

The Influence of the Orient on Greek Fables

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Received: 24/6/2010 ; Accepted: 1/9/2010

Abstract:

This paper tackles mainly the world of fables in the Indian and the Greek traditions .These magnificent stories are still taught as moral lessons and used as subjects for various entertainments . This popular genre which reveals the ideas of ordinary people goes back not only to Fifth or Fourth Century B .C. , but to Sumerian , Babylonian and Assyrian sources long before .

Other stories in Arabic literature can easily be found in different sources before and after Islam. In this paper various examples of fables show obvious structural similarities in characters and meaning. . Some differences can also be traced in both types of stories which are suggestively portrayed.

تأثير المشرق في الخرافات اليونانية

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ملخص البحث :

تتناول هذه الدراسة حكايات وقصص الحيوانات الناطقة (الفيلز) في الموروثين الهندي واليوناني . وتضم هذه القصص دروسا اخلاقية متميزة تدرس لهذا الغرض ، اضافة الى عناصرها المسلية الممتعة .

يعكس هذا الجنس الادبي افكار عامة الناس ، ويرجع تاريخها ليس فقط الى القرنين الخامس او الرابع الميلادي بل الى ايام السومريين والبابليين والاشوريين القديمة . واشهر مثال على هذه القصص في الادب العربي هي مجموعة "كليلة ودمنة" والتي ترجمها الى العربية الاديب المعروف عبد الله بن المقفع (ت-٧٥٩).

ويقدم هذا البحث تحليلا للعديد من امثلة التشابه البنائي الواضح بين المجموعتين وخاصة من ناحية الشخص (الحيوانات) والمعاني ، اضافة الى وجود اختلافات في قصص اخرى . هناك صلة جلية بين المجموعتين تتناولها الدراسة في اتجاهات اخرى من ضمنها لغة القصص الفنية .

In talking of folk tales , the scholar Carl Tomilson **says**, " they are stories that grow out of the lives and imaginations of the people or folk".¹

Indeed such stories were generally passed down through the migrations of peoples; sailors, soldiers, women stolen from their tribes, slaves, monks etc. One predominant kind of these folk tales is a fable or as it is called ' folk beast stories '.²

A fable is usually defined as a type of short literary composition in verse or prose conveying a moral lesson.³ For example in a story , animals and inanimate objects speak and act as human being .This genre, however, represents one of the enduring forms of folk literature. Unlike a folk tale, the fable is the moral lesson woven in the story which is explicitly formulated.It gives, for example, the rewards of courage, ingenuity and independence. A fable also differs from parable for it is concerned with the possible events. yet, both of them are considered forms of allegory .⁴

Historically speaking, several parallel animal fables in Sumerian and Akkadian (700 BC.) are among those that the scholar Erich Ebeling introduced to Western readers. Numerous inscriptions also show how the Babylonian and the Assyrian folk tales adorned the literature of ancient Egypt.⁵ Phalereus ,the Greek philosopher, made the first collection of these fables around the Third Century BC. According to Babrius, the Greek writer, this type of stories had been the invention of Syrians (personifying Neneveh to Greek). ⁶

In this concern, the Iraqi scholar Dr. Sallom says that the first stories appeared in Mesopotamia and then extended to other civilizations.⁷ *A very distinctive example is *The Mosquito and the*

Elephant. It is a Babylonian story which has been involved in Aesop's collection as

The Gnat and the Ox. Then the English scholar, Lambert, translates various stories to English in his book *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* which reflects a real historical background of such stories.

Here, Dr. Sallom goes on to declare that many of Aesop's fables are rather of Indian sources so long as many foreign scholars did not actually know these ancient Iraqi stories .8 In this respect, Arabic poetry and proverbs are full of such animal stories especially in Al-Jahid's book *Al-haywan* or in *Ikhwan Al- Safa's messages* . Moreover, most of the Arab historians like Al-Tabari and Al- Masoodi introduced in their books magnificent tales of this important literary tradition which are concerned with pre-Islamic period. Such animals are well described and treated as we read in Antara's poems or in Omayya Bin Al- Salt's verse lines which describes the cock and the crow after having some wine :

عنيفا واضحى الديك في القدعاليا	وامسى الغراب يضرب الارض كلها
ونادم ندمانا من الطير عاديا	فذلك مما اسهب الخمرليه
نديم غراب لا يمل الحوانيا	ذاك الا الديك شارب خمرة

However, Al Mare's poetry in his messages , *Al- Sahil wa Al-Shagih*, reveals that intimate relation between man and animal, besides *One Thousand and One Nights* which rather holds distinctive examples of such stories .8

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Among the most important examples of these Indian fables is *Kalila Wa- Dimna* which is very well known in Arabic literature. It contains a large number of stories translated by the famous prose writer Abdulla Ibn al-Muqaffa (724-759).The other exciting one in Greek

literary tradition is known as *Aesopian fables* that was mainly attributed to Aesop himself.

Concerning the story of composing these Indian fables, it returns nearly to the Fourth Century BC. when the Indian philosopher Bidpai was imprisoned by cruel king Dabshleem who was unjust in treating people. In return of setting this magnificent book, the king tolerates him. These fables of Bidpai are known in Sanskrit as *Pancatantra*, which is rather a collection of five chapters used for instructing three sons of the king. It contains aphorisms that glorifies shrewdness over altruism. They are beast stories (jatakas in Indian) and a number of them were introduced into the Greek-speaking world by a Cingalese Embassy which once visited Rome about the **year 50 AD**.⁹ Whereas the edition by Ibn al-Muqaffa is divided into fifteen parts and one of them is titled *Kalila Wa- Dimna* (the names of two foxes). It actually adds an important literary narrative prose to Arabic literature. However, it is curious to know that Ibn al-Muqaffa was accused of being atheist during the Abbasid period and then was murdered.¹⁰

The second collection of stories is rather attributed to Aesop, the familiar name in Greece during the Fifth Century BC. But most of what are known *Aesopic fables* is a compilation of tales from various sources and many of them were originated with authors who lived long before Aesop. Yet, Aesop himself is said to have composed many fables which were passed down by oral tradition. According to Aristophanes, the Greek dramatist, Aesop was also accused of stealing a cup from a temple and faced, like Ibn Al-Muqaffa, a tragic end.¹¹

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Researchers have shown an intimate relation between the fables associated with the name of Aesop and the Indian jatakas or birth- stories

of the Buddha. If these stories were migrated to Greek and Europe, they actually submitted either to little modification or to some changes.¹²

In reading comparatively both collections of fables, the Greek and the Indian, more than *three* similarities are mainly detected between them, in meaning, actors and form besides the technique of presentation.

The **first** one shows a striking similarity in the meaning of many stories of both types. It is known that the main characteristic of each fable is usually designed or adapted to convey a moral lesson which is usually summed up at the end of each story. For example, in Aesop's story *Substance and Shadow*(p.12) the same content is enhanced in **Kalila Wa-Dimna's** tale *The Rabbit and the Lion* (p.122). The same heroes throw themselves in the water just for catching another bone . In fact, each one of them sees his reflected image there. The same end is fully introduced to show punishment that comes as a result of greediness as we read in these examples: ¹³

"A dog was crossing over a river with a piece of meat in her mouth . Seeing her own reflection in water , she thought it was another dog with a bigger piece of meat .So she sprang to snatch the piece that another dog had .The result was that she had neither .She also could not get the other piece because it was swept down by the current " (Aesop's fables p.12)

The same story is nearly presented in the Indian fable by Ibn al – Muqaffa *The Rabbit and the Lion* (p.15). The lion also throws himself in a well to get the other bone. We can easily find two other stories which are so much paralleled between the *Cock and the Fox* in **Kalila Wa - Dimna's** collection and *The wolf and the Goat* in Aesop's fables.

The **second** similarity shows, for example, how some characters of two particular stories in both collections share similar roles in their action. In fact, such characters form the main subject matter of these fables and also succeed equally in developing the original structure of

them in concrete instances .They are similarly simple heroes of certain qualities resembling excited scenes to amuse and to convince. The majority of these actors are alike . In well personification they are mainly put on the mouth of animals such as lions, elephants, wolves, foxes, dogs ,crows and doves etc. or sometimes, on men like soldiers, schoolboys, shepherds and singers.Certain Greek gods are also involved .These characters are generally stereotyped, that means they are either good or bad .14

s Indeed, the majority of these characters can clearly be classified into three following aspects:

First, **similarity in both actors and meanings.**

It is easy to detect in both collections how two stories give exactly the same significant meaning whereas the characters are alike. For example, in *As Good as His Word* (p.13),one of Aesop' s fables, and *The Mouse and the Lion* in ***Kalila Wa Dimna's*** stories(p.175), the meaning as well as characters are completely accorded with each other in all details.

"A mouse ran over the body of seeping lion .Walking up , the lion seized it and was minded eat it . Then he laughed and let it go . Not long afterwards its gratitude was the means of saving his life . Being captured by hunters , the mouse freed him by gnawing through the rope. (Aesop's Fables" ,p.41

Actually, the same story is mentioned in ***Kalila Wa- Dimna's*** collection and both stories show simply how a very strong man may need a weaker man's help. This reflects that this story has been migrated to Greece.. Another important similarity can also be detected between the Aesopian tale *One Good Turn Deserves Another* (p.29) and *The Dove and the Ant* (p.255)in ***Kalila.Wa- Dimna's*** tales in both *actors and meaning* though their titles are different.

Second, **different actors with the same moral lessons.** .

Various stories in both collections may present extensively one similar meaning though the animals are different . The Indian fable in *Kalila Wa- Dimna's* edition *The Frog and the Ox* gives the same advice embodied in Aesop's story *The Crow and the Partridge* as we see in the following stories :

" Once upon a time a frog saw an ox . She was envious of his bulk . She swelled out her body till all her wrinkles disappeared and then asked the children if she was fatter than the ox . They said : No. At last she got cross and makes frantic efforts to blow more, she burst herself and died. .
" (Fables of Aesop,p.46)

A similar meaning in **Kalila Wa Dimna's** collection is obviously seen:

"A crow once saw a partridge walking . He was deeply affected by her . Soon he began to imitate her walk but he couldn't .Trying then to go back to his first walk ,he found himself unable and he attempted to regain his usual walking but he was too much confused ".(k.W. D., p.262)

Undoubtedly the same action is nearly repeated in both stories .The crow, for example, imitates a partridge in her walking whereas the frog tries similarly to imitate the ox in braying till it loses its first ability. The two stories embody certain quality, that man has to avoid false imitation which leads to death.¹⁵

Third, **similar actors with different moral lessons:**.

In various fables of both collections , the same animals play different roles for expressing one definite idea. For example, in *Kalila wa - Dimna*, the story *The Lion , the Fox and an Ass* has the same actors in Aesop's fable *The Fox out Foxed* .That means they act meaningful events in different action as we see :

" An ass and a fox made an alliance and went out hunting. When a lion appeared in their way, the fox realized the danger that threatened them , and going up to the lion he undertook to hand over the ass to him in exchange for a guarantee of security . On receiving the lion's promise to let him go , he led the ass into a trap. But the lion , when he saw that the ass could not possibly escape ,seized the fox first and went after the ass at his leisure." (Aesop's stories ,p.16)

If we read the Indian story in *Kalila Wa- Dimna* , we can notice how the *same* actors –a lion, an ass and a fox- play nearly different roles.

The **third** striking similarity deals with the language of these fables. The style is rather simple and understandable and the stories are written in their single narrative frame with some comic touches. They usually start with the traditional term "once upon a time", or they may follow direct beginnings: " A lion's attention was attracted by.. (p.45) " An ass crossing a river with a load of salt, lost his footing.. etc.(p.110) in order to arouse the hearer's attention.

In deed , Ibn al- Muqaffa in his Arabic version starts to narrate his stories with little modification . The stories are rather narrated effectively to arouse our attention: "day by day" or " year after year".

In addition to that, the fables that hold the names of gods like : Zeus,Apollo, Prometheus etc. are typically Greek. On the contrary, the stories whose heroes are animals such as elephants ,camels , monkeys are supposed to be Indian. If such fables have lasted for thousands of years, it is certainly because of their *universality*: place is anywhere, time is real and a moral message is implied .¹⁶ One other clear point to be added here is that most of the animals have the same characteristics from fable to fable : A lion, for example, is noble, a peacock is proud, a fox is cunning , a wolf is fierce, a horse is brave and a donkey is a hard-working.

Finally, the stories reflect that impressive cultural and social interactions between the Iraqi, the Indian and the Greek people. These fables are generally based on various sources rather than being a part of the common culture of the Indo-European people. Even the differences between them - in actors or meaning - they may due to certain changes when transferred orally among generations and cultures. Here we may agree with Mr. Hanford 's view that " there is no need to say which of them is earlier", but we have to say that the Iraqi tales are certainly the earliest . 17

Notes

1. S .A. Handford , *Fables of Aesop*, (London :Penguin Book Ltd., 1954), p.xxiii.
 2. Handford , p. v.
 ٣. *الحياة اليومية في بلاد بابل وآشور*، ت سليم طه التكريتي (بغداد : دار الشؤون الثقافية ، ط٢ ، ١٩٨٦) ص ٣١٨ - ٣٢٠
 4. *Aesop* , Wikipedia , the free encyclopedia ,p.2.
 ٥. ببدا : *كتاب كليله ودمنة* ، ترجمة عبد الله ابن المقفع (عمان : دار الاسراء، ٢٠٠٠) ص ٦٥.
 ٦. ببدا ، ص ، ٣٢.
 ٧. *كتاب قصص الحيوان* ، داود سلوم ، (بغداد ، دار الحرية للطباعة) ١٩٧٩، ص ٣٦.
 8. In Arabic literature, various tales were narrated by poets such as: Omayya bin Al- Salt و. Al-Nabigha- as Al-Asha- امية بن الصلت . Other prose tales were mentioned by "Ikhwan Al –Safa"النابعة الذبياني "Al-Jahid- الجاحظ " or by other different historians in well –narrated styles. In this respect the *Holy Quran* repeated some of the tales mentioned in the holy books either in corrected or modified form .
 ٩. *الحكاية التراثية* ، د. قيس كاظم الجنابي (بغداد: دار الشؤون الثقافية، ٢٠٠٦) ص ٥٢
 ١٠. آثار ابن المقفع ، — ، من التراث العربي (بيروت، دار مكتبة الحياة،-) ص ١٥ –
- Abullah Ibn al- Muqaffah (724-759) is a famous prose writer .His translation to *Kalila Wa- Dimna* from middle Persian to Arabic literature

is considered one of the first masterpieces of Arabic literary prose. His style is implicitly instructive . He met with a violent death through the Abbasid period .

11.Aesop : Known for the genre of fables which are ascribed to him . He may have been of African origin. He is said to have lived as a slave in Samos 550 B.C. According to the historian Herodotus, Aesop met with a violent death at the hands of the inhabitants of Delphi.

12.Handford ,p . vi.

13.One important thing to be mentioned here is the stories of *Kalila Wa-Dimna* which have been written in Arabic verse by Ibn Al- Lahiqi (b. 724 –) : In this example the poet says in the relation between the" lion and the ox " :

وان من كان داني النفس يرضى من الأرفع بالأخس كمثل الكلب الشقي البائس يفرح بالعظم
العتيق البائس

Another edition in Arabic poetry has been achieved by Ibn Al- Habariya whereas Dr. Khalusi in his book (٧٥ الف ليلة وليلة ص) appreciates these stories, and others declare that they can immensely be compared with Shakespeare's plays or rather with Gothe's Dr. Faustus .

14.Handford , p. viii.

15.Aesop and the Indian Fables, [http: Saudiaramco .world .com\issue\ 200050/the fable.](http://Saudiaramco.world.com/issue/200050/the_fable)

١٦.الادب المقارن في ضوء الف ليلة وليلة ، د .صفاء خلوصي(،بغداد: دار الحرية للطباعة،١٩٨٦) ص ٣٢، ٦٥.

17. Handford, p. vii .