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The Journey of the Story ‘Yousuf Zulaikha’: A Cultural Discourse

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Abstract

In the pre-colonial Bengali literature, there are many poems which are derived from Hindi, Persian, Urdu and Sanskrit literature. Those poems are basically love poems. In the history of Bengali literature, there is a section which is called ‘pronoyopakkhyan.’ In this sections love poetries which have no connection with religion are discussed as religious poetries has a large influence in the pre-colonial period. The poem about Yousuf and Zulaikha has a major place in this period. This is the first Bengali pronoyopakkhyan written by Shah Muhammad Sagir. The poet himself was a Sufi saint. He has a well-versed capacity in the field of Persian poetry. As his earlier Sufi poet Firdausi and Jami have written the poem of Yousuf and Zualikha he took the opportunity to write it in Bengali literature. We believe Jami’s mystical dimension of this story influenced Sagir to write this story. In this research paper, we had tried to find out the cultural dimensions within the story written in different languages.

Keywords: Yousuf Zulaikha, poem, Firdousi, Jami, Sagir.

Introduction: The story of Yousuf and Zulekha is a renowned story of ancient and medieval world literature. The story derives from the Bible (Old Testament) and it makes a journey of more than thousand years and came to Bengali literature in the sixteenth century. We said it a journey because as a journey the story has many dimensions in its path. It changes a lot during the journey. Like a river, the story moves from one bank to another. But the mainstream of the story remains the same. In the fascinating story of Yousuf and Zulekha, we can see the same journey. It makes its journey from one language to another, from one culture to another. After deriving from Bible this story makes its journey through “Quran”(Arabic), “Yousuf wa Zulaikha”(Persian) by Firdousi, “Yousuf wa Zulaikha”(Persian) by Jami and makes this journey to Bengali “Yousuf Zulekha” written by Shah Muhammad Sagir. In this present research paper, we had tried to understand the cross-cultural relations of these texts.

Description: The word "culture" derives from a French term, which in turn derives from the Latin "colere," which means to tend to the earth and grow, or cultivation and nurture. Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing

language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Also, culture is a shared pattern of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Thus, it can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group. Cristina De Rossi, an anthropologist at Barnet and Southgate College in London says,

*"Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music, what we believe is right or wrong, how we sit at the table, how we greet visitors, how we behave with loved ones, and a million other things"*¹.

It means the word culture covered the whole life of an individual. In the present research paper, we were tried to interpret the cultural life of the people portrayed in each and every text of the story 'Yousuf Zualikha'.

Discussion: It is considered that the Holy Bible has been written between 1400 B.C.E to 100 A.D. Musa is the first writer of the Bible. He had written some part of the Old Testament in 1400 B.C.E. Most parts of the Old Testament had been written between 900 B.C.E to 100 B.C.E. The complete New Testament had been written in almost 50 years, from 50 A.D to 100 A.D.² So we can say that the Old Testament is a witness of a long period of time as well as its culture. In the genesis part (37-50) of Old Testament, we found the story of Joseph. We cannot find the name of Zulekha here. She just described there as a wife of Potiphar.

Now we can move on to look into the cultural reflection in the story of Joseph from Old Testament. Here we can see these facts:

- 1) Joseph and his brothers used to feed the animals in the field. They were the shepherd and it is their way of living.
- 2) Yousuf's brothers were sold him to the traders for twenty silver coins. From here we can assume two facts. One, in that time people can be sold for money and bought by the money. Two, silver coins are used as the form of exchange.
- 3) Potiphar bought Yousuf and appoints him as a slave in his home. That indicates the existence of slavery in the social system of that time.
- 4) In this story of Old Testament, we can see the king and his kingdom. Therefore we can see the dictatorship culture here.
- 5) Here in this story, we can observe humans deep regard on their dreams. Whether it is the dream of a common people or the king, it is equally valuable.
- 6) Here in this story, we can see the description of a butler of the king. Therefore we can assume that drinking alcohol is one of the ways of amusement for the king.
- 7) In this story, we could not find the name of Zulaikha. Here she is only described as the wife of Potiphar. From this, we can assume that at that time a wife was known by her husband's name only. That was the tradition of the society.
- 8) In this story, we can see a camel cart carrying some types of perfumes and going towards Egypt³. Therefore we can see here the transport system, International trade and the taste of the people.

Now we can come to discuss the holly Quran. The story of Yousuf described in Quran is inherited from the holly Old Testament. Therefore naturally it can be seen some cultural similarities in the story. So, to avoid repetitions we can ignore similar portion of the culture from these two texts and try to find out the new dimensions of culture in the Holy Quran. In the holly Quran we can see some facts like this:

- 1) In terms of business, slavery, dream and luxury the Old Testament and Quran are similar.
- 2) There is a new interesting fact in Quran. When the sons of Hazrat Yakub leaves home to bought crops from Egypt for the second time, Hazrat Yakub said to his sons –
“Sons, don't enter everybody from the same gate⁴.”

Here we could find a folk belief that if all of them goes in the same direction all of them can face a similar danger. Therefore if all of them went on a different path some may survive the danger.

- 3) Here in Quran we also saw the reflection of supernatural powers. Hazrat Yakub lost his eyesight in the mourn of Yousuf. And when the shirt of Yousuf come close to the eyes of Yakub he gets back his eyesight. We can describe this as a folk belief of people.

After Old Testament and Quran we can move on to discuss the cultural reflection in Firdowsi's 'Yousuf wa Zulaikha' kavya. Here we can find some facts of culture like this:

- 1) In terms of business, slavery, dream and luxury Firdowsi's 'Yousuf wa Zulaikha' bear the similar culture like Old Testament and Quran.
- 2) But in this story, we can see a new thing to happen unlike Old Testament or Quran. Here comes angel Gabriel himself to save Yousuf – to nurture him. When brothers of Yousuf pushed him on the well, Gabriel came himself to help him. Here we can see the poets religious belief that a human directly gets help from an angle.
- 3) In the story, we can see that Yousuf's aunt loves him so much that to avoid separation she executed him for theft. So that Yousuf stay with her as a slave. And as a rule, no one can take away him from her. That is a different culture we could see here – a thief is punished as a slave.
- 4) In Indian stories, there is a major role of non-human characters. Firdowsi might have inspired by that gives a role to a tiger in the story. Hazrat Yakub ask the tiger about Yousuf and the tiger replies like that –

“I did not ate him, nor I know more about that.⁵”

So we can say here that the Indian culture entered into the Persian literature.

- 5) If we talk about the dress-up culture of women of Firdowsi's time, his poetry gives us some clues like that –
“from head to toe, she wore luxurious clothes and royal ornaments.⁶”

Poets this description gives us an idea about clothing and ornamental style of women.

The glory of Persian poetry ends with the great mystic Nur-ud-din Abdur Rahman, better known as Jami. He took his takhallus, or poetical name, which means 'drinking cup' or goblet from Jam, the province in which he was born in 1414 A.D. Among all Jami's celebrated works, 'Yousuf and Zulaikha' remodelled from Firdowsi, is unquestionably the most famous and considered the finest poem in the Persian language. It seems to have been written for the express purpose of showing how an unprincipled woman may pursue a good man for a series of years, marry him at last almost against his will, and make him wish himself in heaven the next day⁷. Here we can find some facts about culture like that:

- 1) This text also represents the same picture in terms of business, slavery, dream and luxury like aforesaid texts.
- 2) Like Firdowsi's text, this text also represents Gabriel as a savior of Yousuf.
- 3) Yousuf's aunt here also executed him and made him a slave. The same rules apply here like Firdowsi's text. The poet said:

"There was a law for repressing crime,
Fixed for the faithful in ancient time,
Which to the injured owner gave -
The captured thief for his thrall and slave."⁸

- 4) In this text, the poet for the first time gives importance to Zulaikha and describes her beauty. Poet's description about Zulaikha's beauty also reflects the cultural aspect of that time. Jami describes her mouth like ruby, her hair smells like Jasmine flower. A lesson can be read from her face. Jami describes her eyebrows like Arabic alphabet 'nun', her nose is a combination of 'Alif', 'Sod' and 'Mim'. Her lips are like 'Shin'. Her face is like the garden of Iram where every rose is white:

*"Her face was the garden of Iram, where
Roses of every hue are fair."⁹*

Jami's this description reflects his own identity as a Persian scholar.

- 5) There is a reference to Huma bird in this text. According to Persians' belief, the Huma is a fabulous bird whose shadow falling on a man's head denotes that he will become a king. Poet describes Zulaikha's fate like that:

"And the Huma of fortune above her flees."¹⁰

- 6) The welcome of Zulaikha by the king of Egypt is a very important part of the cultural aspect. The soldiers were well dressed and well equipped to welcome her. A huge crowd of boys and girls were present there for her. And when she arrived they started singing. The poet described:

*"Loudly in triumph glad voices rang
As sweet-toned singers in unison sang."¹¹*

Here we also can see the offering of Sherbet to Zulaikha:

"Sugar of Egypt, with care refined,

And Sherbet of every colour and kind¹² –

We can take this description as the representation of Muslim culture.

7) Jami is also a Sufi saint. Therefore his works have a mystic meaning also. One cannot leave the subject of Persian poetry without a word regarding the mysticism which permeates it. To us who read poetry for poetry's sake the mystic interpretation is almost impertinence. We cannot avoid the fact that most Persian lyric poetry is double in its significance and has been so interpreted. Sufism is a form of mysticism. The Sufis formed a body of fanatic believers, living in monasteries or colleges under the guidance of an acknowledged master, and devoting their lives to philosophic study and to works of ascetic charity. Here, in the story of 'Yousuf and Zulaikha' Yousuf stands as the emblem of divine perfection, and Zulaikha – the poet's name for Potiphar's wife – shows how the human soul attains the love for the highest beauty and goodness, only when it has suffered and has, like Zulaikha, been purified and regenerated. Such is the deeper meaning of this dramatic love poem which differs in many details from the scriptural story of Yousuf.

The Bengali poet Shah Muhammad Sagir also wrote the poem Yousuf Zulaikha. He follows the footprints of Jami to write the poem. Here we can see some cultural discourses like that:

- 1) This text also represents the same picture in terms of business, slavery, dream and luxury like aforesaid texts.
- 2) Like Firdowsi and Jami's text, this text also represents an angle as a saver of Yousuf. But this is not mentioned here.
- 3) In this text, the poet gave importance to Zulaikha and describes her beauty like Jami. Here Sagir describes Zulaikha's body like a lotus flower:

*Beauty of her body like a lotus
Like the sun rose in the morning¹³.*

There's no need to say that Lotus is a favourite beautiful flower of Bengal. That is why the poet uses its beauty to describe Zulaikha's beauty.

- 4) In the text we can see Zulaikha to dressing herself up for her marriage like this:

*Natak chatak beni jenho pekhi forkani
Choila kath lumbito choibal |
Saghono timir punjo kusum purito kunjo
Champa juthi chameli gulal |¹⁴*

Here 'natak chatak beni' represents the hair designing style of a Bengali woman and 'champa juthi chameli gulal' represents the common flowers of Bengal. So, we can see the cultural representation of Bengal here.

- 5) Like Abdur Rahman Jami, Shah Muhammad Sagir also a Sufi mystic poet. He has also given Zulaikha much importance like Jami. Here also Zulaikha is like a soul who

wants to pursue the beloved god. And after a series of tests, Zulaikha gets her beloved Yousuf. This is actually can happen for the poet's cultural belief.

Conclusion: Therefore after all discussion, it is clear that every single text of this story Yousuf Zulaikha brings automatically some new cultural identity in it. Some inner flow of cultural similarities has been always there because of the adaptation of the story. But when the poet finds it possible he puts his own culture into it. This is how the adaptation and establishment of a new culture are seemed to happen in the journey of the story Yousuf Zulaikha.

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