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*Vernacularization of Persian War Epics in Kashmir - A
Study in Historical Perspective*

The valley of Kashmir has always been known for being the meeting ground of different ideas of human civilization that has manifested itself into highest form of synthesis of cultures of which learning, literature and spirituality are most important hallmarks. Chronicler Kalhana writes, learning, high dwelling houses, saffron, iced water and grapes and the like what is common place here are even difficult to secure paradise^{1}. Such is Kashmir the country which may be conquered by the force of spiritual merit but not by armed force by ; where inhabitants inconsequence fear more the next world. {2}The ancient period of Kashmir was the seat of Hindu, Buddhist culture and it produced a remarkable scholarship of Sanskrit that made immense contribution in the development of literature in Indian sub-continent. Literatures like Vamana, Uda Bhatta, Rudratta, Anandvardhana and Abhinav Gupta, Mahima Bhat, Kalhana, KShemendra, Kalhatta, Charaka, Vasugupta, Srivara, Jonaraja,

Prajbhatta, Shukka have made contribution to the development of all different domains of Sanskrit literature(3). Besides Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali and Aprabramsha received favorable impetus. Language and literature received highest watermark up to 14th century when Kashmir passed onto Muslim rule in 1339C.E(4).

The establishment of Sultanate helped Persian language to become a privileged language and it replaced Sanskrit which however, continued for centuries afterwards owing to its richness and patronage of Sultans. The Persian received favorable impetus at the hands of Muslim Sufis who thronged the valley and made it the medium of creative expression. New genres like Ghazal, Rubai, Qasida, Marsia, and Naat and so on became prominent(5). However, the association of ruling and religious elite made Persian to atrophy from common masses who relied chiefly on vernacular stalwarts of which were Lal Ded and Sheikh Noor Din Rishi. However during the successive periods vernacular almost went out of currency with exception of sporadic poetry of Habba Khatun. Habba Khatun chose mundane love surcharged vachun as the genre of her creative expression instead of shruk or vakh that had transcendental appeal.

With the Mughal conquest of Kashmir in 1586, vernacular again lost patronage. The Mughal rule saw extension of remarkable patronage to Persian language and literature that Persianised Kashmir's literary landscape and the tender aspirations of vernacular were strangled under the burden of

state language and culture of elite. So were the common masses relegated to the utter margins{6} thus vernacular became confined only the folk domain. From the Mughal rule, Kashmir passed on to Afghan rule in 1753 C.E and a number of governors were deputed by Lahore Durbar who denuded common Kashmiris of their entire source of living and ruthlessly terrorized people without any leniency {7} The overall picture of Afghan rule appears to be a staunch political arrangement headed by rapacious governors who used all means to suck the life blood of masses. It was during this period that settlement of Mughals vanished, rates inflated and shawl weavers were particularly screwed up{8}.

Kashmir was conquered by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1819 C.E thus and fell from frying pan to fire{9}.The Sikh governors actively incorporated Pandit bureaucrats who were responsible for bringing misery to people {10} Many mosques were closed and many incorporated in khalsa, cow slaughter was strictly banned and during year 1820 a lethal plague broke out that wiped out a large number of people{11}.Everywhere people were in most abject conditions exorbitantly taxed by Sikh government officers{12} The situation was complicated by recurring natural calamities like untimely snow, floods{13} and earth quakes{14} that made people despondent and poets of the vernacular took asylum in Sufi or Bhakti poetry that held sway unabated unto the first phase of Dogra rule. However, during this

period Kashmir saw a spate of Persian masnavis, Mirza Jan Beigh Sami wrote Shah Nama-e-Kashmir, Mullah Ashraf Deler Bulbul wrote Razam Nama, Mullah Abdul Gafur Shopiani wrote Panchgang and Dure Irfan which are didactic and devotional. strong protest is visible in the poetry of Mullah Hamid ullah Shah Abadi who chose to crack whip on the dispensation of time. The excessive segregation of power oriented Persian and folk vernacular become quite clear, Munshi Bhawani Dass Kachroo who was a court poet during Afghan period perfected genre Bahar-e-Taweel where as his despondent wife Arnimall composed poetry in vernacular demonstrates this point.

The defeat of Sikh armies by British East India Company resulted in the signing of the treaty of Lahore by which Lahore Durbar had to pay a war indemnity of one and half crore rupees which was made up by ceding the territory lying between Beas and Indus including Kashmir and Hazara to British. Since Gulab Singh had helped British in the last Anglo-Sikh{15} war they signed a treaty of Amritsar on 16th of March 1846 declaring him Maharaja of newly created state of Jammu and Kashmir{16} and was asked to pay 75lakh rupees only. Gulab Singh was a strong and stern ruler and brought principle of personal rule to perfection. As soon as Gulab singh took over he declared the age old proprietary rights of the peasantry null and void in order to legitimize the policy of maximization of revenues. The Kashmiri Pandits not only formed dominant majority of landed

aristocracy{17} but also monopolized state services. Gulab Singh reorganized Dag-e-Shawl department and weavers were put under severe taxation. With the emergence of organized bureaucracy after 1846 CE the feudal class exercised its exploitation of the artisan of shawl industry through a diversified system of taxation{18}. The Kashmiri Pandits not only formed the dominant majority of landed aristocracy {19} but also monopolized state services. Gulab Singh reorganized Dag-e-Shawl department and weavers were put under severe taxation. The Maharaja even forbade mock warfare{20}so that nobody could have courage to oppose his rule. After the death of Gulab Singh in 1586C.E Maharaja Ranbir Singh ascended the throne. The new Maharaja was exceedingly puritanical in his religious conviction and gave vent to his personal idea of religion in state policies and his rule assumed prominent communal color{21}. It was during the period that Franco-German war broke out resulting in complete ruin of Kashmir's shawl industry which was largest area of employment{22}.The area of gloom and despondency resulted in conditioning of a pernicious mass psyche wherein covertness, refrain from social commitment and aloofness became prominent that resulted in the continuations of Sufi-Bhakti poetry which was bereft of any social commitment. The despair pushed more Sharia and Dharma cautious poets to take refuge in transcendental realities and appeal the supernatural agency and its prophets as no savior could be expected

on the temporal front. Thus Naats, Manqabat, Leelas and Charitas received greatest currency.

The age old mysticism and unabated tyranny of rulers compounded by inclement nature had forced poets to the domain of Sufi Bhakti poetry which was devoid of any social commitment and did not contain a granule of public entertainment owing to the absence of any means of recreation, poets began to render free translations in vernacular of the classic Persian and Sanskrit love epics. The beginning was made in this regard by Moomin Shah of Bebgam Pulwama. Moomin was a highly learned man and a mystic to core . Thus he chose Khwaja Farid-ud-din Attar's famous masnawi Mantiq-ul-Tayeer and rendered it into in Kashmiri. The language of Moomin is ornate and highly Persianized and often erupts in chaste Persian as he reflects.

Marhaba ae hud-hud-e- Janan- e-man

Marhaba ae hud-hud-e -samaan-e-man

Marhaba ae hud-hud-e - humraz-e- man

Marhaba ae hud-hud- e- ambaz-e-man.

This is the first instance of adoption of Persian masnawi and its free translation that proved very beneficial for a long term development of Kashmiri literature.

The tradition was further carried by Mahmud Gami who was born in 1766C.E and died in 1855 C.E. Mahmud was born during Afghan period and lived the whole period of Sikh rule that

followed in the state^{23} and nine years of Dogra rule. About Mahmud Pandit P.N Bazaz correctly observes: a remarkable figure was Mahmud Gami of Shah Abad who is the author of Haroon-al-Rashid and Shaikh Sanaan, Gami thoroughly copies poets of Iran in every respect and was called Nizami of Kashmir by his admirers^{24}. Mahmud wrote free translation of famous Persian masnavis. He rendered in vernacular Shireen Husrau of Maulana Jami followed by YousufZulaikhs of the same author. Mahmud also retold in vernacular Nizami Ganjvi's Laila Majnu and Qisa-e-Harun Rashid.

With the death of Ranbir Singh in 1885 C.E Kashmir entered a new phase, British Government of India made Pratap Singh's accession to throne conditional to introduction of certain reforms and posting of British resident at his court^{25}. The establishment of British Residency and subsequently Regency council that temporarily took over Kashmir government incapacitating Maharaja proved to be a boon. Under the able and inspiring guidance of the Resident and British officers, several measures were taken to prevent the recurrence of epidemics that had been a regular feature through improved sanitation of Srinagar^{26}. After 1890 the British sent to Kashmir several selected officers both civil and military to superintend much needed reforms in administration of the country^{27}. Under the Regency council road connectivity, sanitation and health care saw a tremendous growth. The modernism was facilitated by two

more developments viz, opening of Srinagar-Baramulla cart road in 1890 C.E and spread of modern education the beginning of which was made by Christian missionaries which besides opening schools also opened hospitals in Kashmir.

The two decades after 1890 Kashmir saw the breakdown of isolation on account of impacts of outside forces social and cultural changes came into being{28} .

This of course included the impact of western education in neighboring province of Punjab{29}. The opening of new colleges in 1905, in Srinagar helped to popularize education. Settlement of Walter Lawrence in 1890 to some extent elevated peasant's plight. During this period of transition Kashmiri poets began to play a more conscious role of bringing psycho-social change in Kashmiris who were proverbially meek and coward{30} the poets sought to valorize people by the import of war epics from Persian. Wahab Parray Hajni rendered Shahnama in kashhmiri earning the title of Firdousi -e- Kashmir, Laxman Koul Bulbul for the first time wrote Saam Nama followed by the lucid translation of the same epic by Ameer Shah Kreeri.

The trend was further carried on by Peer. Gh. Mohammad Hanfi Sopori who translated Jung nama Ameer Hamza and Sidiq-ullah Hajini translated Sikander Nama. Around the same period Vishnu Koul wrote Vishnu Pratab Ramayana in voluminous thirty thousand verses in vernacular by freely translating the epic of Ramayana that included the inculcation of

the spirit to fight for truth and justice. The introduction of Jung Namas or Razmia Masnavis had great psycho-social appeal. It was a conscious attempt to rejuvenate the spirit of fighting in Kashmiri whose fighting spirit was dead owing to age old servitude. The people who read or listened to these compositions would often identify themselves psychologically with these brave characters besides getting much needed respite and recreation.

The most important contribution came from Ameer Sahah Kreeri who rendered in vernacular war epic namely Saam Naama and Khawar Nama. Saam Nama is the account in the verse of the mythical Sassanian hero Saam Nareman. Ameer's selection of Saam Naama as his magnum opus was motivated by the popularity of Persian epics that came sprouting out as sequel to Firdousi's Shah Nama and prolific Persian erudite masters like Khaju Kirmani and Asjadi who had already written the legendry account of Saam. Historically speaking the Persian civilization especially Sasanian civilization has been eulogized for its grandeur and has survived as the reference civilization not only in East but in Europe as well which became responsible for the dissemination of archival Persian epics which were transferred afresh throughout the history⁽³¹⁾. The cosmopolitan and highly polished Court, king and city were eulogized in the Persian love epics. Legendry heroes of indefatigable energy and the icons of courage served as the identity makers of Iran instead of characters of Phantasm. The

assumption of these themes with the aforesaid heroes has always been retold and best examples comes with Firdousi, Tusi, Asjedi and Kirmani, with whom these epics attained perfection. The rendering of Saam naama in vernacular verse by Ameer Shah was never a sporadic affair instead a well thought out plan to valorize the Kashmiris. Ameer makes his motives clear as he reflects:

Zibahre dilaver korukh ne bayan.

Muhal ast mardi zi kashmiriyan.

Che kasher natan gurza khanjar wochit.

Wothan chek thar kanh dilawar wochit.

Munael jamanie manz gaomet thela posh.

Kuja dare khoftan kujaa tawo tosh{32}.

Translation

But they have not revealed for goodness.

Difficult is the bravery for the Kashmiris.

They tremble at the sight of daggers and scythes.

They lose heart at the sight of brave men.

They have been rendered meek in their clumsy attires.

Another war epic that Ameer wrote is Khawarnama, which is in fact a mythical tale of the military exploits of Hazrat Ali and his allies. Khawar Nama was written in Persian by Ibn Husaam. Ibn Husaam based his narrative on imaginative wars of

Hazrat Ali but incorporated certain historical events and personalities to give it authenticity and public approval. However the tale is a myth based on the devotion and graceful faith. Ameer chose to translate this tale in vernacular out of his remorse for having spent all his youthful energies in writing and glorifying the Sassanian heroes instead of praising Islamic heroes which could have been for him the bridge to salvation. As prominent literary critic Manzoor Hashmi observes, "Ameer chose to render Khawarnama in Kashmiri at the time when the Sun of his life had begun to sink. Few times back whenever people would get leisure time Khwaar Nama was a favourite pastime. Khawar Nama was so much popular that it was read in every village"^{33}.

The main hero and central figure of Khwar Nama is Hazrat Ali. The epics revolves around the valor, courage, piety and exaltedness of Hazrat Ali. The author clearly speaks out even against the so called Iranian nationalism in which the poet like Firdousi wails over the Arabs conquest of Persia which brought down the tradition of grandeur of the Persian legendary heroes. Instead Ameer vehemently portrays Ali's war and his achievements in these wars much above the legendary Persian heroes whose valor, courage and extraordinary being projected in inevitably in most of the creative masnawis.

Ameer's prioritizing the Islamic heroes over Sasanian heroes clearly marks in ideological paradigm, shift which was

coterminous with his disenchantment with the earlier heroes he had written volumes about. Thus deepening of Ameer's faith in religion clearly finds manifestation in the epic in which Ameer depicts the high moral character of Islamic heroes and are portrayed as the most conscious beings in their conduct. The best example comes to fore when Malik Ushtar is satisfied at the mere glance of Gullchehr and holds back his passion till she becomes his legal wife and the union is consecrated by the edicts sharia unlike Saam Nareman and who enters into conjugal union first with Paridukht and to the dismay of conservative reader with Qamar Rukh. The comparative analysis of the character clearly lead to the juxtaposition of virtues and vices personified an integral part of the existence of these characters although Saam too invokes divine helps and seeks to associate himself with the divine action yet he fails to surpass in piety the heroes of Khawar Nama. The author carefully underplays nationalist feelings in such juxtapositions and avoids the story becoming a fight between Arabs and Persians instead it becomes a fight between the evil and good.

The apologetic approach of the author who was fairly advanced in terms of his age does not preclude literary exuberance and prolificacy of thought that are handled more immaculately and comprehensively. The author maintains a wonderful judicious gap between his deep seated devotion and literary demands of the epic of this volume. Ameer's retelling of

the tale marks of certain improvisations on the original Ibn Hussam's version in which though he retains the exact episodes, character and places but gives more solemn picture in his version. The character of Islamic history are given all the prerequisites and qualities in which they combine valour, courage and skill of the Persian legendary heroes and exemplary piety of Prophet's companions which makes a rare blend of the two. The combination of un matching courage and capacity to indulge into ruthless war is not directed for gaining name and fame and worldly power but the fulfillment of the mission all the Islamic heroes of the antiquity were invested with. Thus heroes Khawarnama combine in themselves two irreconcilable impulses of spirituality and sovereignty. Similarly the women characters of the epic are portrayed as a rare hybrid of enduring feminine sensitivities. Ameer's successful portrayal of these conflicting attributes or character artistically woven into one is itself a real achievement that speaks of authors erudition and tactful mastery of characterization but the reader is overwhelmed by the number of characters included in the epics that makes it inconclusive. The incorporation of fantastic places like Khawar, Kharman, Kamrulkoom and Sahil zamin give the epic an exotic appeal in which the reader is psychologically made to tour to wonderland as he proceeds from one area of epic to another. The exotic portrayal of land is enacted with the purpose of giving the tale a fantastic appeal as well as complicating the hazards such

journeys entail. The depiction of horrendous scenes like death of thousands of men in the desert invites the reader to imagine such a blood bath. Similarly the fights between the characters becomes so vivid and ferociously that the reader almost feels moving with the characters. This successful visualization in itself reflects propensity of Ameer's art of portrayal. While discussing the female character like Dilafroza and Gulchehr the author envisions the physical appearance of an elegant blend of feminine beauty and solemnity. However, the opening of tale within tale complicates the main plot of the epic and the reader is lost in wilderness of subplots. The urgency of author to sustain the narrative to the greatest possible length leads to enact more and more wars across the time and space which lead to digressions diluting the compactness of the tale. The reader feels a bit carried away and unable to relate all the events into a unified compact plot. Therefore the epic tends to be lacking in the unity of action which otherwise is must for any tale to be success.

From the foregoing discussion it becomes quite clear that literary traditions of Kashmir were exclusively shaped by the historical forces, therefore the growth and development of literary culture of Kashmir becomes perceivable only in historical context. The vernacularization of Persian love Masnawis was motivated by their popularity and need to provide much needed mass recreation in the times of gloom. Similarly the import of jung namas(Razmia Masnawis) was a conscious attempt by the poets

to valorize Kashmiris masses whose fighting spirit had been dead. In comparison to original Persian, vernacular *Masnawis* are brief yet these have certain valuable niceties and are testaments to literary profundity of Kashmiri poets and their commitment to society.

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