

Contribution of India to Arabic Wisdom Literature: A Study**Mr. Fazal Haque,**

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Abstract:

Like other branches of knowledge, the ancient wisdom literature of India also appealed to Arab - Muslims a great deal. As is well-known, this country was rich in fable literature, a narrative form, usually featuring animals and birds that behave and speak as human beings. Fables and stories were mostly narrated by wise men of India to highlight human follies and weaknesses. They also sought to instruct through them the common people and rulers on popular levels of wisdom. The two great story works of Indian origin- *Kalilah wa Dimnah* and *The Thousand and One Nights*. Popularly known as The Arabian Nights - are monumental testimony to high levels of Indian wisdom. They became in the course of time popular not only in the Arab world, but also in all parts of the rest of the world as important pieces of international literature through translations of their Arabic versions into all major European and Asian languages.

Key words: Kalilah wa Dimnah, Thousand and Night, Literature, Asian Languages

Introduction:

In addition to the above, among numerous other Sanskrit works bearing on Indian wisdom that were translated into Arabic were *Triya Charitr* (Deceit of Women) *Boddi Sattva* and *Prohitar* (Buddhasafa and Blohar). Likewise, two famous games of mental gymnastics *Shatranj* (Chess) and *Nard* (Backgammon) originated in India, from where they travelled to the Arab world and through it across the globe. As described by the Arab historian al-Ya'qubi (d.897 AD), they are not only games, but also supposed to represent two different philosophies. Besides, such literary

Arabic works as al-Aghani by Abul Faraj al-Isfahani; al-Iqd al-Farid by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih; and two famous treatises al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin and Fakhr al-Sudan 'ala al-Bidan by al-Jahiz, etc., abound in references to early Indian sources, especially while dealing with etiquette, wisdom and polity. The impact of the style and contents of the first two major works of Indian origin *Kalilahwa Dinnah* and *The Arabian Nights* on Arabic and world literature is discussed below in some detail.

Description of the Topic:**➤ *Kalilah wa Dimnah***

The oral tradition of fables in India dates as far back as the fifth century BC. The most important compilation of the Indian variety of fables is the *Panchatantra* (Five Chapters), a Sanskrit collection of animal fables, known as the fables of Bidpai after the narrator, an Indian sage, Bidpai, called in Sanskrit Vidyapati. ¹ This work is a frame story containing numerous fables aimed at teaching man political wisdom and shrewdness. It was intended to guide people to right behavior as well as to instruct rulers in the law of polity. It also contains a fine analytical account of human psychology and sentiments.

The original Sanskrit work, now lost, was a mixture of Sanskrit prose and stanzas of verse. It was originally written by a learned Brahmin named Vishnuserman. ² This book was first translated into Pahlavi (old Persian) by Burzoe (Ar. Burza waih) at the instance of the Sasanid king Khusraw Anushirwan (531-579 AD), who is said to have taken keen interest in Indian literature and science. When he sent his personal physician Burzawaih to India in search of its scientific and medical works, the latter brought with him, in addition to scientific works, the game of chess and the *Panchatantra*. Later, the same Pahlavi version of the book was translated into Arabic by Ibn al - Muqaffa ' (d.760 AD) in the middle of the eighth century under the title *Kalilah wa Dimnah* after the two jackal - counselors to the lion king in the frame story. This Arabic version of the book has got a special significance in the sense that the Persian rendering of it was lost, as was the Sanskrit original. The Arabic version, therefore, became not only one of the earliest secular prose - works in Arabic, but also the basis of all existing translations into the major languages of the world including, besides European tongues, Hebrew, Turkish, Ethiopic, Icelandic and Malay. Later, it was versified also by some Arab poets. For example, Abdul Mu'min bin Hasan al - Saghani (fl. during the thirteenth century) was noted for his poetic version of the book under the title *Durrat al - Hikam fi Amthal al - Hunud wa - al - Ajam* (Gems of Wisdom in the Parables of the Hindus and non - Arabs).

The Arabic version of the book *Panchatantra* was first translated into Spanish in 1251 , which subsequently became the first attempt at story - writing in this European language.³ Then it was translated into Hebrew , Latin and other languages , It is said that the Latin version of the book made by John of Capua from its Hebrew version under the title *Directorium Humanae Vitae* (Guide for Human Life) was the chief source by which oriental fables became current in Europe , following which the stories contained in it not only became popular there , but also exerted a major influence on the development of prose and story - writing in the West , as it was heavily drawn upon by several European writers in their respective works produced in Latin and other languages.⁴

The overwhelming impact of the book *Kalilah wa Dimnah* is clearly visible in a number of early collections of Latin stories. An illustrious example of this fact is that the Latin book *Disciplina Clericalis* compiled by Butrus Alfonso (fl .in the 12th century AD), contains at least one - third of the stories from different Arabic sources. ⁵ Another glaring instance of the impact of the book on story - writing in the West is the collection of Latin stories compiled by an unknown author under the title *Giste Romanorum*. It has been found out by researchers that most of the stories and fables contained in it are taken from *Kalilah wa Dimnah* and other Arabic sources. ⁶

Furthermore, the renowned French writer Jean de La Fontaine (1621-95 AD) clearly admitted to having been greatly influenced by the beast stories of *Kalilah wa Dimnah*. It is quite obvious that he took the basic material of his Fables, ranking among the greatest masterpieces of French literature, from this great Arabic work of Indian wisdom and other Eastern sources. ⁷

The Arabian Nights

Like in their cultivation of the other arts, the Arabs were forward in the field of narrating tales and fables. Their attention to the development of fiction literature came at a later stage, after they had begun to fall into desuetude. They left their indelible mark in this field also Initially; they borrowed the art of narrating tales from the Persians who had produced such famous works on this subject as *Hazar Afsanah* and *Gulistan - i - Sa'di*. When these works were

translated into Arabic, they soon became very popular among the Arab masses. Their immediate appeal tempted Arab story - tellers to produce similar stories on the pattern of the Indo - Persian tales with such success that they soon surpassed even the Persians. They also gave to the world a tremendous collection of stories known as The Thousand and One Nights. It is still regarded as one of the great pieces of international literature⁸. They also wrote a large number of books on this subject, most of which were unfortunately destroyed. An idea of the vastness of this genre of Arabic literature is given by the fact that Ibn al-Nadim recorded in his Fihrist (Index) as many as 140 such books. The observation made in this regard by Crichton, a European Orientalist, is worthy of mention: " The pleasure we derive from the thousand and One Nights makes us regret that we possess only a comparatively small part of these truly enchanting fictions. "⁹

Sources of the Arabian Nights

Sanskrit narrative literature is extremely rich, as a result of which several folktales included in The Arabian Nights originally came from India. Obviously, the noteworthy collection of tales, Katha-Saritsagara (Ocean of Rivers of Stories), assembled and recounted in the narrative verse by Somadeva¹⁰ (fl. 1070 AD) had been one of the chief original sources of The Arabian Nights. This work itself was based on an earlier work, now lost, the Brihat - Katha (Great Tale) by the Sanskrit writer Gunadhya. This is corroborated by the fact that the said Sanskrit work bears strong resemblance to the Arabian tales: magic, demons, orgies, vampires, love and high adventure abound in the 124 sections, or chapters, known as taranga (waves).¹¹ Having been filtered through Persian, these Sanskrit tales naturally introduced the imagery and technique of Iranian life. That is one main reason why the background of The Arabian Nights is preeminently Indian, while its setting is Persian. Moreover, the study and popularity of the Indian tales were largely responsible for introduction of the Indian ideas of rebirth or transmigration of soul into Arabic literature.

The story of Sindbad, a Sindhi merchant, and the seven sages of Indian origin is a brilliant example of the genre of frame story employed in The Arabian Nights. As the story goes, an Oriental king entrusted the education of his son to a wise tutor named Sindbad. In the course of training the young prince was ordered by Sindbad to observe silence for a week, during which period his stepmother tried to seduce him. But when she could not succeed, she tried to accuse the prince before the king and wanted to bring about his death by relating seven stories. Each of her stories was confuted by seven sages, who, in turn, told the king tales of the craft of women. And when the prince started talking, the stepmother was exposed. This story is incorporated in The Arabian Nights.

The style adopted in the narration of the stories of The Arabian Nights is undoubtedly of Indian origin. A.A. Macdonell says:

A distinguishing feature of the Sanskrit collections of fairly tales and fables, which are to a considerable extent found mixed together, is the insertion of a number of different stories within the framework of a single narrative. The characters of the main stories in turn relate various tales to edify one another, or to prove the correctness of their own special views. This style of narration was borrowed from India by the neighboring oriental peoples of Persia and Arabia, who employed it in composing independent works. The most notable instance is of course. The Arabia Nights.¹²

Evidently, the immediate basis of The Arabian Nights was the Hazar Afsanah which was first translated into Arabic towards the end of the ninth century of the Christian era. In the course of time the Arab story - tellers made large additions of similar tales to the original material,

these reflected the achievements and adventures of the Arabs as well as the folk customs, manners and general trends in society which prevailed amongst them during the later Middle Ages, At the same time they gradually substituted the earlier stories with new ones, as a result of which the Persian character of the original became eclipsed. The new collection, made many years later, was called The Thousands and One Nights, and popularly known as The Arabian Nights. Although the new stories reflected the Arabian mind and manners, the general plot and framework, including the leading characters, were the same as employed in the stories of the Hazar Afsanah. ¹³

The first draft of The Arabian Nights was prepared in Iraq in the tenth century of the common era by ' Abd - Allah Muhammad bin ' Abdus al - Jahshiyari. He collected a large number of stories from Arab story - tellers and other sources, and put together from this material 480 long stories. Later, fresh additions were made to the collection. The stories associated with Baghdad consisted mainly of humorous anecdotes and love stories, in which Caliph Harun al - Rashid is frequently featured; those having Cairo as the main centre of the story are marked by ironical pleasantry and the magical element, which is brilliantly illustrated in the stories of Alauddin and the Wonderful Lamp. The original collection made by al -Jahshiyari was open to additions and interpolations until it took its present final shape in Egypt in the Mamluk period. ¹⁴

Its Popularity and Impact

The book which remained neglected in its homeland found recognition in Europe as a valuable ethnographical work. This was the main reason why Europeans paid special attention to it, thoroughly studying and translating it into their languages. It was mainly because of the great interest taken by Europeans, by both intellectuals and the great mass of ordinary people, that it assumed its place among the most celebrated pieces of international literature.

The main cause of the success of The Arabian Nights in the West was the crisis through which European literature was passing owing to the unprecedented expansion of the literate classes, who demanded a more popular type of literature. In the wake of the expansion of Islam, the infiltration of Islamic ideas and of Arabic literary themes into medieval Europe encouraged the European palate seek more than the predominantly ecclesiastical disciplines of the Dark Ages, as a direct result of this phenomenon, European writers started feeling their way towards a new style and the Arabian Nights provided them with the model for which they were searching. It possessed the two basic qualities, that are so important in popular literature, the spirit of adventure and the element of realism. ¹⁵

While the tales are the products of the creative imagination, an element of realism is always present. Thus, these wondrous stories, while providing fantastical entertainment to the readers, not only reflect to a great extent the temperament of the Arabs but also display a wisdom acquired over the ages. For instance, the folk - manners and customs are drawn from society as the narrators saw them. Similarly, the adventures of Sindbad, the sailor, which form one of the best-known tales of The Arabian Nights, have been recognized as based on actual reports of voyages made by Muslim merchants. ¹⁶

Although The Arabian Nights in its present form reached Europe in the seventeenth century, some of its stories were narrated in Italy and Spain as early as in the thirteenth. It appears to have fired the imagination of people in the West, as there was soon quite a demand for the work. An idea of the popularity of the book in the West may be drawn from the fact that it

was published in England and France more than thirty times in the eighteenth century. As a result. Some of its stories and characters became inseparably linked with Western folklore. It was translated into French and English, as well as into most of the principal languages of Europe, that is Dutch, German, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, Russian and Polish.

Some suggest that The Arabian Nights also played a part in the literary renaissance of the West in the field of fiction literature. European historians of literature have conceded that, had there not been The Arabian Nights, there might well have been no Robinson Crusoe and no Gulliver's Travels, ¹⁷

Many of the major European writers studied The Arabian Nights and were influenced by it. The renowned French author Voltaire (1773-1813 AD) is reported to have said that he had gone through this book as many as fourteen times before he started writing his own stories and novels. Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813 AD), a German epic poet and man of letters, was another noted European author who borrowed ideas for his epics from The Arabian Nights. He also contributed a great deal to the broadening of the German imagination by writing his novels on the basis of the psychological development of his characters. ¹⁸ It is also held that George Meredith (1828-1909), an English poet and novelist, was deeply influenced by the Arabian Nights in his novels that are noted for their wit, brilliant dialogue and psychological analysis of the characters. ¹⁹

The works of William Shakespeare, the Fairy Tales of the Grimm brothers of Germany, Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte, the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer and the works of Steele, Addison, Byron, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Dickens and others bear indelible marks of the style and contents of The Arabian Nights. It is not possible to give her a comprehensive survey of the many instances of the impact of the stories of this book on the development of different genres of European fictional literature in the post - Renaissance period; nevertheless, a brief reference to the works of Shakespeare and the Grimm brothers is given below for a better appreciation of the infiltration of the Arabic style, manners and themes into European literature.

William Shakespeare

Some elements of Arabian literature have been found to be so dominant upon the personality and works of William Shakespeare (d.1616 AD) that he appears to have been a product of Arab - Islamic culture and civilization. As rightly described by Prof. Safa Khalusi of Baghdad, it appears as if a pure Arabian soul had transmigrated into his body. It cannot be mere coincidence that he repeatedly mentioned in his works the Arabian scents, flowers, camels and palms. He also frequently mentioned in his works such countries, cities and rivers as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Tripoli, Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem, Alexandria, the Nile and the Euphrates. ²⁰

Perhaps, it would be no exaggeration to say that Shakespeare might not have been able to produce his vast literature, especially his five principal plays, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth and Tempest, had he not drunk deep at the fountains of the Arabic sources of knowledge and inspiration, including The Arabian Nights. For instance, the vivid, terrifying description of Hell given by him in Hamlet has a striking similarity with the Qur'anic verses. While his drama. The Tempest, resembles the story of the island of treasures in The Arabian Nights. Both sources are full of descriptions of magicians and devils working under the command of the sultan of the island. ²¹

There also exist a number of similarities in both plot and content between Othello and the story of Qamar al - Zaman and his beloved in The Arabian Nights. The end of the story in both is more or less the same. The heroes strangle their respective wives to death on the suspicion of betrayal of trust. The only difference is that while the hero in The Arabian Nights, named ' Ubaid - Allah al - Jauhari, is represented as more pitiless than Othello, killing not only his wife but also the slave girl who used to assist his wife in her misdeeds, Othello is content with the slaying of just his wife. The other point of difference is that while the wife of Al - Jauhari was actually disloyal, Othello's wife Desdemona, with whom he had been deeply in love, was innocent, and when Othello himself realizes this fact, he resolves upon suicide to atone for his sin.²²

Shakespeare's other plays, especially King Lear and The Merchant of Venice, also present to the audience material from The Arabian Nights. In both, those found guilty of ingratitude and betrayal are rewarded with the harshest punishments.

The Grimm Brothers

The world - famous collection of fairy tales jointly produced by the German philologist Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) and his brother Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859) under the title *Kinder und Hausmarchen*, popularly known as Grimms ' Fairly Tales, also bears the hallmark of The Arabian Nights not only in contents, but also in the style of presentation. The fables were transcribed by them from oral renderings by the masses, and soon became very popular among the people, as a result of which they were translated into several European languages. And even these days they are prescribed as nursery stories in the West.²³

The authors themselves acknowledged in their comments on their book that they had drawn heavily on The Arabian Nights. For example, story no. 142 entitled the Samli Mountain is taken from The Arabian Nights ' story ' Ali Baba and Forty Thieves. ' In the German version a poor man hears thieves command mount Simsi to open, and the mountain containing rich treasures opens. Then, after packing up treasures from it, they make it shut by saying: " O mountain Simsi, close ". The poor man also becomes very rich by using the same words: however, he has an envious brother who also comes to know the trick. But when he enters the mountain, he forgets the sentence by means of which the thieves used to get out of it; instead of calling ' Simsi ', he starts calling ' Simli ', ' Simli ',²⁴ . In the meantime, the thieves enter the mountain and kill him. Obviously, the word ' Simsi ' used here is none other than the Arabic word Simsim ("sesame ") used in The Arabian Nights.

Conclusion

To conclude, it may appropriately be said that the diffusion of Indian literary wisdom through the Arabic monumental works, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* and The Arabian Nights was not confined to the Arab world alone. It rather stirred and fired the imagination of writers in the West also. It not only became an inseparable part of European folklore, but also contributed to the development of modern literary genres, particularly the novel, the story and drama. In view of the great impact, it has exerted on European writers, Professor Massignon has rightly observed that it quickened the mentality of Europe which the Greek and Roman fables had made dull and languid.

Lastly, it would perhaps be no exaggeration to assert that, when modern writers of the East in general and those of Egypt and Syria in particular, started studying and borrowing new Western ideas and literary forms, it was to some degree old Indo - Perso - Arabian wine in new European bottles.

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