

Fabulous Islam – the journey of fable in the Muslim world

Shahrukh Husain

B'ismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Raheem... In the name of God the beneficent and merciful, it has been narrated to us that once, in the deep of night, some men were invited to identify an unfamiliar animal through touch. The first stepped forward, collided with its leg and shouted, "God help me, I've bumped into a pillar!" A second reached out, felt the tail and clung to it. "I've found a rope!" he exclaimed. "A good sturdy rope, firmly attached to the wall." A third, already at the other end of the elephant, stroked the rough texture of its trunk and decided it was a branch. Immediately, the men got into intense debate, each trapped in his own opinion and too proud to look beyond personal experience to open his mind to a wider reality.

A sound lesson for children and adults. Darkness, limited perception, blindness and stubbornness are all metaphors for an inability to 'see' beyond the immediate, leaving us with incomplete parts of the truth – the tail, the trunk, the leg. Too proud to pursue knowledge, we turn away from enlightenment. But – following on from a reference in 'The Elephant' surah of the Quran, 'Did he not make their treacherous design an occasion of drawing them into error?' – this fable of Rumi, the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic and poet, elevates metaphor by deploying it to awaken in us a desire to avoid error and reach that vaster, unfathomable, invisible truth: the reality of the Divine.

Fable, on the whole, is not usually connected so directly with the spiritual, but that dimension has arguably been present since pre-Islamic times. Elements of fable, then and since, were primarily used to convey moral and ethical principles through animals and inanimate objects imbued with human characteristics. The arrival of Islam provoked further and deeper speculation on the spiritual values underlying those principles. So, for example, among the debates that abound within Islamic narratives – in its epics and fables, its wonder tales and folklore – sit contestations between miracle and magic in relation to the revelation of the Quran; what is allowed and what is not. Shape-shifting sorcerers in possession of potent magic spells and alchemical knowledge can be found battling

heroes with cloaks of invisibility, invincible swords and other superpowers bestowed on them by saints and prophets (and sometimes djinns). The challenge of the hero is to transform their status through moral and physical courage in the course of marvellous adventures, only using miraculous gifts to combat the forbidden art of magic and other evils. Likewise, the spiritual seeker's real miracle is the transcendental journey itself – transformation happens in the moment they believe in the ultimate truth without the need for magical distractions.

From the seventh century CE, the Islamic world's increasingly cosmopolitan and intellectual vibrancy provided fertile ground for creativity and innovation. Storytelling traditions were swiftly absorbed from Aesop's fables, the ancient Sanskrit fables of the *Panchatantra* and from the Indian-derived Persian fables of *Kalila wa Dimna*, translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa of Basra in the eighth century. Translations of these stories abounded in centres of learning from Baghdad to Cairo and Cordoba, often infused with Islamic philosophical and ethical perspectives, while literary versions adapted and developed the themes of earlier fables.

The first known Islamic picaresque narrative is the tenth-century set of stories *Maqamat* by Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamdhani, in which a sharply

eloquent, roguish narrator launches into satires on greed, deception and human folly addressed to his rich and powerful audiences, echoing principles of moral instruction from fable. So, too, in later stories found everywhere in the Muslim world from the Balkans to China (some of which are versions of Aesop's fables), the insults of the wise fool Mullah Nasruddin are directed to Emperor and bigoted cleric alike.

1554 saw an early iteration of the 'noble savage' in *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (*Alive, son of Awake*) by the Andalusian polymath Ibn-Tufayl. A (*tabula rasa*) philosophical novel about a boy born in a cave and reared by a doe, this places it in parallel with the tradition of animal fable. Isolated from society, he embarks on a life of self-discovery based on physical enquiry, natural observation and personal experience. After a brief excursion into society, he returns to precious isolation, disillusioned by society's rules, regulations and failures. Recognised as a pivotal voice in the history of philosophy and notions of empiricism and individualism, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* was translated into Latin and other languages and influenced the work of leading philosophers, including Ibn-al-Arabi and the Jewish scholar of Islamic tradition, Maimonides, and contributed to later European Enlightenment thought.

The fable genre with its emphasis on narrative economy, moral clarity and the use of allegory, continues to thrive alongside and often within other literary works, and has left a lasting impact on both Eastern and Western literary traditions. Fables also survive in modern retellings; in cartoons and comics, in children's books and television programmes, and in spiritual teachings serving almost every ethic and principle of Islamic tradition.

The contributions in this collection open up a series of dazzling and thought-provoking vistas. Khaldoon Ahmed's touching piece, *The River Chenab*, interweaves his experience of his parents' emigration from Pakistan to London, with the fable of the lover Sohni's treacherous swim across the River Chenab. But in contrast to Sohni's tragic journey's end, Ahmed's inherited memories of the past survive, giving him insights into cultural continuity, adaptation and the ways in which narratives evolve across changing contexts. Farah Naz's remembered fable of the man, his son and their donkey also touches on the migrant navigation of multiple cultural contexts; blending aspects of her Pakistani heritage with the influences of British society, while learning to inhabit spaces in which different norms and values intersect. She is pulled in many directions, unable to find her own way, but the fable lingers. She metabolises its alchemy to reflect on the dynamic nature of cultural adaptation – the

formation of hybrid identities through experience. Both sets of narratives explore themes of resilience in the face of challenge; embracing the splendours of Islamic art and civilisation while continuing to contribute to the ongoing transformation of cultural narratives – the shaping of human experience through new understandings of identity, belonging and community across geographical and temporal boundaries.

In a very different way, Jasmine Shackle continues the fable's unstoppable journey with an exuberant romp through the jungle of lost origins in search of a connection between the trickster tale of Portuguese Pedro and the iconic fabulist Mullah Nasruddin. Was the trickster story carried by sailors with Vasco de Gama's colonisation of Goa in India? Or did it originate in the long interaction between North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule during the Middle Ages? As in the fable of the Owl and the Rabbit, more is often gleaned from the journey than the answer. The fable, while positing a clear principle, can yield an uncompromisingly ambiguous moral: not all things are meant to be fully understood.

This theme of matters esoteric continues into Salma Raheem's contribution – a distinctly demanding Quranic story. The Quran refers to a figure later known as Al-Khidr as 'a servant among our servants to

whom we had given mercy and taught him a certain knowledge.' Raheem delves into the theme of divine wisdom versus human understanding in the story of the Prophet Moses' human impatience when Al-Khidr's actions appear to contradict morality. At its core, the story gives voice to a quality of fable that demands humility in the face of divine wisdom, that which transcends human reasoning, and which counsels both patience and trust in God's greater plan. My own mother's telling of the fable always ended with the moral, 'sometimes you must be cruel to be kind'.

In *The fable of the naked faqir*, Shueyb Gandapur gives us an account of his travels in search of the Islamic civilisation of Mughal India and stumbles on the tomb of the Sufi saint, Sarmad Shaheed. Beheaded for sacrilege, Sarmad rose to shame the prejudices of his killers by confirming his faith from his own severed head before an astonished audience. He proclaimed the unity of God and the transcendent power of divine love in a credo that observed the path of love to lead beyond the confines of orthodoxy toward the unknowable in the heart of God – an utterance with the simplicity and magic of fable.

Adnan Madani expands the fable genre, taking us on a flight of fancy as it coalesces into diverse forms of storytelling, exploring the visual potential provided by vivid narrations, written or oral. The heroic epic of Amir

Hamza in the *Hamzanama* and his trickster sidekick, Umro Ayyar, turbo-charged the imagination of both literate and illiterate audiences, transcending cultural and linguistic barriers. While Hamza embodies the traditional heroic archetype, Umro Ayyar subverts conventions and challenges societal norms – the trickster, spymaster and shapeshifter who personifies the versatility and fluidity of fables as storytelling devices, and expands them to embrace almost all forms of story. Madani's discussion of defaced images from an illustrated version of the *Hamzanama* in Kashmir prompts reflection on the role of visual representation in storytelling. Fables convey moral lessons, cultural values and collective wisdom, and the defacement of the images raises questions about their preservation and interpretation across different cultural contexts. Whether conveyed through oral tradition or visual art, Madani highlights the tension between iconoclasm and cultural heritage in the past and future lives of fable.

I conclude with a saying from Raja Birbal, poet, advisor, one of the *navratan* (nine gems) and beloved poet of the Mughal emperor Akbar's court. Akbar once dreamt of a tree laden with mangoes of different shapes and sizes and asked Birbal to interpret it. "The mangoes represent your subjects," Birbal replied. "They come in different shapes and sizes

but are all equally important to the kingdom.” The same can be said of the fable.

Shahrukh Husain

Shahrukh Husain is a Jungian analyst specialising in myth, legend and folklore from around the world. Her books for adults and children are published in 19 languages. She is passionate about keeping traditional tales alive in diverse settings from schools to young offender institutions. She also writes for film and television.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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