



RESEARCH PAPER

Pakistani Anglophone Novel and Romance/ Dastan Narrative Strategies: Farooqi's 'Qissa-Novel' as a Case of Genre Re-visitation

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ABSTRACT

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The paper reads closely Musharraf Ali Farooqi's *The Merman and the Book of Power: A Qissa* (2019) as an adamantly conceived a cross between Romance/Dastan and the Novel genre. The paper explores MAF's claim regarding the creative shortcomings of Novel genre vis-à-vis its inadequacy to cater to the needs of exploiting fantastic imagination and scrutinizes his *Qissa* for its model praxis in incorporating Romance/Dastan narrative strategies as a specific case of genre re-visitation. Utilizing the key term of 'Romance' (as in Western critical theory) and 'Dastan' (as in Urdu critical theory) as the theoretic perspective to help read the target text the paper concludes that MAF deliberates the (re)familiarization of the long lost narrative strategies as utilized in Romance/Dastan to the contemporary Novel genre - neither debunking it nor devaluing it - albeit expanding the scope of narrative fictions.

Introduction

Musharraf Ali Farooqi's (abbreviated as MAF hereafter) conviction that "even a diverse and powerful genre like that of novel is unable to adequately render all stories" (www.micromaf.com) is definitely brow-raising for those fans of the Novel genre, who might believe, after Terry Eagleton, that novel "cannibalizes [all the] other literary modes and mixes [their] bits and pieces promiscuously together.... [therefore making itself] the queen of literary genre....[and] a mighty melting pot" (2005, p. 1). No other times, but the contemporary ones, have seen the Novel genre thriving at such a large scale. Just a close look at the record of a hundred years of Nobel Prize for Literature is enough to ascertain the fact that the Novel genre has largely dominated it by crowning more novelists as Nobel laureates than any other literary genre. However MAF's above statement being followed by his belief in "the ancient forms of storytelling", like Dastan/Qissa- interchangeably used in Urdu for

the tradition of fantasy writings- whose Western counterpart can rightfully be traced in Romance writings (from ancient to medieval times), as the relevant resource bank for picking and exploiting their creative strategies on the part of contemporary novelists, stand conspicuously delineated by his fabulist fictions: *The Jinn Darazgosh* (2010) and *The Merman and the Book of Power: A Qissa* (2019)- referred to as *Qissa* hereafter (in Italics for MAF's book and in plain for referring to genre in general). MAF has laid his hands on diverse crafts of writing: translations; children books; novels; and qissas till now, therefore, his insistence on "revisit[ing] the ancient forms of storytelling from which the novel itself emerged" (www.micromaf.com) is worth exploring critically. The paper at hand is an attempt in the very direction as to explore MAF's above statements vis-à-vis his creative praxis for giving us his *Qissa* as a new recipe for rendering those fabulist stories that he deems the Novel, as an art form, is more likely to miss.

Literature Review

MAF's *Qissa* has been published in two editions in 2019: the first one from India by Aleph Book Company and the second one from Pakistan by Kitab- a publishing house owned by MAF himself. The latter edition was also supported by illustration material by Michelle Farooqi. Being such a special case of publishing it is somewhat discouraging to discover that MAF's *Qissa* has received only a few reviews and those, on that, are again by the regional reviewers as all of them belong either to India or Pakistan.

Poorna Swami reads MAF's *Qissa* in its capacity at blending historical facts with creative fictions. For her it is a specimen of a creative text that can equally pretend to be fantasy as well as history at the same time. She rightly points out that the *Qissa* somehow fails in dismantling completely the patriarchal stronghold which normally informs the "male voice of a qissa-teller" (*Livemint*, 19 October 2019). Maaz Bin Bilal reviews MAF's *Qissa* as a counter Orientalist discourse in the shape of a 'qissa-as-novel' entity. He maintains that by projecting the images of the Levant of history, sequestered by the Mongols and simultaneously marked by scholarly research pursuits of its Islamic philosophers, the *Qissa* excavates fictively the Eastern epistemic tradition long lost in the debris of Orientalist historiography (*Scroll*, 17 November 2019). Mahmood Farooqui, referring to the fecundity of *Qissa* as a genre- considering *Qissa* and *Dastan* as one entity- in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Punjabi languages, lauds MAF's attempt at exporting it to English language. The second bird, he thinks, that MAF kills with the same stone is to bring forward the vivid picture of the sacking of Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols which was in other words a closure to "the Islamic Renaissance and its intellectual and cultural achievements". He finds, however, MAF's *Qissa* a bit languishing in its narrative speed and therefore somewhat unexciting for the readers unlike the Urdu *Dastan* genre. (*The Asian Age*, n.d). Shazia Omer, nevertheless, counters Mahmood Farooqui and observes that MAF's *Qissa* not only leaves the reader satisfied but also curious for more to come. She also highlights the *Qissa* as laden with a feminist agenda albeit

written by a male author portraying a predominantly male world just as Poorna Swami has pointed out in her review of the *Qissa* (*India Today*, 10 January 2020). Osama Siddique hails MAF- the erstwhile “translator and interpreter of traditional daastans and qissas”, becoming a ‘Dastango’ (storyteller) himself. He believes that MAF, by piecing together the Dastan elements with those of a detective story as well as of apocalyptic literature, has given us a *Qissa* which is “incredibly contemporary....given the understandable current interest in the bleakness of human future” (*Dawn*, 09 February 2020).

The above review of the literature clearly shows that MAF’s *Qissa* has not attracted any Western reviewers yet, which it should have, given its creative attempt at bestowing the genre of contemporary novel with the Eastern epistemology, by conjuring the historical time-scape of the death of the Abbasid Caliphate, and Eastern Urdu flavour of Dastan. The present paper attempts to attract the international academia to initiate a debate to ascertain how far MAF has, in his creative execution of his *Qissa*, been successful in contributing to the contemporary genre of novel which according to him needs to revisit the long forgotten techniques of storytelling previously part of Western Romance and Eastern Urdu Dastan? The next part of the paper delineates the methodological perspectives informing our analysis.

Material and Methods

The paper uses Barbara Fuchs’ theoretic understandings of the literary genre of ‘Romance’ as a critical idiom to comprehend Western tradition of the genre of ‘Romance’ along with the critical observations of some renowned Urdu critics like Gyan Chand Jain, Sohail Bokhari, and Syed Waqar Azeem vis-à-vis Urdu Dastan tradition. A detailed discussion of the key terms ‘Romance’ and ‘Dastan’ provides the paper with theoretic background and critical diction to guide the close reading of our target text.

“Romance”, observes Barbara Fuchs, with regard to its status as either a literary genre or a narrative mode and of course with regard to the matters of its origins as well as history, “is a notoriously slippery category” (2004, p. 1). Therefore she insists to conceptualize it “as a set of literary strategies that can be adopted by different [narrative] forms” (p. 2). Ranging from its being a vernacular language to being a tale either in verse or in a fictive narrative of prose and being a romantic love narrative in ‘Novel’ or a historical ‘Ballad’ poem, ‘Romance’ has withstood time itself to gain forceful creative appearances, in the Western tradition of storytelling, with the inherent feature of a literary piece that is to adapt through “transformations and reiterations” (pp. 3-4).

Fuchs, referring to Northrop Frye, applauds his role in distilling the features of medieval chivalric romances: marvellous actions of hero; suspension of the laws of nature; descriptions and exploits of enchanted weapons, animals, ogres, witches, and talismans which, she further establishes, were pointed out by Frederic Jameson

as Romance's capability to use as tools to show "opposition between good and evil" (pp. 5-6). She observes that though Frye was not so much interested in the capacity of Romance as a vessel for containing any political agenda, he however, did highlight it as characterized chiefly by 'Idealization': a technique used by Romance through which the social ideals of the ruling elite were projected onto the fictive heroes/heroines and their adventurous quests albeit set in some far off exotic time and space (p. 6). She proposes "to consider romance as a literary and textual *strategy*" (Italics in original, p. 9) and further sheds light on the work of Margaret Doody who argued that the essential yardstick of realism used in order to segregate Novel from Romance was actually the work of the Anglo-American academy just to establish the supremacy of the English as they fabricated a story of the origin of English Novel with its banner-bearing for realism whereas Novel and Romance, Doody believes, are one and the same thing (pp. 9-10). Referring to influential histories of the rise of the English Novel like that of Ian Watt's, she quotes John J. Richetti who rightly pointed out such histories as advocates of the novel's supremacy as an art form due to its representation of realism but simultaneously ignoring the role of earlier narrative fictions like Romance in shaping the "mass art" to what it is now (p. 106). Doody, observes Fuchs, "discards the category of romance altogether" as well as "the progress narrative" that puts forward Romance as "a bad alternative or insufficient predecessor to the novel" (p. 10). Therefore, Fuchs believes, it would be more appropriate to look at Romance as a literary and textual strategy because "[t]his redefinition....accommodates romance as one of the many voices within the novel" (p. 10).

Though the debates endeavouring to establish Romance's import from the East to the West or vice versa are beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to mention that Romance did show a resilient endurance for centuries as a popular literary genre until Novel emerged with its advocacy of realism to replace it, albeit Doody, as shown by Fuchs, argues it to be a crucial glitch in the understanding of literary critics for Romance adopted various strategies since the Renaissance to remain relevant to the contemporary ways of storytelling. In order to highlight Romance's survival strategies Fuchs quotes Arthur Johnston and enumerates them as: adaptation of new fashions of narrative; practices of abridgement of older romances; rearrangements of plots to render clearer reading experience; and even excision of the marvellous elements from them and finally finding a niche in children's literature, which with its fantasies prepares the youth for more realistic narratives as those of contemporary literary fictions (pp. 99-100). By the times Novel was emerging it was still, observes Fuchs, according to the leading critic of those times: Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), considered to be a type of romance whereas William Congreve (1670-1729) had already "established a distinction between novel and romance by emphasising the former as a narrative of the 'familiar' and the latter as one narrating the 'miraculous and impossible'" (p. 106). However Novel's use of realism as its departing quality from Romance became irrelevant too when by the start of the 20th century, Novel, as a genre, itself shed its realist skin and adopted new modes of exploiting the marvellous and supernatural, previously the hallmark

of Romance genre, as it too wielded a magical realist mode of storytelling rendering “the simple dichotomy between realist novel and non-realist romance...no longer valid” (p. 129). Yet it is pertinent to mention here that magical realist fiction, despite the excess of the marvellous and the supernatural, elements chiefly belonging to Romance, is deeply entrenched in the contemporary times and serves as a conduit for “opposition to dominant cultural discourse” with “transgressive, subversive and revisionary” dimensions making it at the same time “a revolutionary form of writing” (Bowers, 2004, p. 97) which actually remained beyond the scope of regular romances from ancient to medieval times and from there to the Renaissance and after.

The Western tradition of Romance as a literary genre is known as ‘Dastan’ in Urdu (Bukhari, 1987, p. 34). Since MAF uses the word ‘Qissa’ as an insistent subtitle it is pertinent to know this word with relation to Urdu literary genre of Dastan. Bukhari, shedding light on the various terms used in Urdu language referring to the genre of Fiction, gives an interesting account of the word ‘Qissa’, often used in lieu of terms used for storytelling (dastan, story, plot), by maintaining that it may also refer to a variety of fictions carrying the element of historicity in them. He further elaborates that a ‘Qissa’ may either consist of events based on true historic occurring or at times mere suppositions about those historic events (pp. 35-36). It is this interpretation of the word ‘Qissa’, referring to a story wedged in historical events—real or supposed, as given by Bukhari, that is highly useful for this paper to exploit as a theoretic understanding to approach MAF’s *Qissa* as a cross between Dastan and Novel. As for the feature similarities between the Western Romance and Urdu Dastan it is useful here to refer to Gyan Chand Jain’s observation that though Urdu Dastan shares the fundamental characteristics of Western Romance genre: multiplicity of plots, supernatural elements, romantic love, quest narratives, etc. (2019, p. 50), it is the torrential force of entertainment for the listener or reader that runs in Urdu Dastan to distinguish it from Western Romance (p. 64). Syed Waqar Azeem also testifies to this entertaining feature of Urdu Dastan by observing that Dastan provides its readers with such interesting and euphoric entertainment that it has no room for logic or reasoning (2018, p. 10). It is interesting to note here that Urdu Dastan, as regrettably recorded by Bukhari, did not lead itself to a state of naturalization through evolutionary transformations like Western Romance did to acquire the garb of Novel, rather breathed its last so silently that no one could even guess that it was already replaced with Urdu Novel that was more akin to Western traditions of novel writing (1987, p. 390). Is MAF’s latest *Qissa* a literary attempt at repairing to literary strategies used by Western Romances and Eastern Urdu Dastan to make amends for that evolutionary loss suffered by Urdu novel to introduce back the age old literary strategies to contemporary Novel to enable it to fuse the marvellous, beyond magical realist one, with the real albeit historical? Is this a new way of writing contemporary novel about history dealing with both its atrocious realities and its marvellous and mysterious folklores, legends and apocalyptic forebodings mingled into a single narrative: A *Qissa*? It is in the light of these questions that the paper attempts to analyse MAF’s *Qissa*.

Discussion

MAF's *Qissa* is a specimen of fiction writing that operates at the borders of ancient and contemporary strategies of storytelling. It is a cross between ancient form of Romance (West)/Dastan (East) and the contemporary shape of Novel genre. In this analytical section we aim to dissect MAF's statement regarding the insufficiency and inadequacy of the Novel genre, in its present shape, to narrate all stories vis-à-vis his own fictive resourcefulness as exploited in conceiving the *Qissa*.

MAF starts his *Qissa* with the harrowing details of the sack of Baghdad in 1258 by Hulagu Khan in the manner of a historical narrative. He masterfully describes that how the Mongol army, estimated to be around 300,000 soldiers (Marozzi, 2015, p. 139), was taken by the Baghdadi masses as "the manifestation of the End Time creatures Gog and Magog, imprisoned by the legendary king Alexander behind a Rampart" (Farooqi, 2019, p. 1). Donzel and Schmidt record that historically Gog and Magog have been established as the "eschatological symbols of divine wrath" by all the three major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Through various epochs of human history they remained the objects of appropriation by the followers of these religions as the potent enemies of their respective civilizations and cultures recognized as "Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes, Scythians, Alans, Romans, Huns, Goths, Khazars, Arabs, Turks, Mongols and, in more recent times [as] Napoleon, the Nazis, the Communists, the Freemasons and al-Qaida" (2009, p. 4). As Hulagu Khan himself believed to have put to sword about 200,000 Baghdadis (Robertson, 2016, p. 225) it is no wonder that his army was interpreted as the avatar of Gog and Magog.

No other historical figure has acquired a similar lasting legendary fame as has Alexander the Great of Macedon (356-323 BC). Referred to as *Dhu'l - Qarnayn*, meaning 'The Two-Horned One' or 'Bicornous', he "appears in the eighteenth Surah of the Holy Quran [18: 83-100] as the one who imprisoned Gog and Magog (Weinfield, 2008, p. 71) and became the central figure in *Alexander Romance* that travelled through Syriac, Greek, Arabic, and Persian languages generating particular cycles of stories appropriated and accorded to the local cultures of those languages. Al-Tabari (d. 923 AD) "believed that Alexander was *Dhu'l-Qarnayn*" (Italics in original, Gad, 2012, p. 231) and the stories about marvellous quests undertaken by Alexander found firm footings in the great Persian legendary epics like Firdawsi's *Shahnamah* and Nizami Ganjawi's *Iskandarnamah*.

Almost after a year of the fall of Baghdad, in the midst of Juvayni's efforts to restructure and reconstruct the city as its Governor deputed by Hulagu Khan, a merman named Gujastak, captured by the seamen, is brought to his court. It might be interesting to mention here that a similar sounding word "gojastak", meaning cursed or hateful, was used for Alexander (Iskandar) in Pahlavi literature (Manteghi, 2012, p. 163). As Juvayni's court is unable to decide the fate of the creature, Qazwini, the accomplished intellectual of his times, intercedes and convinces the Governor to spare the creature for the purposes of studying it as "one of Creation's marvels"

(Farooqi, 2019, p.8) hitherto a subject of mere stories narrated by the storytellers in the markets of Baghdad. MAF, at this juncture of his *Qissa*, interjects metafictional short narratives highlighting the descriptions and deeds of various marvellous creatures taken from Qazwini's book for which he is researching in the *Qissa*. These short narratives, supported with Michelle Farooqi's illustrations, basing on Qazwini's information regarding the marvellous as drawn from his book *Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing*, are masterfully utilized by MAF as they not only, with their scattered placements in the course of the *Qissa*, convince us for the willing suspension of our disbelief regarding the existential possibility of such creatures at par with the belief system regarding the marvellous and the miraculous in the times of Qazwini but also serve as the technical feature of 'Dastan-goi' (storytelling) of using short narratives about the marvellous and the miraculous to prolong the duration of the *Qissa* and stretch the interest of the readers.

Gujastak's existence is all the more important for Qazwini as he is already conducting a research to "develop his theories on the nature of existence and cosmic phenomena" (p. 22). It is important to note here that the 13th century sciences like geography, astronomy, and cosmography were more of confusions with the quasi-historical accounts and the legendary romance based narratives as the sources of knowledge than being laws and principles basing on pure scientific observations and experimentations. This state of the scientific occupations was logically so keeping in view the unsophisticated scientific methodologies, research behaviours, and tools of experimentations prevalent in those times. Qazwini's books: *Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing* as well as *The Information Regarding the Heavens*, especially the former that often remained an attraction for fictionalizations, duly reported in Author's Note by MAF himself, are testimonies to this state of confusion. However the efforts of Qazwini and his likes for the advancement of human knowledge cannot be doubted and undermined for their unsophistication and confusion as they were truly moved by the desire for acquiring knowledge.

While Qazwini is busy studying Gujastak to determine how such miraculous creatures are born, a slave girl named Aydan, with whom he had a sexual tryst almost five years before, is purchased by Governor Juvayni to be included into his harem. He still remembers Aydan's sexually domineering disposition and is least wondering when she is rumoured to become Juvayni's wife sooner in time. However she is reported to have lost her control over Juvayni after her alleged public liberties with him (p. 42). In order to place Gujastak's existence within the limits of rationality and simultaneously not disturbing "the foundations of his faith" (p. 41) Qazwini looks up into available sources of knowledge since the Mongols had destroyed the unmatched Chamber of Wisdom established during the reign of Al-Mamun. Being well versed into the intricacies of the contemporary philosophical debates regarding the created-ness of the creations he is very well aware of the dangers of the intellectual pursuit that he has chosen for himself. His perusal of the accounts of

Sallam Tarjuman- known for his survey of Alexander's Rampart- and Ahmed bin Fadlan- known for his report on the appearance of the commander of Gog and Magog, as with many other accounts of sailors, merchants, poets, chroniclers, philosophers, he is able to collect evidences for the appearances and sightings of the marvellous creatures like Gujastak. However what is interesting for Qazwini is that the appearances of such creatures have been ascribed to the approach of the End Time right from the times of the Abbasid Caliph Motasem who had with the sack of Amorium brought an end to the Byzantine Empire. Since then the Abbasid Caliphs have been plagued by the apocalyptic dreams of the marvellous creatures like Gog and Magog getting free from Alexander's Rampart to destroy the civilized world.

Qazwini, to further his study of Gujastak, proposes a sexual union between the merman and Aydan, who, he knows, after fallen from grace, was no longer important for Juvayni, and gets the official sanction for this mating. Apart from his aim of advancing the knowledge his hidden agenda is to teach Aydan a lesson for her robust sexual disposition which always reminded him of his insufficiency to match her desires. Gujastak and Aydan's sexual union begets them a child who contrary to Qazwini's expectations is no different from a normal human child though he does not show any signs of learning human speech. Moreover Qazwini, over the time, observes that Aydan too had started behaving more like a mermaid. The couple is inseparable. Right from the arrival of Gujastak there was unrest among the masses to kill Gujastak. Qazwini discovers that Duraid, a former librarian at the Chamber of Wisdom, was behind all that as he believed Gujastak to be an ominous sign of the End Time. During the course of collecting resource material regarding the existence of beast-humans like Gujastak, Qazwini chances upon an account about the 'House of Relic' that was discovered after the sack of Amorium by Caliph Motasem. Along with this account he also receives another manuscript: Jahiz's *Book of Animals* which he had requested Juvayni to provide him from the books undestroyed by the Mongols. In Jahiz's book he finds a note entry giving an account of Caliph Motasem's seeing of a pair of griffins after the sack of Amorium. But soon he learns that Juvayni had not sent him Jahiz's manuscript which is very perplexing for him. However he keeps researching about the reportages of the marvellous creatures and comes across a Byzantine monk's commentary that alluded to Caliph Motasem's possession of a certain *Book of Power*, written by Apollonius of Tyana. The prophet, sage, healer, magician, the miracle worker, and much more- Apollonius of Tyana, believed to be born around the same time as that of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, is discarded by the Christian scholars "as a pagan counterblast to the Christian Gospels" (Oldmeadow, 1908, p. 11). Flavius Philostratus' hagiographic account *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (216 AD) is considered to be a "literary confectionary" produced by "a fanciful writer, hungry for the marvellous" (pp. 22-23). MAF conjures this legendary figure from the oblivion of history as the writer of the *Book of Power* to appropriate according to the needs of his *Qissa*. Qazwini learns that it was after the possession of this book that the succeeding Abbasid Caliphs became obsessed with apocalyptic dreams about the End Time so much so that Caliph

Muqtadir even commissioned Sallam Tarjuman to survey Alexander's Rampart as to confirm its intactness.

MAF gives the details of Qazwini's research after the manner of a mystery novel. One night while he is visiting the reading hall at the library within the Governor's quarters he happens to see a mysterious human-seraph like creature sneaking around, who he recognizes was actually Gujastak. He hits the wall rushing after the beast-seraph Gujastak flying away from the reading hall and passes out. When he comes to he finds Duraid lying dead with the manuscript in his hands. The manuscript is actually Apollonius of Tyana's the *Book of Power*. Qazwini is now facing yet another enigma of rationalizing Gujastak's transformation from a beast-human to a beast-seraph to which he himself is a witness.

Qazwini learns that the merman Gujastak and his family had disappeared soon after his sighting at the reading hall. His reading of the *Book of Power* acquaints him with its author Apollonius of Tyana and a love story of a mermaid and a sorcerer during the times of Alexander the Great. The love story is about a particular triangle of lovers (which MAF seems to suggest can be read as a universal triangle of lovers) whose love is doomed because of their inability to distinguish between ambition and vanity. The mermaid fell in love with Alexander when he was following his ambition of knowing the whole world in one of his expeditions to the depths of the sea in a glass carriage. A young sorcerer had also seen the mermaid exactly when she was gazing at Alexander in the bed of the sea and had fallen in love with her. The mermaid's love for Alexander went unrequited as he was not destined for love and the sorcerer's love for the mermaid went unrequited because she was in awe of Alexander's status of a great conqueror of the world. When both the lovers had approached Apollonius of Tyana to grant them a talisman tying them to their beloveds he bound their fates to each other and to the *Book of Power* which was now in Qazwini's possession. As soon as Qazwini had finished reading he knew that Aydan and the merman Gujastak were the manifestations of the mermaid and the sorcerer of Apollonius of Tyana's *Book of Power* and Qazwini being its master now understands its metaphoric meanings that love cannot exist if it is seeking after the vanity of power. He understands now that both the lovers had actually guided him on purpose to Apollonius of Tyana's *Book of Power* as they had learnt their lesson. He recognizes that it was the time that the lovers were released of their bondage to the talismanic *Book of Power*. He drowns the *Book of Power* in the waters of Tigris. Here MAF reports the final reunion of the torn lovers: the mermaid and the sorcerer. Qazwini understands that real glory comes from the love for what one really aspires without seeking for power which only begets vanity and arrogance. As for the project of compiling his theories about the existence of the marvellous creatures and the cosmic phenomena within the limits of rationality he completely understands that "reason could [not] encompass all of God's mysteries" (2019, p. 217).

Since MAF's primary reason for the writing of his *Qissa* is to present a practical specimen of romance writing, utilizing the ancient narrative structures of Dastans, but a close look of his *Qissa* reveals his basic premise to have remained unfulfilled as the features of contemporary novel genre are still very much prominent in his *Qissa*. The *Qissa* instead becomes a devil's advocate for the novel genre itself by utilizing features of Novel genre with regard to length, the elements of suspense mystery (more near to the domains of the popular form of gothic novel), complex characterization, and thematic depth unlikely to be found in ancient romances/dastans/qissas.

MAF's *Qissa*, lengthwise, runs for 200+ pages which are very much a standard length these days for a novel. As his *Qissa* takes up a particular age- in this case the post-Baghdad Massacre times after 1258- as its subject matter to render it also a dimension similar to that of an historical novel, it's given length is too short even for that. Kiran Nagarkar, in the acknowledgement section of his massive historical novel *Cuckold*, fixed the new norm regarding the length of an historical novel, to be between 670 to 1437 pages (2017, p. vii) and the Urdu literary tradition of the Subcontinent has the example of *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza Sahibqiran* running for thousands of pages expanding over as much as 46 volumes (Shirazi, 2016, p. 154), the length of MAF's *Qissa* is too short of the gold standard either for an historical novel or for a dastan/qissa with its mere 217 pages to be precise.

Despite MAF's insistence for calling his *Qissa* a narrative venture taking after the features of ancient romances it still remains more akin to the novel genre. Unlike romances, whose main concern remains in the fulfilling of the hero's quest and entertaining the readers with the descriptions of the marvellous and the miraculous with almost no deep mysteries to be solved but simple, linear, and prolonged multiple plots revolving around the battles between the good and evil, MAF's *Qissa* mocks the features of a suspense mystery novel more closely. Qazwini's intellectual quest for determining the exact nomenclature for the beast-humans within Muslim philosophy moves at a brisk pace particular to suspense mystery novels despite the interjections of short narratives, about various marvellous creatures along with Michelle Farooqi's illustrations, scattered in the course of the *Qissa*.

The characterization of MAF's *Qissa*, too, is the one befitting a contemporary literary novel known for its complex round characters. This aspect of contemporary novel can easily be discerned, on the part of the reader, by closely studying the characters of Gujastak, Aydan, and Qazwini. All these three main characters of the *Qissa* are round characters. Gujastak and Aydan, unlike the regular characters of a romance/dastan/qissa which are flat ones usually either in black or in white as their main purpose is to highlight the perennial battle between good and evil, become round characters for they have learnt, in their search for each other spanning over centuries, that "vanity and love [cannot] abide together" (Farooqi, 2019, p. 214). Likewise Qazwini also, after his intellectual quest, regarding the classification of the existence of the marvellous and the miraculous things vis-à-vis human rational

capacity, comes to close, understands that “if reason could encompass all of God’s mysteries, it would obliterate the capacity for wonder that was fundamental to how the Creator expressed His power over his creatures” (p. 217) therefore making him a round character at par with Gujastak and Aydan.

MAF projects the intellectual concerns more befitting a novel in the garb of a qissa. By choosing to situate his *Qissa* in a particular historical context of post-1258 Baghdad Massacre and the legendary context of *Alexander Romance* as well as the occult figure of Apollonius of Tyana, MAF poses the real question as to what is actual path to glory and what are the potent impediments in achieving it? Power, Love, and Intellectual Pursuit- all are the paths heading towards glory but poised at the edge where humans can easily sway into beast-hood by becoming vainglorious. Vanity, as MAF shows, is the greatest sin that can foil human efforts at seeking glory.

The power struggle between the competing Empires of the world, as in MAF’s *Qissa*, whether between the Byzantines and the Abbasids or between the Abbasids and the Mongols, is easily corrupted into beastly acts of mass-murdering as in the times of the Abbasid Caliph Motasem, when he sacked Amorium thus bringing an end to the Byzantine Empire as well as the times of Mongol Sacking of Baghdad by Hulagu Khan thus ending the reign of the last Abbasid Caliph Mustasim. As it becomes necessary to exert ruthless and brutal power to achieve and maintain power that is based on vanity than on true sentiment of bringing justice and civilization therefore the end result of such a power struggle on the level of politics among the competing Empires is loss of humanity.

Likewise Love, if run on the dynamics of power struggle between the lovers, may also be tainted by vanity therefore turning the lovers into beast-humans as is the case with the love triangle of the mermaid, Alexander the Great, and the sorcerer. MAF, by utilizing the occult figure of Apollonius of Tyana and situating it vis-à-vis *Alexander Romance* and invoking the various sources of epistemology in vogue till the 13th century, brings forward his own *Qissa* of a love-triangle that aims at drawing home, to its readers, mainly the proposition that love and vanity cannot abide together. MAF gives an excellent twist to the *Alexander Romance* and the mysteries surrounding the semi-historical legend of Apollonius of Tyana by mixing the two to form a new qissa. Apollonius of Tyana’s *Book of Power* in the *Qissa* stands as a metaphor of power and the decisions that the power seeker may have to make after its discovery and possession. The love-triangle between the mermaid, Alexander the Great, and the sorcerer is marred by power-seeking lust that guides their pursuit for glory rather than seeking each other. Alexander is shown as a character, unlike that of Western and Eastern Romance’s model for a hero, rather more of a divine vessel to represent human obsession for chasing glory and name. Love as a sentiment is not his plate. Therefore the mermaid, when she looks at Alexander as he is visiting the nadirs of the sea to explore God’s universe and the marvels hidden in it, falls in love with him, but does not even get a return gaze by Alexander. The sorcerer also, standing at the other side of the mermaid, is not returned a momentary gaze by the

mermaid as she too is oblivious to his presence being so immersed in her pursuit of a powerful legendary figure like Alexander whereas the sorcerer is yet no body compared to Alexander's legendary fame. But when the mermaid recognizes, after her consultation with Apollonius of Tyana, that Alexander is just a vessel, in human form, to fulfil God's Will and is incapable of returning her love she moves back to the sorcerer who had by now advanced so much in his knowledge of the world and immersed in the vanity of his glorious knowledge that he could not see her too. It is at this point that Apollonius of Tyana bound the destinies of the two lovers: the mermaid and the sorcerer with each other through the talismanic *Book of Power* that must, until destroyed voluntarily by its possessor, keep the lovers apart.

MAF shows the historical figures of Qazwini and Juvayni as the metaphorical representations of the conflict faced by humans in choosing between intellectual pursuit and the pursuit of Power. Both, striving for the glory that they believed their works, Qazwini's 'Cosmography' and Juvayni's 'Universal History', might bring them, are distracted when they encounter Mongol power. They are in a difficult situation of choosing either Power or Intellectual Pursuit. Juvayni is writing his 'Universal History' whereas Qazwini is compiling his book of 'Cosmography' when they are picked up by the Mongol power corridors to play their roles in restructuring Baghdad: the former as its Governor and the latter as its leading Polymath to assist Juvayni. Qazwini's intellectual trail for the understanding of the existence of the marvellous creatures, within the Muslim epistemological criterion, leads him to discovering the *Book of Power* and the fate of the two lovers bound to it. Instead of retaining the possession of the book that will guarantee power to him in return, he decides to destroy it and gives the two lovers a second chance as he has recognized that vanity is the outcome of power-seeking and power as a goal in itself is vainglorious and beastly until it is guided by selfless love which is the only glorious path ensuring the humans their humanity. MAF shows that it was probably this understanding of love and its supremacy as a path over other paths to glory, like Power and Intellectual Pursuit that might have helped him complete his work on cosmography thus rewarding him with a future in history unlike Juvayni who, lost in his pursuit and exercise of power, could never finish his universal history. According to MAF's *Qissa* Juvayni lives in history as a stooge to Mongols and not as a glorious scholar- the status he was aspiring for himself in the first place.

The above analysis clearly shows that MAF runs deeper concerns into his *Qissa* usually missing in Romance/Dastan narratives. The subtle balancing of love and power becomes an act of distinguishing humanity from beast-hood for MAF. This deep philosophical undercurrent of his *Qissa* brings it more near to the domains of contemporary literary novel though structurally entrenched in the Romance/Dastan tradition. Therefore this hybrid storytelling can be seen as MAF's new recipe for a 'Qissa-Novel' as pointed by Maaz Bin Bilal.

Conclusion

It is a brave move to pit the ancient narratives like Romance with the contemporary modes of narration like Novel as MAF does. Literary narratives ought to be creative expressions of multiple combinatory possibilities of various narrative models as no literary genre outdoes the previous genres rather keeps shape-shifting according to the times of its practice. Therefore if Novel does, to recall Doody, create a generous space for the fantastical and fabulist narratives' exploitation within its creative radius- albeit alluding to the history, real or supposed, may be relevant to the present in its apocalyptic repetition- it is a marvellous phenomenon in itself. Homer's *Odyssey*, Greek Romances, Medieval European Romances, Eastern Dastans, and Novel: all share among themselves one feature and that is story. Therefore it least matters what one may call them: Romance, Dastan/Qissa, or Novel- they are all one and the same: stories that can move us! MAF's *Qissa* is definitely a novel shape of narrative fiction that echoes its ancient pedigree.

MAF's *Qissa*, resourcing the long forgotten ways of storytelling based on the tradition of 'Dastan-goi', is 'a-training-in-taste-buds' for the contemporary readers of prose fiction. He grafts his imaginative skills onto the legendary tales of Alexander and Apollonius of Tyana by converging them into an historical context: the Fall of Baghdad and brings forward a 'Super-Romance'- a luminous '*Qissa*' of love and its endurance in the wake of apocalyptic times. His '*Qissa-Novel*' is a unique case of genre re-visitation. Though he successfully exploits the narrative strategies of Romance/Dastan in his *Qissa* the overall flavour of the Novel genre remains intact too. No one else, among the Pakistani Anglophone novelists, but MAF, could have written this kind of *Qissa* with such a natural flow and ease. MAF is Pakistani Anglophone writing's dark horse and needs to be brought to its main race-course. He is less known to the Pakistani academia, and disproportionately so, given his long list of literary feats let alone his translation of Amir Hamza cycle which alone is enough to grant him immortality.

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