

METACULTURAL COMMONALITY IN
EAST AND WEST: A STUDY IN
PERSPECTIVE OF LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The metacultural values provide the foundation of commonality for Eastern and Western civilizations. The primary value is 'love'. The feelings and emotions of love with a description of realities from life are given in *Zebr e Ishq*. Nawab Mirza Shauq's Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* is a beautiful blend of fiction, romance, reality and autobiography. The autobiographical tales told in the form of poetry have been written by Meer, Sauda, and Momin but the poetry of these great poets lacks the power of that fictional and courageous utterance found in Mirza Shauq's poetry. The most famous Masnavi of Nawab Mirza Shauq Lakhnavi *Zebr e Ishq* was written during 1855 to 1862. He is unmatched in bringing simplicity and pragmatism in Urdu literature. His Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* is an embodiment of a separate identity, individuality, unity, and artistic expression in the history of Masnavi writing. In this Masnavi, a woman's psyche has been represented in the light of social and cultural factors of Shauq's era. *Zebr e Ishq* does not contain mystical secrets, nor does it address the philosophical aspects; rather it describes an ordinary incident in the most beautiful way. The characteristics of emotional empathy, perfect characterization, psychological representation and realism have rendered it immortal in Urdu literature. There is an analogy in Eastern and Western literature and diversity. The parallel comparison brings an end to the prejudice, stasis, and the conservativeness in literature and critique. There are numerous literary and technical qualities in Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* which enable it to be included not only in Urdu literature but also in the World's best love poetry.

East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.¹ A line from a poem by Rudyard Kipling is describing the distance between Eastern and Western civilizations. But there is a domain of literature where all these distances diminish.

The metacultural values provide the foundation of commonality for both civilizations. The primary one is 'love'. The western perspective is beautifully described by Shelly as:

*The fountains mingle with the river
And the rivers with the ocean,
The winds of heaven mix for ever
With a sweet emotion;
Nothing in the world is single;
All things by a law divine
In one spirit meet and mingle.
Why not I with thine?—*²

The feelings and emotions of love with a description of realities from life are given in *Zebr e Ishq*. Nawab Mirza Shauq's Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* is a beautiful blend of fiction, romance, reality and autobiography. Meer Hassan's *Sebrul Bayan* and Pandat Daya Shankar Naseem's *Gulzar e Naseem* are known by everyone but there is something more unique in Shauq's style. The autobiographical tales told in the form of poetry exist because of Meer, Sauda, and Momin too but the poetry of these great poets lacks the power of that fictional and courageous utterance that is found in Mirza Shauq's poetry. His real name was Tasadduq Hussain. Urdu Masnavi *Fareb-e-Ishq*, *Bahar-e-Ishq*, and *Zebr-e-Ishq* are his creations. The most famous Masnavi of Nawab Mirza Shauq Lakhnavi *Zebr e Ishq* was written during 1855 to 1862. Without any doubt, he is unmatched in bringing simplicity and pragmatism in Urdu literature. His Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* is an embodiment of a separate identity, individuality, unity, and artistic expression in the history of Masnavi writing. In this Masnavi, a woman's psyche has been represented according to the social and cultural factors of Shauq's era. *Zebr e Ishq* does not contain mystical secrets, nor does it address the philosophical aspects; rather it describes an ordinary incident in the most beautiful way. The characteristics of emotional empathy, perfect characterization, psychological representation and realism have rendered it immortal in Urdu literature. Shauq came under severe

criticism during his era because this Masnavi was labelled as obscene and vulgar, distorting the ethics of society. However, with the passage of time, the critics started seeing Shauq through a different lens along with other writers like Saadat Hassan Manto, Noon Meem Rashid and Meera Jee. They started making parallel comparisons of *Zebr e Ishq* with the literary masterpieces of East and West. The characters of this Masnavi are anonymous but the critics and researchers have named the female character "Mah Jabeen" for their ease because of the attributes given to her by Mirza Shauq.

Mah Jabeen's love exalted from sexual and physical pleasures ends up on her death. The end of this Masnavi is tragic in nature because of her suicide. When Mah Jabeen's parents come to know about her love affair, they want to send her to their relatives in Banaras so as to avoid defamation but the heroine feels devastated. She cannot withstand the disgrace and separation from her beloved and thus ends up taking her life. Her beloved attends her funeral because of her last will and then drinks poison after three days in extreme grief however he survives afterwards. *Zebr e Ishq* is not only an epitome of a cordial affair but also possesses extreme influential qualities. Shauq has got mastery over portraying human emotions in a beautiful manner. This depiction of emotions has added more to the beauty of Masnavi where Mah Jabeen deals with her parents and her conjugal emotions simultaneously. Shauq has rightly presented his society and environment in this Masnavi that is not merely a story of lust and sexual pleasure but actually a true picture of Lakhnavi culture where the princes and the rich are engaged in lustful activities. Separating this Masnavi from the Lakhnavi culture of 19th century is like negating the reality.

Shauq has not tried to hide anything rather he has highlighted all the vices and weaknesses of his society thus rendering this Masnavi both vulgar and immortal at the same time. A contentious aspect of *Zebr e Ishq* is the issue of nudity that is evident in the physical description of the characters and the narration of beloveds' meeting. Shauq's writing has been labelled as immoral with the charge of vulgarity.³ But Atta Ullah Palvi has admired Shauq for highlighting the social vices and moral flaws with so bold expression. *Zebr e Ishq* embodies the elements of lust and sex in it because it represents the society where prostitution has penetrated among all spheres, leaving no space for anything else except nudity and vulgarity.

Atta Ullah Palvi has presented a concise critical analysis of it. According to him, Emile Zola and Maupassant were the pioneers of realism in Europe and they taught that society's all stinky, reproachful and humiliating moral vices should be highlighted to

such an extent that one starts feeling disgust. This was the belief of Shauq as well. The purpose of writing these Masnavis was to admonish the Lakhnavis.⁴ Neither has he ignored the weaker aspects of Hero's personality nor has he made any adjustments in his character according to the established ethical standards. Had he done that, the character of the hero would not have aligned with his environment and era. Realism, without any doubt, is the key to success for this Masnavi. Shauq's hero is an ordinary person who is an inefficient, inert, and a lazy rich, desirous of his beloved for sexual pleasure, more feminine than masculine in nature, and believes in destiny more than hard work. Highlighting these vices in the character of hero is in no way a weakness or fault in the storyline but instead, the sole purpose of Shauq is to show the luxuriated and inefficient society. This character is a substantial proof of the decay of his culture. Shauq was forced to write this Masnavi because of his restlessness with his era's conditions and grievances.

Zebr e Ishq is an accurate and true history of Lakhnavi era in which we find the portrayal of all perceptions and thoughts, beliefs and ideologies, and mental inclinations developed in the wake of life. Besides portraying the history, this Masnavi is a sincere representation of its era in terms of social, psychological, ideological, religious, and cultural life.

This masnavi was written during the time of Syed Wajid Ali Shah whose attitude and behaviour has given Lucknow specific cultural mood. According to Khaleeq Anjum the poetry of shok though doesn't possess complex details of events and characterization but the cultural delicacy and details inculcated in the poetry make his poems much worthy and distinct from other poetical masterpieces of his age.⁵ The customs and traditions of Lucknow culture are also given in detail in his Masnavi for example lighting in the mosques, celebrations on new moon nights, charities in the courts of saints and charities on Thursdays etc.

The Sorrows of Young Werther, an artistic work resembling with *Zebr e Ishq* was written by Goethe in 1774. Goethe substantially reworked the book for the 1787 edition⁶ and acknowledged the great personal and emotional influence that *The Sorrows of Young Werther* could exert on forlorn young lovers who discovered it. As he commented to his secretary in 1821, "It must be bad, if not everybody was to have a time in his life, when he felt as though *Werther* had been written exclusively for him." Even fifty years after the book's publication, Goethe wrote in a conversation with Johann Peter Eckermann about the emotional turmoil he had gone through while writing the book:

"That was a creation which I, like the pelican, fed with the blood of my own heart".⁷

The Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* encompasses the representation of both external environment and the internal emotions of human life. It is considered perfect in its qualities of literary language, style, characterization, individuality, and sensuality in Urdu literature. This is the very reason why it is considered one of the top love Masnavis giving immortality to the name of the poet.

The linguistic expertise used by Nawab Mirza Shouq is the spurb feature of this masnavi. Though there are no detail of events, characters, scenes or metaphysical elements but the use of daily language of women of Lucknow, idioms and proverbs has given the picturesque of the social life of Lucknow in this masnavi. According to Dr Shameem Unhonevi simplicity, originality and spontaneity are the main features of this masnavi with which it captures the reader throughout his reading. Meer Anees and Mirza Shouq have given new standards of linguistic and figurative aspects of poetical narration.⁸

The Sorrows of Young Werther, is also considered an excellent representative of masterly description of human feelings with linguistic skills. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley makes direct references to the novel *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*. This is done when Victor's creature finds the novel and reads it to pass the time and practice his language skills. The creature learns a lot from reading this novel, especially about emotions and feelings.⁹

The most interesting element found in this Masnavi is that it provides a lot of analogies and parallels in Eastern and Western literature. According to Aale Ahmad Suroor, *Zebr e Ishq* ranks greatest among all Urdu Masnavis, particularly among Lakhnavi Masnavis. Because, for him, the most bright and thrilling pictures are found in Shauq's work. He calls *Zebr e Ishq* the greatest Lakhnavi Masnavi instead of *Gulzar e Naseem* and Shauq the greatest Masnavi writer.¹⁰ Similarly, Abul Lais Siddiqui also prefers *Zebr e Ishq* over *Gulzar e Naseem* and *Sebrul Bayan*.¹¹

Abdul Majid Daryabadi compares Shauq with English literature's acclaimed dramatist William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's dramas comprise the elements of separation, grief, detachment and suicidal tendencies. It can especially be seen in *Romeo and Juliet*. For Abdul Majid Daryabadi, Shauq's work can even be ranked higher than the work of the most famous English dramatist Shakespeare in its effectiveness, didacticism, and representation.¹² Where Abdul Majid Daryabadi prefers Shauq over Shakespeare in terms of representation, Khawaja Ahmad Farouqi has found the work of

Shauq and Shakespeare alike.¹³ He supports the thought that *Zebr e Ishq's* heroine has more energetic and courageous character than the hero on the basis of her exemplariness. He believes that Mirza Shauq has shown his heroine superior to the hero and this quality is found in Shakespeare's dramas too. Despite her youthfulness, naivety and extreme sentimentalism, the character of Mah Jabeen possesses activeness and strong determination. She does have the higher psychological and spiritual qualities than the hero. Majnun Gorakhpuri drew analogies among *Zebr e Ishq*, a Russian novel *Anna Karenina* (1878), and a Persian epic *Shahnameh* (977-1010). He was impressed by three female characters in fictional literature who possessed grace and elegance even in their lowliness. One of these characters is Anna Karenina, the heroine of Russian fiction writer Tolstoy's work, who falls for Vronsky despite having a blissful married life. She tries hard to get Vronsky's attention but commits suicide upon failing to do so. She feels no remorse for her actions till her death. The second of them is Manizeh, the heroin of *Shahnameh* written by Persian poet Ferdowsi, who falls for Rustam despite being a princess. She does not even care about her royal elegance and luxurious lifestyle. Third of them is Mah Jabeen of *Zebr e Ishq*.

Majnun Gorakhpuri found Mah Jabeen equal to Anna Karenina and Manizeh in attributes because of her determination, courage, and perseverance.¹⁴ Mah Jabeen is also determined to die because life is meaningless for her without her beloved. She makes an exemplary speech in her farewell meeting with the hero. She links the continuity of life with the eternity. Her eloquent speech is full of exemplary wisdom addressing the secrets of life and death, issue of mortality and immortality, impermanence of life, and universality of death. Majnun Gorakhpuri highlights the above mentioned qualities in Mah Jabeen's speech and wants this Masnavi to get the same status in Urdu literature as the German philosopher and fiction writer Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe's famous novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) possesses in German literature. According to Nizami Bidayuni Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* was written in 1861. Rasheed Hassan Khan also agrees with it. The Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* consists of 455 verses. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is a loosely autobiographical epistolary novel by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. First published in 1774, it reappeared as a revised edition in 1787. It was one of the most important novels in the *Sturm und Drang* period in German literature, and influenced the later Romantic movement. Goethe, aged 24 at the time, finished *Werther* in five-and-a-half weeks of intensive writing in January–March 1774.¹⁵ The book's publication instantly placed the

author among the foremost international literary celebrities, and was among the best known of his works.¹⁶

Goethe's Werther also commits suicide in despair of love. He also embraces death against life just like Mah Jabeen. Majnun Gorakhpuri finds *Zebr e Ishq* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* equivalent in literary status. One can forget the distinction between life and death while reading both these works of literature. The fear of death vanishes from the mind.¹⁷ There is a strange similarity between Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* with the impact of cultural differences and diversities. In Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq*, heroine of the story commits suicide while in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* suicide is committed by hero of the story. In Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* the bravery and courage of the heroine and weakness and cowardice is of the hero reflect the specific culture of Lucknow when the Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* was being composed. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is a story about unrequited love, was presented as a collection of letters written by Werther, a young artist of a sensitive and passionate temperament, to his friend Wilhelm. These give an intimate account of his stay in the fictional village of Wahlheim,¹⁸ whose peasants have enchanted him with their simple ways. There he meets Charlotte, a beautiful young girl who takes care of her siblings after the death of their mother. Werther falls in love with Charlotte despite knowing beforehand that she is engaged to a man named Albert, eleven years her senior.¹⁹

Both these writings were considered a stimulant for suicidal attempt during their period, therefore their publishing was kept banned for many years. Both these creations belong to two different cultures. In *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the marriage of Charlotte was a tragedy for Werther. While Mah Jabeen in *Zebr e Ishq* was unmarried and there was no hindrance in her meetings with the hero. In actual, Mah Jabeen was living in a shallow and inert society where no action was taken to resolve an issue. Although *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is different from *Zebr e Ishq* in its cultural aspects because the heroine is helpless here. Her society is shallow and inert. But the similarity of both these writings arises from the emotion of love that makes their writers immortal. The element of tragic pain is common in the characters of Tolstoy's Anna, Goethe's Werther, Shakespeare's Juliet and Nawab Mirza Shauq's Mah Jabeen. All these characters reflect emotional turmoil that exerts deep influence upon the reader's heart. These characters have sacrificed their lives in the loyalty with their love.

Every masterpiece carries its meaning in two types of waves that travel on both internal and external surfaces. On external level of the meaning, we can find a sketch of that particular era's cultural and

social life. While in its internal meaning, we find the writer's own psyche and his mental inclinations. In both *Zehr e Isbq* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the social and ideological apprehension of their respective era is present but at the same time both these works address the issue of self-negation and the tragedy of the soul as well. Both these writers, consciously or unconsciously, represent the shattered hopes, dimness of the stars, skepticism, curiosity, and the similar factors of emotional tragedies because of the uncertainty of life. The tendency of "suicidal attempt" was lying somewhere in the subconscious of these writers that popped up in their works.

This goes without saying that all superior or inferior living beings consider their life the most precious treasure in this world, and the instinct to preserve their life and safety is penetrated into their soul. But human psyche, due to some particular sensory, psychological or psychical experiences, gets inclined towards getting freedom from the confines of life. However, this should also be kept in mind that the metaphor of death carries the realization of its aftermath more than any other fear in itself. The end of life on death is a mandatory, involuntary and natural action but it does not mean that one should escape the life because of any failure in a pursuit or its instability. The main purpose of all the above mentioned writers of East and West is to highlight the intensity of love. Universal concept of love which is described in the Masnavi *Zehr e Isbq* is the commonality of metacultural nature between East and West. This metacultural commonality provides common ground for sharing other values and concepts between both civilizations. The narration of love which comes in the conversation of Mah Jabeen and his beloved during their last meeting reminds us the 'Love' of Shelley: Werther is overwhelmed by his excess of emotion, which seems to be the sole cause of his suicide. ... Though his actions may be rash, overblown, and juvenile, Werther clearly tried to overcome his infatuation with Lotte. He left Wahlheim, moved to a new town, and tried to begin a new life.²⁰

In short, imagination has no boundary, religion, age or profession. Therefore the representation of love is similar in Persian literature in the form of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* in 10th and 11th century, English literature in the form of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in the end of 16th century, German literature in the form of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in 18th century, Russian literature in the form of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* in 19th century, and Urdu literature in the form of Nawab Mirza Shauq's *Zehr e Isbq* in 19th century despite all of them having different time and space. All these writers do have the similarity in their imaginativeness regarding the human tragedy.

The love and sacrifice are synonyms. No love exists without sacrificing. The dream of hero of Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* gives this dimension of love. The hero witnessed a vision that:

*In ecstasy I saw a dream
Mah Jabeen was saying to me with agony
That you lost your senses up to such an extent
That you forgot me within a few days
My achievement of all this story is this much
That what time I passed it was with hardships
This is the only of my success in love
That I sought friendship with the grief*

The same feeling of love can be seen in verses of Coleridge:

*All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
All are but ministers of Love,
And feed his sacred flame.²¹*

The incidents like Mah Jabeen's story often occur in our society but no one had the moral audacity to represent them before Shauq. The notion of the rights of women is disseminated generally in literature and particularly in poetry but in real life, a woman is not even provided with the basic rights to spend her life. Shauq has artistically shown the social upheavals and moral vices in their real form without any pretense. Because of this realistic approach, he has been called the pioneer of realism like French writers Emile Zola and Guy de Maupassant in 19th century. Instead of becoming a moral teacher, Shauq preferred becoming an artist while writing the spiritual and physical aspects of love in a Lakhnavi culture. His effort is, without any doubt, appreciable.

Both Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* were popular and had great impact on their society. The Masnavi *Zebr e Ishq* was banned after it was played on stage because it was opinion of the critics that it can create same feelings and emotions in the readers which were demonstrated by hero and heroine of the story. Similar was the case of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. The book reputedly also led to some of the first known examples of copycat suicide. The men were often dressed in the same clothing "as Goethe's description of Werther and using similar pistols." Often the book was found at the scene of the suicide.²² Rüdiger Safranski, a modern biographer of Goethe, dismisses the Werther Effect 'as only a persistent rumor'.²³ Nonetheless, this aspect of "Werther Fever" was watched with concern by the authorities – both the novel and the Werther clothing style were banned in Leipzig in 1775; the novel was also banned in Denmark and Italy.²⁴ It was also watched with

fascination by fellow authors. One of these, Friedrich Nicolai, decided to create a satirical piece with a happy ending, entitled *Die Freuden des jungen Werthers* ("The Joys of Young Werther"), in which Albert, having realized what Werther is up to, loaded chicken's blood into the pistol, thereby foiling Werther's suicide, and happily concedes Charlotte to him. After some initial difficulties, Werther sheds his passionate youthful side and reintegrates himself into society as a respectable citizen.²⁵

The novel is the story of a sensitive, artistic young man who demonstrates the fatal effects of a predilection for absolutes—whether those of love, art, society, or thought. Unable to reconcile his inner, poetic fantasies and ideas with the demands of the everyday world, Werther goes to the country in an attempt to restore his well-being. There he falls in love with Charlotte (Lotte), the uncomplicated fiancée of a friend. Werther leaves but later returns, feeling depressed and hopeless no matter where he lives. Torn by unrequited passion and his perception of the emptiness of life, he commits suicide.

An exceptionally popular book, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* gave expression to what Scottish historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle called "the nameless unrest and longing discontent which was then agitating every bosom." The mind that conceived its symmetry, wove its intricate linguistic patterns, and handled the subtle differentiation of hero and narrator was moved by a formal as well as a personal passion. The translated title (which uses "Sorrows" instead of "Sufferings") obscures the allusion to the Passion of Christ and individualizes what Goethe himself thought of as a "general confession," in a tradition going back to St. Augustine.

The credit of highlighting the aspects of tragedy in the global literature and *Zehr e Ishq* in the critique of Urdu literature goes to Majnun Gorakhpuri, Farman Fatehpuri and Abdul Majid Daryabadi. Besides these, some prominent critics in Urdu literature like Syed WaqarAzeem, Dr. Jameel Jalibi, Aale Ahmad Suroor, Ata Ullah Palvi, and Khawaja Ahmad Farooqui have analyzed this Masnavi in the light of literary perspectives in English, Persian, German, Russian, French, and Urdu literature. They have done its comparative studies with different literary masterpieces and the philosophical and literary thoughts of great writers. In these comparative readings, they pointed out the analogies in Eastern and Western literature and the diversity in it. Such parallel comparisons bring an end to the prejudice, stasis, and the conservativeness in literature and critique. There are numerous literary and technical qualities in Masnavi *Zehr e Ishq* that enable it to be included not only in Urdu literature but also

in the World's best love poetry.²⁶ This is the reason why so many literary critics have done its comparative study with other literary masterpieces in the world.

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