

**A LEGACY OF FOLK-BRIDES:
THE TRIADIC-DOWRY IN WEDDING IN THE FLOOD**

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ABSTRACT

Poetic imagery is an interesting field that sometimes probes into depth to see, “how the images strike responsively on resonant points in the racial unconscious, producing the emotive power of archetypes and myth” (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p. 250). In this connection, the present study focuses on Taufiq Rafat’s Wedding in the Flood where the story is related through an omniscient narrator giving voice to the perceptions of four different personas in the poem along with his own. Stylistically they correspond to the pentagonal-pattern of classic elements in Eastern symbology namely earth, air, water, fire, and -an additional element to the medieval theory of ‘humours’ - ether. In a folk-tale-like narratorial stance, all of them mention triadic-dowry-items of the bride that powerfully invokes the memory of three archetypal women in Punjab folk lore.

Key words: Taufiq Rafat’s poetry, folk women, the classic elements, stylistic-narratology

Those who have gone

never return.

...

Water does not tell tales:

it reflects only

what it sees.

(Daud Kamal, *Outsideness*: lines 11-12 & 18-20)

And this ‘reflection’ of water has meditatively engaged plurality of writers to produce volumes of literature; a literature that narrates, relates

or retails the stories of those who after having spent their lives near or upon water are gone forever¹. But these are not merely the stories of death; they are also the stories of life. The stories of life having joys and sorrows - the stories of water-like life, cleansing lovingly or destroying eerily but constantly moving, ebbing, throbbing, rushing and flowing far away, leaving behind only the intricate yet powerful watermarks in its wake. One such landmark in Pakistani poetry on 'water' is Taufiq Rafat's *Wedding in the flood* (1985, p.134-6). A tragicomedy that starts with the merry notes of marriage (a promise for the continuity of life in its own right) but ends at sad tunes of death (a full stop on a mortal's existence in this world)².

Rafat who used to "bandy words in a foreign tongue" (1985, p. 24) wrote a body of literature in English "permeated with persons, places and passions that can only be called Pakistani" (Tahir, 1997, p. vii). *Wedding in the flood* conflates the conventions of medieval narrative poems and centuries old traditions of *dastaans* (or folk lore) from Indus-region (*Ibid*, p. xii) through its seemingly simple yet stylistically complex narratorial design. The scene is of a rural marriage taking place at the bank of some unknown river during the season of formidable rains and flood. Instead of telling a long rigmarole by one external observer, the omniscient narrator includes the "narratised speech" (Barry, 2010, p. 239) of four characters. So the poem gets five free-verse-paragraphs. They are further linked with each other through a repetition of triadic dowry of the bride.

Being "a true craftsman like a carpenter who chisels the wood and carves out a great masterpiece" (Tahir, 2009) Rafat 'chisels out' the details about time and place. Likewise the selection of pentagonal schemata at the hands of this 'true craftsman' is not a chance happening. The count of number for Rafat is quite important. Being adept in oriental and occidental symbology he knew the significance of basic elements that constitute a link between 'nature without' (the cosmos) and 'nature within' (the human being). If we focus on the "linguistic evidence" (Barry, 2010, p. 211) of verb phrases introducing thought processes: "*sobs* the bride's mother", "*gloats* the bridegroom", "*thinks* the bride"

and “*grumbles* the bridegroom’s father”- they are starkly persistent. Concentrating on this “linguistic evidence” (Bary, 2010, p. 211) one resolves that just like characters in medieval comedy of humour, personas in this poem are caricatured for comic effects, like a “cartoonist enlarges the most characteristic feature of a face, and ... all other qualities lost sight of” (Long, 1909, p. 160).

The first verse paragraph (lines 1-17) starts with depressing wails of the bride’s mother and depicts her humour, closely allied with earth. By perceiving her daughter’s *rukhsati* as final departure, calling her ‘the shy one’, casting doubts about her ‘faring amongst strangers’, mentioning ‘the lunch’, indulging in details of the dowry (*a cot, a looking-glass, a tin-trunk*, /beautifully painted in green and blue) and following the progress of *baraat* (the wedding party) till ‘even the stragglers are out of view’; she fulfils all the qualities of a melancholic person, being “backward, thoughtful, unenterprising, gluttonous, affected, and sentimental” (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p. 245). In short, her main concern is about down to earth realities.

Whereas in the second stanza (lines 18-26), we find the cheerful, gloating bridegroom, thinking about his bride and making castles in the air. This sanguine person proves that he is “beneficent, amorous, and joyful” (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p. 245) through his promise to ‘forgive her *the cot and the trunk /and looking-glass*’, by glimpsing ‘her slim fingers gripping the palankeen’s side’, and naming her as ‘a pot-licking wench’. And indeed he shows “a dominance of blood” (*Ibid*), a capacity ‘to think with heart’ in romantic strains. His alliteratively musical line, ‘I like the look of her hennaed hands’, gives the most beautiful and the only *bridal* image in the poem (as far as the beauty of bride is concerned). To use Rafatite diction, this image is not “an ocean in a waste of words, /but gently glow, as a gul-mohar glows, /among the splendid everyday shishams” (1985, p. 84-5).

On the other hand, ‘It is dark in the palankeen ... and the roof is leaking’, where we find the bride absorbed in thinking (lines 27-34) while her ‘feet are wet’. The phlegmatic bride is “pale, dull and cowardly” (Holman &

Harmon, 1986, p. 245) since she is ‘cold and scared’, and her only concern while making a lot of complaints about her predicament, is: The rain will ruin *cot, trunk, and looking-glass*, and Rafat proves her lack of courage in a stylistic manner. As mentioned earlier, numbers play an important role in this poem. Every narrator with the exception of bride and bridegroom has been given a space of 17 lines each. While riding in the ‘palankeen on the shoulders of foursome’, the bride is receiving jerks with every rising foot. Under excessive rain the muddy track must have become slimy, the movement of palankeen bearers slippery, and the resulting impact shockingly jolty thus she realises ‘they would hurry, but their feet are slipping, and there is a swollen river to cross’. This gesture of concern by otherwise an unemotional and stolidly calm person, stylistically is a moment of “the *anagnorisis... self-recognition*” (Barry, 2010, p. 224), a moment of dawn after some shock. “*I have been licking too many pots*”, must have been the after-effect. But here she chokes and shows a lack of confidence to confess, to take responsibility. Perhaps it is that missing line in her 8-lined discourse that should be there to counterbalance bridegroom’s (having 9 lines).

Next in lines 35-51, we find the grumbling, protesting (though in a muted way) the bridegroom’s angry father, burning in his rage like a coal. The choleric man has all the characteristics of an “easily angered, impatient, vengeful and obstinate” (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p. 245) person. Because he shows his displeasure, ‘they might have given a bullock at least ... Instead, we are landed with *la cot, a tin trunk, and a looking-glass*’, and jumps to a ready conclusion, ‘all the things that she will use!’ Hence, he gives the bride a silly title, ‘The *silly* girl’s been licking too many pots’ and despite Ferryman’s earlier warning, ‘Come back before three ... or you’ll not find me here’, he stubbornly refuses to change his opinion, ‘but whoever heard /of a marriage party arriving on time?’

So far earth, air, water, and fire; the four cornerstones in western elemental theory have been placed by Taufiq Rafat. But the poem continues across the western thought and into the eastern elemental philosophy³ to synthesise ‘four elements and seven planets’ - a concept given by Omar Khayyam, the iconoclastic poet of Persian Rubaiyat⁴.

Thus in the last verse paragraph the third person narrator with ether like qualities takes the queue.

Traditionally this “external focalisation” being named as “omniscientnarration” (*Ibid*, p. 232-3), makes it perfect for celestial characteristics. Five sentences in this stanza (lines: 52-68) correspond to five symbolic qualities associated with the ether (*akaash* or sky), namely “superiority, dominion, cosmic power (with destructive forces of storms), supernatural forces, and spiritual ascension and aspiration” (Tresidder, 2004, p. 444). In the first sentence, the vantage point of the narrator is set high above in the sky taking a vertical filmic long shot capturing the whole scene in one glance, ‘Bridegroom and bride and parents and all, /the ferryman waits; he knows you will come, /for there is no other way to cross’. Next, the sovereignty and dominion is evident through this command, ‘The river is rising, so quickly aboard /with your *cot, tin trunk, and looking-glass*’. The imagery in third sentence using rhetorical questioning and hyperbole at the same time is simply tempestuous, giving the climax: Who has seen such a brown and angry river /or can find words for the way the ferry /saws this way and that, and then disgorges /its screaming load? Fourth sentence is anti-climactic, the shortest but supernaturally great in literary effect; a synecdoche to signify the call of death by drowning, ‘The clarinet fills with water’. And now the *dénouement* - the concluding sentence is the longest one in the whole schema of the poem,

Oh what a consummation is here:

The father tossed on the horns of the waves,
and full thirty garlands are bobbing past
the bridegroom heaved on the heaving tide,
and in an eddy, among the willows downstream,
the coy bride is truly bedded at last.

Does it involve spiritual ascension or aspiration of the narrator? Or in other words, has the poetic justice been achieved? We will return to this point later.

Both stylistically and narratologically, *Wedding in the flood* could be rated as a modern version of *dastan* (Tahir, 1997, p. xii). Rafat pulls his readers into the folds of a cultural ambience from the very first words, 'They are taking my girl forever'. The opening has a rural resonance: *Jitthydolilathayuthonjanaza utthey* meaning where she descends (as bride) from there she must ascend (as body). The 'foursome bearing the palanquin on their shoulders' (powerfully reminding the pyre-bearers) gravitate the bride to tragic catastrophe of her watery grave. Thus "the *peripeteia* ... or a reversal of fortune" (Barry, 2010, p. 224) makes this poem a complete whole where, "the first line is tied to the last" (Shamsie, 2007, p. 286) thematically. Other cultural thematic of the tale, reinforced through "the *hamartia*" or fault of the bride "which motors the whole story" (Barry, 2010, p. 245) is her 'pot-licking' habit, may be an innocent crime yet ominous enough to bring loads of rain on her wedding day.

But most vehemently forceful, a replica of age old customs is the dowry of the bride. Repeated like incantations with varying tones that are in tune with affectations, aspirations, doubts, malice and authority of the characters show Rafat's creativity. Consider the linguistic data, highlighted here: '**two sturdy lads carrying the dowry**/(a cot, a looking-glass, a tin-trunk, /beautifully painted in green and blue)/**lead the way**'; '**I'll forgive her** the cot and the trunk /and looking-glass'; '**the rain will ruin** cot, trunk and looking-glass'; '**instead, we are landed with** /a cot, a tin trunk, and a looking-glass'; and '**quickly aboard**/with your cot, tin trunk and looking-glass'. Stylized in the background is a constant music of rain - started as 'drizzling'; it keeps on gathering force, 'will the rain never stop?'; it 'will ruin cot, trunk and looking-glass'; then it changes to splash in squalls, 'Dear God, how the rain is coming down'; and finally it whirls 'rising' waves of water into frantic and frenzied 'brown and angry river'. Thus a combination of nature within and nature without, of pouring rain and repetitive narrativity strikes the "racial unconscious"

(Holman & Harmon, 1986, p. 250) of the reader intriguingly like some metaphoric hieroglyph. It seems that in set wedding tradition of posing riddles to test a bridegroom's knowledge in rural Punjab (Pakistani folklore, n.d) Rafat, a sage of cultural legacy is trying to ask or to communicate something deeper and beyond this apparent story of the bride - something allegorical, something symbolic.

There are 'nine and twenty ways of reciting tribal lays', they say. Likewise there could be many options possible to solve this puzzle but one sure lies at the niche of folk tales. Because Rafat's literary tastes and pursuits harboured a special liking for them. A careful scrutiny of most popular amongst them reveals that trigonometric dowry items of the bride match with the details of Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punnu, and Sohni Mahiwal. Tales that take us to the aromatic fields of Punjab lovingly named as 'the land of five rivers', and along the banks of Indus and Chenab, the birthplace of these romantic sagas. Sumptuously beautiful heroines, Sassi, Sohni and Heer were both the kind of faces (Long, 1909, p. 4) as well as names (Barry, 2010, p. 238) capable of launching a thousand ships.

We find, young and "innocent" Deedu of Ranjha got mesmerised by the legendary fame of Siyal's Heer and left his native Takht Hazara for his journey Jhangwards, "lovewards" while "playing magic" on his flute. His magic that could "put even birds resting in trees into a kind of ecstasy" brought the blessings of "five saints" and earned a free crossing over Chenab in a boat. As luck would have it, this boat bedecked with a *palang* (colourful bed or cot) belonged to Heer herself. Being tired he got allured to slumber in it only to be awakened by "angry" voice of Heer and into love's eternal gaze (Sheeraz, 2013, p. 172-6). Rest of the story is a series of secretive meetings (while Ranjha's melodic flute playing love tunes), disclosure of secret, trials of jealousy, sufferings of separation, manoeuvring of miracles, and finally the proclaiming of Heer's hand. On a happy note he left for Takht Hazara to bring his *baraat*.

Another story related to river Chenab (literally, a combination of *chann* meaning moon and *aab* meaning water) is of a potter girl who used to

draw “floral designs on earthenware” at her father’s shop. One day a trader IzzatBaig came from Bukhara to buy clay pots but lost his heart to this Sohni girl (literally, the beautiful). He kept on visiting till all his *mohars* (gold coins) spent and he was given a job and title of *Mahiwal* (buffalo-man). Sohni could not remain intact for long and the rumours of their love got circulating. The hostile family arranged her marriage and “bundled her off in the *doli* (palanquin)”. Mahiwal became a hermit and got settled opposite her new house across the river. Soon their night rendezvous started despite her marriage; and despite the fact she didn’t know the art of swimming but found a solution in her work of art. Night after night, she floated across using an ‘earthen pitcher’ while the water of Chenab, a sheet of molten glass gleamed with her moonlike face’s reflection over its calm surface (Love legends of Punjab, n.d). But her secret could not remain in dark for long.

Similar is the legend of Sassi (literally, the full moon) who also floated, but over the waves of mighty Indus. The Brahmin girl was declared ominous at the time of her birth. To save her life and their honour the parents put her in *asandug* (wooden chest) and threw it into the ebbing river. A washer man of Bhambore saved and raised her. The exuberant beauty fell in love with young prince of Makran, Punnu who came to marry her. But hostile brothers took him back on the back of a camel. Sassi could not bear the pangs of separation and ran towards Makran on foot. Despite thirst and hunger, exhaustion and injuries she continued her journey. Nature took pity on and a spring spurted in the desert. Later to avoid the malice of a shepherd, she prayed and the land slit to take her into its bosom (Aqeel, 1997, p. 98-114).

Thus, Sassi’s life that was saved by her parents while putting her into a box “found eternal refuge” in the “womb of a hillock” (Bhambore, n.d). Other doomed lovers also perished in same ironic way. Sohni whose life depended on the earthenware and on the calm surface of Chenab that used to reflect her “with answering looks /Of sympathy and love⁵”, was provided with an unbaked pitcher; and lost her dear life in the wild, stormy, and flood raked waves of the river. Heer who was daydreaming for her lover’s return was given poison and made asleep in death’s eternal

chamber. Hence, in the light of these folkloric details, the **cot, trunk, and looking glass** in *Wedding in the flood* become allegorical and symbolic images for Heer's bed, Sassi's box, and Sohni's reflection. But this affinity does not end here.

The image of Rafat's nameless *the bride* along with the bride-to-be (Heer), the run-away-bride (Sohni) and the bona-fide-bride (Sassi), bring us to yet another underlying "emotive power of archetypes and myth" (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p. 250). For bride in East is not a simple concept, on philosophical plane it is synonymous to western 'shepherd'. In English pastures he is the man taking care of flocks and on the same analogy Jesus Christ is *the Shepherd*, a caretaker of humanity (Tresidder, 2004, p. 436). In pastorals it is used as a "conventional codeword" for poets, like in Spenser's twelve monthly poems, *The Shepheardes Calendar* (Holman & Harmon, 1986, p. 362). Similarly, *the bride* in Indus region is a context-specific word. In traditional sense it is used for a woman on her wedding but in mystic tradition it denotes the emotions and yearnings of a poet or the human heart. Bulleh Shah wrote his *Baramaha* (twelve monthly) poem revolving around the (outer) cyclic nature and the (inner) agony of bride who is separated from her lover husband (Bara Maha, n.d). So thematically, the tragedy of these brides, their untimely death when they were so young and beautiful is something larger than what meets the eyes.

Culturally, these lovable figures, who were the beloveds and themselves the lovers, have attained permanent niches in the temple of love. Their vibrant legacy is consecrated not only in films and songs but also through myth, art and literature of Southeast Asia. Sassi's grave became a place of veneration for many who visit the valley of Lasbella (Bhambore, n.d). Sohni got an iconic status in Arpana Caur's modernist paintings for decades; her "love beyond measure" - is the title of series of paintings that showcase Sohni in modern day's skyscraper world as embodiment of human courage (Ami, 2015). Heer's been saluted by Taufiq Rafat with a unique poetic verve. As mentioned earlier, in the *dastana* of Heer, '*palang*' is that point of departure where Heer gets mesmerised by the sleeping-waking beauty of Ranjha (lying in her bed).

And that is even before she has the chance to listen to much acclaimed melodious tunes of his flute. Centuries across in the closing lines of *Wedding in the flood*, the bride is ‘truly bedded at last’. It seems as if the roles have been exchanged, here *she* is given the place of *Ranjha*, as a stylistic tribute to: “*RanjhaRanjhakardihunmeinaapayRanjhahoyi /SadomeinuDheedoRanjhaHeer nah aakho koyi*”⁶.

Above all it is in channels of nature that they are loved most. They say “Sohni was drowned, but her soul still swims in water” of the river Chenab (Love legends of Punjab, n.d.). The miraculous spring is gushing and throbbing that once had quenched Sassi in sandy rugged terrain of Makran (Aqeel, 1997, p. 110). And still yet, the orchestral waves of Chenab sing the mystic tales of Heer Siyal. “Then the whole atmosphere echoes with the melodious sound of Ranjha’s flute. The waves go dancing to its tunes. *We belong to Heer’s palang; we belong to Ranjha’s flute; we belong to their love;... they say*” (Sheeraz, 2013, p.187). Hence, by leaving their memories in the flowing nature, these love smitten brides have earned an epithetical reference: *The ones whose names were writ in water*⁷!

Likewise, in the closing imagery of *Wedding in the flood*, when other members of the wedding group, after riding the sea-sawing wilder waves of the river are prosaically washed out from the narrative; the ‘coy bride’, after whirling in an ‘eddy’, is finally given to death’s embrace in a calm and placid downstream. With willows, wailing and watching their own reflection on the surface; the bosom of river-bed lodging her like a cradle; and the overall scene shielding her from world’s gaze like a box or coffin - her final resting place is not less than a tribute that the bride gives to her folk ancestors.

NOTES

¹ Homer’s the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* encompassing the whole Mediterranean basin; the Old English poems *Beowulf* around the coasts of Baltic; Walcott’s *Omeros* about Caribbean Sea and *the Seafarer* about the hardships of life travelling the ‘ocean’s highways’ are few examples of western poetry. Whereas, the East Indian *Mahabharata* and famous

South Asian *dastaans* in verse like *Heer Ranjha*, *Sassi Punnu*, and *Sohni Mahiwal* developed at the banks of mighty rivers.

² It is to give a tribute to Taufiq Rafat's translation, "one point settles it all" of Bulleh Shah's poem, *gal iknuktyvichmukdiaey* (Khan, 2015).

³ Wikipedia holds that five basic "fundamental powers" on which this cosmos is based in *Vedic* thought is related with *bhumi*(earth), *jala*(water), *agni*(fire), *pavan*(air/wind) and *akaash* (aether or void).

⁴ Here is the complete quatrain (Macaulay, n.d. p.78):

You who are product of the four elements and seven planets
And because of that Four and this Seven in perpetual agitation
Drink wine; I have told you more than a thousand times

There is no coming back for you, when you're gone, you're gone.

⁵ As cited by Christine Froula in her seminal essay, 'when Eve reads Milton: undoing the canonical economy' (Peterson, 1992, p.149).

⁶ Taufiq Rafat has rendered this extremely popular Sufi couplet of Waris Shah as: "Ranjha Ranjha I cried till only Ranjha is there /I'm transformed, now Heer has disappeared" (Aslam, 2015).

⁷ Used here in a metaphorical sense is Keats' self-selected epitaph (though he considered it in literal sense), "Here lies the one whose name was writ in water" (Christie, 2011).

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