Cultural Dimensions of a Pre-modern Epic: The *Padmavat*

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"It was the year 947(of the Hijra), when the poet began to tell this tale in words. Of Ceylon and Queen Padmavati, whom Ratna-sena brought to Citaur castle; of Alauddin, the Sultan of Delhi, and how Raghav-caitanya told him of her. How the the Emperor heard, and besieged the castle, and how there arose the war between the Hindus and the Musalmans. From beginning to end, just as the story runs, so wrote he it in the language of the people, and told it inverse" (*The Padumawati* 2005: 13-14),

Thus began the tale of the *Padmavat.* There are many ways of 'reading', 're-reading' and 'interpreting', a text for the reconstruction of the historical past. We all know that works of literature are remarkable for rendering, 'space' to the social-cultural order and help in the breaking of some of the established social-cultural stereotypes. Therefore, literature is a vital tool for the exploration of ideas, beliefs and archetypes of the social order. Leslie Stephen said: "Every man is also an organ of the society in which he has been brought up. The material upon which he works is the whole complex of conceptions, religious, imaginative and ethical, which forms his mental atmosphere" (Stephen 1994: 8).

Hence it can be can be conjectured that an author's text is a production of his epoch, that unequivocally prevails over his discourse. This study will focus on interpreting one of the most popular texts of Awadhi Sufi literature till the present day – Malik Muhammad Jaisi's *Padmavat*, composed in the sixteenth century. Also the present research seeks to identify some of the myriad cultural dimensions of the premodern narrative – *Padmavat* . Following Eugenia Vanina's concept of 'mental programme', the present study intends to facilitate this element (Vanina 2012:8). No doubt, this 'mental programme' will be a complex one and will consist of numerous overlapping and interdependent 'programmes' of various social, gender, religious and ethno-cultural segments (Vanina 2012 :8).

The Poet and His Genre

In the sixteenth century Awadhi was used as a literary tool by the sufi poets to give expression to their ideas in the form of poetry (Saksena 1971 : 11). The most recognized work in Awadhi dialect is undoubtedly the *Padmavat*, written in c.1540. It has been accepted as a quasi-historical Awadhi poem. Thomas de Bruijn says, "Muhammad Jaisi's *Padmavat* is based on the historical tale of the sack of the Rajput stronghold of Chitor by Sultan Alauddin Khilji in the fourteenth century – not the most obvious example of a 'Muslim' poem" (Bruijn 2011 : 127). Little is known about the life of Jaisi as can be gleaned from his *Padmavat*. It is believed that Jaisi was born in c.1477-1494 (Shirreff 1944: vi). Jaisi lived in Jais, situated in Manikpur of the sixteenth century (Fazl 1978: 96-97). Jaisi was a sufi belonging to the Chishti order and in the *Padmavat* he overstates:

Saiyyad Ashraf pir piyaara,

tina mohi panth dinah ujiyaara

Maargat hut andhiyaar asujha,

bha anjhor sab jaana boojha

Jehanghir hoi chishti nihah kalank jas chand

(*Padmavat* 1955:19).

Saiyad Ashraf (Jehangir) was an elect saint, and he it was who threw light upon my path. He lit the lamp of love within my heart ; the light burned up, and my heart became pure. My way had been dark and invisible, and lo! it became bright and I understood. His family title was Jahangir, pur like the moon. He was the holy master of the world, and I am the slave of his house (The Padumawati 2005 :10).

Perhaps Jaisi is referring to his spiritual *pir* /*guru*/guide as Saiyid Ashraf Jehangir of the Chishti sufi order, and he is praising his *pir* for enlightening his path,and thereby removing all the darkness from his life. Saiyid Ashraf Jehangir was a chishti saint of the medieval period (Rizvi 1978 :266-267). In all probability one can say that Jaisi could have manipulated his allegory accordingly, since he has interspersed his narrative with sufi beliefs,and assisted in projection of the socio-cultural- religious ideals and practices of the

medieval north India . One should also not forget as mentioned by Eric Hobsbawm that, " all history is full of implicit or explicit counterfactuals" (Hobsbawm 2012 : 150).

As Robert Hodge also pointed out that an aesthetic discourse can be defined through the characteristics of any literary work (Hodge 1990: 21-28). The *Padmavat* has been largely accepted as belonging to the Persian *mathnawi* or *masnawi* genre (Bosworth et al 1991: 833-835). Apparently the romantic story of *Padmavat* is symbolic of the divine love between human soul and God (Bruijn 2011 : 122-123).Awadhi sufi poets of the later period also seems to have followed this paradigm , and such a genre was dependent on the use of certain categorizations. Aditya Behl says," all the terms translated from Indian religious practice are fitted into the narrative frame of love stories such as those of Ratnasen and Padmavati" (Behl 2002 : 96). Also Ramya Sreenivasan has altogether tried to analyse the historicity of the tale of Padmini in the context of the genre of *Padmavat* (Sreenivasan 2009 :74-76). While K.B. Jindal writes "Jayasi has not based the story of his *Padmavat* on an imaginary plot. The story centres around the historical act of the siege of Chittor in A.D.1290, with some modifications to suit the purpose of the narrative. Ratan Sen, the then King of Mewar has been mentioned as the hero,instead of Bhim Sen who was on the throne when the episode happened" (Jindal 1993:41).

Jaisi was also aware of the other contemporary Awadhi poetical discourse, since he has mentioned about *Mrigavati* of Qutban (c.1503) and the *Madhumalti* of Manjhan (c.1540) :

> *Mirigavati kahan jogi bhaeyu* (*Padmavat* 1955: 266).

> *Madhumalti kahan kahan kinha viyogu* (*Padmavat* 1955: 266).

Ergo the genre adopted by Jaisi seems to have been carried not just by his contemporaries, Qutban and Manjhan but it became a legacy for the later Awadhi poets of same genre. However the genre can be interpreted differently and can be labelled also as the 'mystic' genre.

An Inclusive Framework:

A number of religious sects– different forms of Bhakti including the Saguna and Nirguna forms, Nathpanthis, Sahajiyas, Gorakpanthis etc.were prevalent in the sixteenth century

north India.   S.A.A.Rizvi has talked of the interactions between medieval Hindu mystic traditions and Sufism (Rizvi 1978 : 322-396). Muzaffar Alam with reference to the region of Awadh has remarked that, Awadh has been a stronghold of the sufic doctrine of *Wahdat-ul-Wujud* (Unity of Being), which promoted a belief in the essential unity of all phenomena, however diverse and irreconcilably conflicting they might appear (Alam1996 : 174). This gets reflected in Jaisi's use of certain terms and concepts of the Sufi and Bhakti beliefs, also simultaneously accepting the practices and traditions of the Gorakhnath (Briggs 1938), and the Nathpanthis. And Jaisi has discussed contemporary cultural-religious practices in great details. Rizvi says," the motive of these sufi poets who wrote Hindi *masnawis* was to arouse indescribable ecstasy both in themselves and in others thus obliterating the distinction between 'Thou' and 'I' " (Rizvi 1978 : 364). Jaisi has described God in different forms like '*ek kartar* ' (one God), 'formless', and has pointed to the Digambar sect. Jaisi says:

Savanro aadi ek kartaru,

Jehin jiyun dinah kinah sansarun (*Padmavat* 1955 : 1).

Jaisi is praising and remembering God as One, '*ek kartar*', because God gave us life and made this world. Further Jaisi says:

Alakh arup abran so karta,

Vaha sab saun sab ohi saun barta (*Padmavat* 1955: 7).

While narrating the story of Ratansen and Padmini,   Jaisi has made use of popular folktales such as the *Ramkatha or* Rama story in order to justify the events of his story. He writes:

Nahin so ram hanivant badi duri,

kau layi aav sanjivani muri (*Padmavat* 1955 : 136).

In the above lines Jaisi draws the analogy with the popular *Ramkatha*. Jaisi is talking about the sad state of the king who has fainted, and he is says that when Lakshman had fainted Hanuman had brought the sanjivani medicine. While talking of the king's predicament he is sad to see that no one is there to help the king. Perhaps by use of the popular folk lores,and sufi and Bhakti concepts   Jaisi, was trying to bring about an homogenization of   the medieval society.Thomas de Bruijn say," Awadhi epics are a part of a 'composite' culture, where Indian

Sufi poets converted local stories into epics of mystical love"(Bruijn 2011: 122-123). As Jindal writes: "The sufis steered clean of all controversy and showed a path of love that could easily be acceptable to all. They did not bother so much about establishing the oneness of God as the Universal Brotherhood of mankind. And their method of presentation was also very inviting. They combined entertainment with edification" (Jindal 1993 : 45). There are a number of indications to Gorakhnath and the Nathpanthi traditions in the *Padmavat,* since in the narration of his allegory Jaisi uses the concepts, and motifs relating to these :

Chand badan aur chandan deha,

Bhasm chadai kinha tan kheha (*Padmavat* 1955 : 142).

Siddhi hoi kahan Gorakh kaha (*Padmavat* 1955: 142).

Gorakh siddhi dinha tohi hathu,

Taare guru Machchinder Nathu (*Padmavat* 1955: 181).

Here Jaisi is referring to the application of sandlewood and *bhasm* (used by the Gorakhnath followers) on the body ; attained 'perfection' or enlightenment by taking the name of Gorakh ; also Gorakh gave enlightenment and finally Jaisi refers to another saint guide Machhinder Nath. All this points to the cognizance of the contemporary religious traditions and their acceptance by the poets like Jaisi. Further talking of intertextuality of the *Padmavat* Bruijn postulates :

"One of the elements that give his *Padmavat* a firm Indian grounding is the structural parallel between Ratansen's voyage to Simhala and Ram's voyage to Lanka.The intertextual connection between the tale of Padmavati and the Rama story is far from unintentional: it frames the sufi poem in a cultural position that is recognisable for an Indian audience and immediately gives the story a thematic coloration.The intertextual link with the Rama story works both ways: Jayasi compares scenes and events from the Rama story with elements of his *Padmavat* but also imposes his own ideology on these elements.In the same way, the tale of Ratansen and Padmavati 'borrows'from the semantics of Rama's tale and expands its relevance in its cultural context (Bruijn 2011:128)".

Some Reflections on the Social Order

The Indian social structure in pre-colonial India could, to a large extent, plausibly be interpreted in terms of cate (Habib 2013:158). There were a number of customs and ritual

practices that kept the institution of patriarchy alive in the sixteenth century. These popular customs included the –*sati* (immolation of widows), *jauhar* (mass immolation of women) and polygamy. Jaisi while narrating the story of *Padmavat* has referred to these customs many times. As for example, the male protagonist of the story has two wives and the women also commit *sati* and *jauhar:*

Jauhar bhain istri purush bhaye sangram (*Padmavat* 1955 : 875).

Here Jaisi is saying that when men died in war, the women committed *jauhar*. He also says that both the queens Nagmati and Padmavati became popular because they both committed *sati*:

Nagmati pdmavati rani,

Duvon mahasat sati bakhani (*Padmavat* 1955: 873)

Jaisi has reflected and portrayed, both the spiritual and the mundane medieval world. Jaisi was cognizant of the beliefs and customs of the medieval society and therefore, he represented it in his narrative of *Padmavat* in a symbolic manner. He also outlined the different castes and professions of the medieval society. The study of Jaisi's *Padmavat* helps in knowing the working of the social set-up of the medieval society of the sixteenth century or the ways in which sufi poets projected women. Certain patriarchal notions of the medieval period gets also reflected from Padmavat :

Tumha tiriya matiheen tumhaari,

Murakh so jo matae ghar naari (*The Padumawati* 2005:256).

Raghav jo sita sang laayi,

Raavan hari kaun siddhi paayi (*The Padumawati* 2005:256).

In these lines Jaisi is drawing analogy with the popular Ramkatha, by pointing to a woman as being foolish or lacking in wisdom. He says that when Raghav took Sita with him, then Raavana kidnapped her. Perhaps by drawing such analogies Jaisi charts out the dominant notions about women, circulating in the medieval north Indian social order.On the other hand Jaisi also praises women and puts them on a high pedestal by calling them a 'guru'. There are a number of references to the prevalent castes, as Jaisi many times mentions the different castes, jatis and professions of women. As for example Jaisi writes:

Chandelin thamkai pagu dhara,

Chalin Chauhani hoi jhankara,

*Chali Sonaari sohaag sohat*i (*The Padumawati* 2005:413).

Chalin Ahirini kaajar dinhe,

Gujjari chalin goras kai maati (*The Padumawati* 2005: 415)

Rangrejini tan raato saaro,

Malini chalin ful leyi ganthe (*The Padumawati*2005: 415).

Like this Jaisi refers to the prevalent castes of women– Chandellas, Chauhans, Sonars, Ahirs and Gujjars castes. Jaisi displays the different work/professions of women- selling flowers and the colouring clothes,etc. In fact scholars like K.R. Qanungo has noticed the influence of Islam on the growth of hindi literature (Qanungo 1968:47). According to him the *Padmavat* reads like a historical romance, but the author intended only to present philosophy in the more attractive garb of an historical allegory (Qanungo 1968:55). Qanungo points out that Jaisi writes in his *Padmavat*:

> "Lest others could misunderstand me, I clear up the meaning........Chitor is the human Body; its King is the Mind, Sinhala (Ceylon), the birth place of Padmini is the human Heart wherefrom springs Intelligence, Padmini. The sub-king Budh is the Guru- the spiritual guide who shows the way. Nagmati the co-wife of Padmini is the World. Fortunate is he who escapes her snares. Raghava, who praised Padmini's beauty to Alauddin is the Evil spirit *Shaitan*; and Alauddin is Maya" (Qanungo 1968:56).

It is believed that premodern society had its own mechanisms of social control. Habib points out:

> "Widow-remarriage among upper castes was absolutely prohibited,and the fearful practice of *sati* or immolation of the widow, was practiced among the warrior-caste of Rajputs and corresponding ruling groups and other high castes.The Mughal administration pursued a policy of discouraging *Sati* by trying to establish, in each case, that it was voluntary; though this was not entirely ineffective, *satis* still took place" (Habib 2013:163-164).

Epilogue:

Altogether it appears that the cultural climate of Awadh and its pluralist society had seeds that produced sufi narratives like the *Padmavat*. In the words of Alam, the support for the

doctrine of the Unity of Being, and the associated philosophy and practice of generous accommodation to local beliefs and customs, continued in Awadh through the seventeenth century (Alam 1996:175). It influenced and added to the dynamics of political and social alignments (Alam 1996:191). This study helps in exhibiting sufi male poets-Jaisi's awareness of the existent dominant coercive customs and rituals in medieval north Indian society. Its interesting to see how the poets used the contemporary customs and rituals in the construction of their 'mystic' allegories. Accordingly many times the poet is prescriptive about the codes of conduct, and adherence to some of the coercive rituals, but many times the poet also provides for 'spiritual' outlets for women and reflects on 'spiritual' pursuits of women. Here his images of women appear quite liberal and this could be due to his sufic beliefs. Apparently Jaisi's Padmavat is 'inclusive' of the major contemporary religio-cultural beliefs of north India. Recent researches have assigned a new 'meaning' to the readings of the *Padmavat*, such as Ramya Sreenivasan who have equated the male protagonist of *Padmavat* with a 'valiant warrior', and labelled such allegories of the poets as, 'warrior-tales' (Sreenivasan 2014: 242-272).

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