

A Dialog with Persian Classics in a Folk-based Verse Narrative from Eighteenth Century Punjab

Denis Matringe

► **To cite this version:**

Denis Matringe. A Dialog with Persian Classics in a Folk-based Verse Narrative from Eighteenth Century Punjab. Indian Folklife, National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai, 2006, pp.6-8. halshs-01954774

HAL Id: halshs-01954774

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01954774>

Submitted on 13 Dec 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



DENIS MATRINGE, Centre d'Étude de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud (CEIAS) CNRS-EHESS

A Dialogue with Persian Classics in a Folk-based Verse Narrative from Eighteenth Century Punjab

DENIS MATRINGE



Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, a Punjabi poet affiliated to the Qadiri sufi order chose a folk story of the lower Indus valley to write one of the most exquisite verse narratives ever produced in his language [1]. His name is Hasham Shah, and not much is known about him. He was born around 1753 near Amritsar, died in 1823 and is buried near Sialkot [2]. He wrote both in Persian and Punjabi, using the lingua franca of Western, Central and Southern Asia mostly for Sufi treatises and biographies, and his mother tongue for romances is locally known as *qissa-s*, including his masterpiece, *Sassi Hasham*. The latter is the story of the tragic love between the Sindhi princess Sassi and the Baluch prince Punnun, and its title, as usual with classical Punjabi *qissa-s*, associates the name of the heroine and that of the poet.

Today, any Punjabi knowing reader is instantaneously bewitched by the magical charm of Hasham's poetic diction, by the delicate subtlety of his touch, by the sustained evenness of his tone, by the suggestive power of his images, as well as by the harmonious construction, the exceptional concision and the tragic intensity of his narrative. All these distinctive features contrast sharply with the only surviving *qissa* of the great poetic genius of the previous generation, the majestic *Hir*, achieved by Varis Shah in 1767, a poem encompassing many Punjabi social and religious idioms of his time, in a style at the same time sparkling, ironic and deeply moving [3]. The contrast is indeed immense between the fine chiselling and the perfect harmony of *Sassi Hasham* and most pre-modern North Indian narrative poems, with their intricate intrigues and their overlong conventional passages.

A striking aspect of *Sassi Hasham* is the kind of cultural diversity which underlies, without any asperity nor awkwardness, its sublime unity of style and composition, and the aim of these few pages is to give a hint about the relation of *Sassi Hasham* with two great Persian classics in order to add an element to my previous characterisation of Hasham's poetics [4].

It might be appropriate, first, to summarise the story as narrated by Hasham in hundred and twenty four stanzas

of four rhymed verses, and to remind briefly how it differs from other versions. After a brief prologue, *Sassi-Hasham* consists in three parts. The first one (stanzas 1-26) is about Sassi's birth in a royal Sindhi family in Bhambor (near Tatta, on the lower Indus) and her abandonment in a chest on the Indus after astrologers questioned by her father have made this prediction: "A faultless lover will she be / when she's a maiden young. / Then in the desert will she die / by parting's sorrow slain. / Yet, Hasham, though her kin be shamed / her story will be sung" [1:59].

In the second part (stanzas 27-82), Sassi grows up with her adopted parents from the washermen caste. As an Adolescent, she refuses wedding proposals in that low caste. She also refuses to see her natural parents. Thus, summoned by the king about her attitude, Sassi simply sends him an amulet which he had got tied around her neck before entrusting her to the river and which contains the truth about her birth. Thereafter, she becomes enamoured of Punnun, a Baluch prince from Kech (today Turbat in Pakistan), whose portrait she has seen in an exhibition of paintings of royal figures in the garden of a rich merchant. In order to attract Punnun to Bhambor, Sassi obtains from her biological father that the first caravan merchants coming from Kech to the city be kept as hostages. So it goes, and one of the two leaders of the caravan is dispatched to Punnun's father, Hot 'Ali, to request him to send his son to Bhambor. The king refuses, approved by his wife, but Punnun, hearing from the merchant about Sassi, becomes enamoured with her. Against his parents' advice, he crosses the desert riding on a camel and joins his beloved. When the caravan merchants arrive in Kech without Punnun, the king and the whole city are plunged into despair. Both the prince's brothers then decide to leave for Bhambor. They find Punnun together with Sassi. Having treacherously made him drunk, they take advantage of the lovers' sleep to abduct him and bring him back to Kech.

The last part gives the story its tragic conclusion. Sassi, despite her mother's entreaties, sets off in pursuit of Punnun across the desert. Burnt by the sun, she looks for footprints of the Baluches' camels. She finally discovers one, and then looks in vain for another one. A shepherd, who catches sight of her, thinking it might be a ghost, does not dare to approach her. Resuming her quest, Sassi understands that her end is near and she comes to breathe her last on the footprint of the camel which had, maybe, carried her lover. The shepherd, then, realises his mistake, buries Sassi and builds her a tomb, near which he decides to live as a *faqir*, abandoning his family and his herd. Warned in his sleep by Sassi's soul, Punnun leaves Kech in haste, not without having been

forced to threaten with his dagger his brothers who wanted to hold him back. His camel takes him directly to Sassi's tomb. Learning from the shepherd the decease of his beloved, he dies of grief on her tomb, which opens up to welcome him.

Hasham's narrative is based on a folk story known in the whole lower Indus valley and its surroundings, where it forms the theme of many folksongs, and where it has long been transmitted by bards with lots of variations. Thus, Richard Burton [5:81-89] narrates an oral version from Sind which differs considerably both from Hasham's story and from the Gujarati version collected by Marianne Postans [6:199-202]. Within the Punjab itself, there are important variations, as is obvious if we look, for instance, at the story as it has been recorded in the *Dasam Granth* ("Book of the tenth [Guru]"), the second sacred book of the Sikhs after the *Adi Granth*, compiled by Bhai Mani Singh at the beginning of the 18th century. Sassi was born from the semen spread on the sand of the Indus bank by a Hindu ascetic at the sight of a celestial nymph. She has been married to King Punnun, who had already several wives. The latter are jealous of Punnun's love for Sassi and assassinate the king. Hearing of the tragedy, Sassi rushes to the spot of the crime and dies of a broken heart. The story stresses sincerity and fidelity, whereas so many others in this section of the *Dasam Granth* deal with the misdeeds and the vices of women. It is with a Muslim poet contemporary of the compilation of the *Dasam Granth*, Hafiz Barkhudar, that the version we find in Hasham's narrative first appears.

In the third stanza of his poem, Hasham writes: "listening to the story of Punnun and Sassi, one reaches perfect love", thereby claiming to compose a story the hearing or reading of which would lead one to that stage of the mystical path where love, the lover and the Beloved become one. It was Hasham's admirable achievement to reach that goal without any religious comment or allusion in his work, without any eulogising prologue (his is reduced to three stanzas, one on God, one on love and one on the composition of the poem) and without any explicative epilogue. There is not a word about nor an allusion to the Prophet or to any saintly figure in the poem, no direct reference to Islam after the mention of God in the first stanza and, with the exception of the two kings, Adam in Bhambor and 'Ali in Kech, and of the rich merchant called Ghazni, the characters have local names. Like in so many other Sufi poems, human love and spiritual love are not alternatives [7: 24]. But human love is painted in such a way that no misunderstanding is possible.

To achieve this, and to cause his lay to produce a maximal effect, Hasham made full use of all the cultural elements at his disposal. Folklore of course is overwhelmingly present through the story itself, which Hasham reworked in many ways, as, for instance, when he turns the shepherd from a man with dubious intentions into a simpleton struck by the vision of love to the point of becoming a *faqir*. But what I would like to insist upon here, as it is less obvious, is a specific aspect of his literary

culture mobilised by Hasham to compose a tale on pure love. Like all the members of the Punjabi literary elite of his days, the poet had studied the great masters of classical Persian literature. Moreover, like quite a few among them, he tried his hand at writing a Punjabi version of *Khosrow and Shirin*, in the tradition of Nezami (d. ca 1209), who inspired writers for centuries in many parts of the Muslim world, and who himself had borrowed the subject of three of his lays (*Khosrow o Shirin*, *Haft peykar* and *Eskandar-name*) from the *Shahname* of Ferdowsi (d. ca 1020).

Both Ferdowsi and Nezami accompany, so to say, Hasham in his writing of Sassi Punnun. Intertextuality with Ferdowsi's epic surfaces in the crucial episode where Sassi is cast away in a chest on the Indus. Here is an ancient folk-motif, well known in the Muslim world because of the story of Prophet Musa (Moses), and the oldest appearance of which is probably in the legend of Sargon I (ca 2340-2284), the founder of the empire of Akkad. Sargon's mother put him in a basket of bulrushes and abandoned him to the Euphrates. Akki, the water-carrier lifted him up from the river and brought him up as his own son. This motif found its way into Ferdowsi's *Shahname*, where it appears in the part of the epic which bridges the genealogical gap between Bahman and Alexander through Hoday. Bahman is the son of King Esfandiyar, who has been killed in a nonsensical fight by the great hero Rostam. But before dying, the king has entrusted his son to Rostam, who educates him and sends him back to the court. There, Esfandiyar's father, King Goshtasp, who had converted to the religion of Zoroaster and caused his son's death by ordering him to bring Rostam to his court, gives the throne to Bahman, his grandson, and dies. Bahman first wants to avenge the death of his father, and thus gets Rostam's son Faramarz hanged. But he then repents and, having engendered a son from his own daughter, Hoday, he gives her the throne. Hoday governs with justice, but she gets rid of the child she has had from her father by abandoning him in a chest on the Euphrates. The child, Darab, is taken in by a washermen couple. He persuades his adopted parents to get him educated as a warlord: his royal quality is soon recognised and he is welcomed as king at the court of Iran. The emperor of Rum, whom he has vanquished, gives him his daughter. He sends her back to Rum after she has conceived a son, Darab (Alexander), who later becomes king of Rum. From another woman, Darab has a second son, Dara, who succeeds him. And when Darab-Alexander attacks Iran and defeats Dara's army, the latter, agonising after having been slain by two of his ministers, entrusts his country to Alexander before dying. Thus is the genealogical link established between the kings of Iran and Alexander.

Hasham had certainly read the story of Hoday and Darab in the *Shahname*. In *Sassi* as in Ferdowsi's epic, a skilled carpenter is summoned, a chest is finely assembled and richly adorned, jewels are added to it, a launderer rescues the baby and, along with his wife, offers the child a good life and gets him (or her) nicely educated. In each case,

having come of age, both the prince and the princess refuse to live as launderers. There are of course differences too, including an important stylistic one. The episode is much more developed, with a more minute narration, in Ferdowsi, and this very fact tells a lot of Hasham's poetic intention, as I have shown elsewhere in a comparison with Varis Shah [4:31-41]. Hasham's poem is condensed to the utmost in order to produce a maximal effect on the reader. Besides, unlike Ferdowsi, Hasham creates a sharp contrast between, on the one hand, the suffering of the baby tightly chained to the chest and her frightening journey on a stormy river haunted by monsters and demons, and, on the other hand, the loving tenderness and simplicity of Atta, the launderer who rescues her. Both this conciseness and this contrast cause Atta's "pure love" to be more intensely felt by the reader.

If we now turn our attention to Hasham's reading of Nezami, we are struck all the same by astonishing elements of symmetry and contrast. In *Khosrow o Shirin*, Nezami creates three unforgettable characters: Khosrow, the king torn between his love and the throne, Farhad the architect, first sketch of the perfect lover, a figure magnified with Majnun in *Leyli o Majnun*; and Shirin, the dominant character in the novel, incarnating fidelity and mastery in love. Now, there is a striking crossed symmetry between the way Shirin and Khosrow in Nezami's novel and Sassi and Punnun in Hasham's poem fall in love. In Nezami's *Khosrow o Shirin*, first Khosrow becomes enamoured with Shirin by hearing his intimate friend Shahpur singing Shirin's praises, and then Shirin with Khosrow by seeing drawings of him made by Shahpur and fixed to trees in places where she goes for walks with her friends (here again well-known folk motifs). As for Hasham's characters, first Sassi is struck, the poet says, alluding directly to Nezami's novel, "by the wound which once laid down Farhad" [1:77], when she sees, along with her friends, Punnun's portrait in the merchant's garden; later on, Punnun falls in love with Sassi when he hears one of the caravan leaders speaking "to him with fulsome praise of Sassi's loveliness" [1:89]. In both sets of episodes again, Hasham's dense and tense stylistic soberness is to be contrasted with Nezami's superb poetic diction, sometimes however verging on mannerism and preciousness, sometimes somewhat rhetorical. If Nezami's long (6500 distiches) and complex narrative can be read as a kind of apprentice novel, Hasham's condensed fable is, once more, entirely oriented towards giving access to the feeling of pure love.

On that matter, it is interesting to note that about the merchant's garden and its gallery of royal portraits, Sassi had "heard it was as fine as Khotan fabled musk" [1:77]. Now, here is precisely the image which a poet like Hafez (d. ca 1390) uses to refer to the smell of the gateway to paradise in the famous ghazal 373 of Khanlari's classical edition [8]: *barha gofte-am o bar-e degar mi guyam* ("Times I have said, and again I say"). In a single line of this ghazal, Hafez enunciates both the source of his art and his

expectation of a mystically qualified reader: *gowhari daram o saheb-e nazari mi juyam* ("I own a jewel and seek a master of vision"). The allusion to the musk of Khotan in Hasham's poem is no mere chance; Sassi is on the verge of entering the universe of pure love, – that jewel which the Qadiri Sufi Hasham wants to share. By mobilising many aspects of the cultural universe of his reader around a story which has nothing to do with the rhetoric of religion, and through his very personal dialogue with great Persian classics, Hasham precisely wants to make his reader this "master of vision", apt at following the injunctions of his own internal master, Hafez's *pir-e golrang* ("rose-colour Master", ghazal 99), – his heart. It is thus no surprise if, until today, in Sufi convents of the Punjab, *Sassi Hasham* might be read by a master to his disciples in order to plunge them into a state (*hal*) conducive to the practice of spiritual exercises [9].

References

1. Shah, Hasham, *Sassi Punnun*, rendered into English verse by Christopher Shackle, Lahore, Vanguard, 1985.
2. Shah, Harnam Singh, *Sassi Hasham*, 2nd ed., Jalandhar and Delhi, Dhanpat Rae and Sons, 1959.
3. [Varis Shah], *Hir Varis Shah*, poème panjabi du 18^e siècle, introduction, translittération, traduction et commentaire par Denis Matringe, vol. 1, Pondicherry, Institut Français d'Indologie, 1988.
4. Shah, Hasham, *Sassi*, texte présenté, traduit et annoté par Denis Matringe, Paris, Langues et Mondes, 2004.
5. Burton, Richard F., *Scinde or the Unhappy Valley.*, vol. I, 2^e édition, Londres, Richard Bentley, 1851.
6. Postans, Marianne, *Cutch*, London, 1839, repr. New Delhi, Asian Educational Services, 2001.
7. Hafez, *Divan*, introduction, traduction du persan et commentaires par Charles-Henri de Fouchécour, Paris, Verdier, 2006.
8. Hafez, *Divan-e Hafez*, ed. Parviz Natel Khanlari, 2nd ed., Tehran, Khwarazmi, 1983.
9. As demonstrated by Nicole Revel, in the Sulu and Tawi Tawi archipelagos in Island Southeast Asia, one finds a parallel though distinct attempt in the chanting of and the listening to a *kata-kata* like *Silungan Baltapa* ("By singing a blue print of *Al Mir'aj*"), the second part of which is meant to show the Way and has a healing efficacy. See N. Revel, with H. Arlo Nimmo, A. Martenot, G. Rixhon, T. Sangogot and O. Tourny, *Le Voyage au ciel d'un héros Sama / The Voyage to Heaven of a Sama Hero Silungan Baltapa*, trilingual edition (Sinama, French, English), Paris, Geuthner, 370p, 4 black and white pictures, 1 DVD video (1 sound file: the epic in integral, +2 files with a diaporama of 110 photos and a narration in French and in English), by N. Revel and A. Martenot. ❖
