I'm unable to look at this flower, much less to touch it."

Hearing so, the roasted chicken served for the king burst to laugh. The queen became nervous and insisted on discovering the reason. The king questioned his ministers, astrologers and other experts; none could give him an answer, but lastly a prisoner divulged the queen's hidden love affair with an elephant warden the night before on the back of the elephant.^{iv}

Why didn't the queen keep silent? She could have said nothing not to arouse any doubts in others. The reason is that she needed to confirm her innocence inside by such dubious pretensions and also needed to calm her doubts and assure her dignity in the public.

2. Social aspect: One hides the truth from the others simply because it's disgusting, unpleasant, reproachful and disapproving in the other's point of view and it contrasts social laws. The revelation of the reality might cause pain and sufferance. But guile helps to avoid such condemnation by law. By abusing of popular thought and beliefs in social norms, the individual can divert law and let his desires survive. As far as you don't touch the social norms explicitly, you live your desire without any conflict. In a patriarchal society where the woman's sexual desire is ignored, her existence is just and only justified as an object for masculine desire, her beauty faces the man's ugliness, her youth faces his old age, her intelligence bears man's foolishness, as is said in *Shuka-Saptati*: "For a wife, a foolish, for the woman, an unskilled lover, ...all these cause much pain."^v Soon she begins to bemoan the waste of her beauty, charm and youth on a person who doesn't deserve her. As the most natural reaction, she will try to search for a way to ameliorate her state of life out of society's sight.

As the society resists in front of any reverse of its law and norm, guile and deceit come to support feminine desire as well as the society's norms and traditions.

To conclude, Many Indo-Persian narratives function as an aiding tool to control the effect of the events in favour of women in male-dominated societies. Narration seems to be vital for women's lives under the pressure of patriarchal norms. The structure of cuckoldry narratives makes it possible for the society to be confident about the essential survival and strength of its social norms, the loss of what will produce fears, suspicions, and senses of remorse.

ⁱ 1. SIDDIQUI Tahira, *Fiction Writing in Persian in the Sub-continent During the Mughal Period*, Islamabad, Iran-Pakistan institute of Persian Studies, 1999, pp. 39-50.

ⁱⁱ 2. HAKSAR A.N.D., *Shuka Saptati*, New Delhi, Harper-Collins Publishers, 2000, p. 99.

ⁱⁱⁱ 3. BAJOIT Guy, « La place de la ruse dans la gestion relationnelle de soi », in *Les Raisons de la Ruse*, Paris, La Découverte, 2004, pp. 48-49.

^{iv} 4. NAKHSHABI Ziâ Al-DDin, *Touti-Nâma*, Tehran, Manoochehri, 1994, pp. 191-198.

^v 5. HAKSAR A.N.D., *Shuka Saptati*, New Delhi, Harper-Collins Publishers, 2000, p. 19.

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