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Ethical Recalibration and Elliptical Refraction: A Gendered Reading of the *Tutinama* Genealogy

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Abstract:

Drawing upon David Damrosch's concept of elliptical refraction, this paper analyzes the changing moral architecture of Nakhshabi's *Tutinama* (c.1330) as it moves across cultural and ideological systems. I argue that, from the Sanskrit *Sukasaptati* through Nakhshabi's Sufi-inflected Persian text, Gawwasi's Deccani masnavi, Qadiri's prose, and finally Haidri's colonial *Tota Kahani*, these parrot tales show an ethical recalibration of narrative that gradually erases female agency, commodifies the female body, and naturalizes patriarchal dominance. I apply theories from Wayne Booth, Gérard Genette, Pierre Bourdieu, and Gayatri Spivak to close readings of texts and demonstrate how world literature operates not as a neutral site of circulation but as a machinery for encoding and intensifying ideological control.

Keywords: Tutinama, Nakhshabi, ethical recalibration, elliptical refraction, David Damrosch, gender stereotypes, Pierre Bourdieu, Gayatri Spivak.

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Introduction

Cultures are marked by the movement of narratives. One such text is *Tutinama* (parrot tales). It is a text that travelled across centuries, from the original Sanskrit to a medieval Persian tale, and then into colonial pedagogy, reaching new readers. But as it travelled, its narratives were changed by the cultural and ideological systems they entered. David Damrosch calls this "refraction". Damrosch is of the opinion that literary works are refracted through the interpretive frameworks of their host cultures (281-83) and that this refraction transforms narratives at fundamental levels. While Damrosch establishes that narratives transform, the specific mechanisms by which their moral architectures are rewritten remain underexamined. This paper argues 'ethical logic' as a site where world literature operates not as a neutral space of circulation but more as a machinery through which cultures recalibrate narratives to serve ideological ends. For this, I use Wayne Booth's concept of the implied author as a theoretical lens. According to Booth, a narrator does not just relay events but also constructs a "second self" (71), which is more of an overarching consciousness arising from the "sum of his own choices" (74-75). Explaining this way, each translator or adapter of the parrot tales acts as a new implied author, constructing a new moral universe seeking a specific ideological "communion" with their contemporary reader (Booth 300). I trace the evolution of the ‘parrot tales,’ from *Sukasaptati* to its Hindustani prose rendition, *Tota Kahani,* and make visible how this implied authorial presence systematically recalibrates the text's ethical logic to enforce patriarchal surveillance.

Origin of Parrot Tales

Chandra Rajan in his introduction to the *Panchatantra* describes how this ancient Sanskrit collection of animal fables spread far beyond its original cultural context, reflecting the way Indian stories have spread across languages and continents more generally (Marroum 513). Eventually, these stories were given new life in translation, first as *Kalila wa Dimna* in

Arabic in the eighth century and then as *Anvar-i-Suhayli* in Persian in the twelfth; a central frame story that opens into a number of smaller, embedded tales intended to entertain and educate is a recognizable structure shared by these works, despite their disparate tones. Working within this same storytelling tradition, Chintamani Bhatta composed the *Sukasaptati*[i] in the twelfth century. Here, a clever parrot keeps his mistress from straying during her husband's absence by telling her seventy stories over seventy nights. The earliest form of this motif appears in the *Radha Jataka*, where a Brahmana's wife takes advantage of her husband's absence to consort with other men. Two parrots, raised as the Brahmana's adopted sons, witness her behaviour and expose it when he returns. They observe that "even if a woman were carried about in one's arms, she would not necessarily remain faithful." The elder parrot concludes that only "wifely love can curb a woman's lust," attributing the wife's transgressions to the absence of such love (Cowell 1). Chintamani reshaped this story for a different audience. The Brahmana becomes Madana Vinoda, a prosperous merchant, a social type often seen in fables of that time. Before setting off on a long trading journey, Madana Vinoda entrusts his wife, Prabhavati, to the care of a pair of parrots. Lonely in his absence, Prabhavati listens to a frivolous friend who tempts her to take a lover. When the female parrot protests, unlike the male parrot who takes a gentler route, Prabhavati becomes angry. The male parrot appears to agree with her plan, but asks her to be careful, giving his advice through his long cycle of seventy tales (Töttössy 228). Each night, he narrates her a tale and slowly steers her away from temptation. On the final night, she gives up on the idea of meeting her lover entirely. When Madana returns, she confesses this to him and thanks the parrot for saving her from doing wrong. The seventieth story closes with a plea for forgiveness, arguing that Prabhavati was only partly at fault as she was misled by poor company rather than driven by her own will.

Sukasaptati became extremely popular and soon appeared in Persian as *Jawahir al-Asmar* in the early fourteenth century (c. 1313-1315). Imad ibn Muḥammad Taġari, a secretary

at the court of Sultan Ala al-Din Khalji (r. 1290–1316) translated these Sanskrit tales into Persian, but his version was considered long-winded and lacking in polish (Hanif 262). Khwaja Ziyauddin Nakhshabi later wrote these tales in simpler and more elegant Persian. In his preface, Nakhshabi writes that his patron handed him an old Persian translation and asked him to create a new version, one that was clearer and more refined. He reduced the seventy tales to fifty-two, replacing the less engaging ones with more compelling ones and arranging them with greater care (Hanif 263). According to Damrosch, the more difficult text *Jawahir al-Asmar* failed to effectively "refract" into the Persian cultural consciousness, and to achieve cultural legibility, a foundational recalibration became necessary which happens in Nakhshabi's version. The young Emperor Akbar was so captivated by Nakhshabi's *Tutinama* that in the 1550s he commissioned an illustrated manuscript with more than 250 miniature paintings, one of the earliest large-scale art projects of his reign[ii].

But Nakhshabi's *Tutinama* did not remain confined to its fourteenth-century Persian setting. Over the next few centuries, writers reimagined the parrot's stories in different languages and forms. Two sixteenth-century writers, Gawwasi and Qadiri, stand out for the very different directions they took. Gawwasi's version, written in 1639, takes the form of a *masnavi* in Deccani Urdu. He strips Nakhshabi's Persian version of its Arabic influences. His retelling avoids specific names and places, or for that matter any specified setting. This creative choice probably helped the stories reach a wider audience in South India, where readers were more familiar with Sanskrit storytelling traditions. It also gave the work a certain universality, making it easier to relate to for those who grew up with local narrative forms. Qadiri, on the other hand, chose a more conservative approach. He produced a Persian prose version that retained the names of the characters and stayed close to the main thread of Nakhshabi's text, but he also introduced key changes. His *Tutinama* is shorter, thirty-five tales instead of the original fifty-two, and simpler in style. This pared-down version later formed the basis for Haider

Bakhsh Haidri's Tota Kahani (1801), a translation into Hindustani that blended Persian and Hindi. As Blain Auer (2018) observes, Haidri's work marks an important moment in the history of how moral and political knowledge was transmitted in the subcontinent (40). Around this time, the colonial interest in Indian languages was also beginning to shape the literary world. John Gilchrist (d. 1841), a Scottish physician and Indologist who became professor of Hindustani at Fort William College in 1800, played an influential role in this process. He encouraged scholars who had Persian knowledge to work for the colonial government. While always under colonial control, Gilchrist's program not only contributed to the standardization of Hindustani but also established a space where the linguistic traditions of Persian, Arabic, and India could meet.

The Doctrinal Foundation: Ethical Recalibration

As it was Nakhshabi's *Tutinama* that shows a break from Sukasaptati (mostly in its resolution) and inspires the later versions, it is important to understand the ideological framework governing its recalibration. In order to do that, one must distinguish the broad, secular tradition of scribal literature from that of *Nasihatnama* ("Mirrors for Princes"), a genre dedicated to imparting guidance and counsel to monarchs and rulers. In medieval Islamic culture, narrative collections such as *Kalīla wa-Dimna* (mentioned above), a book of animal fables translated into Arabic from Persian, circulated as secular prose read by elites for linguistic virtuosity, stylistic refinement and general moral edification (Irwin 37, 40–41). By contrast, *Nasihatnama* (Mirrors for Princes) genre operates as a discursive framework designed to instruct monarchs on the successful management of power. These texts frequently utilize framing stories as mechanisms for governance, where an advisor uses narrative to calm a volatile ruler and restore rationality to the state (van Leeuwen 24-25). The vizier serves as the "exponent of reason" whose job is to protect the ruler from destructive, impulsive passions (van

Leeuwen 33). For example, in *Siyāsat-nāma* (The Book of Government), a prominent work of Mirror literature, Niẓām al-Mulk advises:

> The king's underlings must not be allowed to assume power […] this particularly applies to women, for they […] have not complete intelligence […]. Naturally their commands are mostly the opposite of what is right, and mischief ensues; the king's dignity suffers and the people are afflicted with trouble. (Niẓām al-Mulk 179)

Tutinama is often grouped with secular scribal literature because of its frame-tale and animal exempla, however it actually operates as the Mirrors for Princes. By recalibrating ethical logic, Nakhshabi, in *Tutinama*, adopts the advisory posture of courtly Mirror literature. The parrot in the story functions more like a wise court vizier counseling a volatile ruler, employing cautionary tales to manage crises, enforce discipline, and prevent irrational action. However, unlike the 'Mirror' literature, in Tutinama the pupil is a woman who, through the stories, is taught to serve as an exemplar of excellent social behaviour. She is entrusted with the responsibility of promoting virtue and is expected to maintain a code of modesty within the social structure. By integrating this top-down political logic into a household narrative, Nakhshabi transforms the domestic space into a microcosm of the state. According to Gerda Lerner, patriarchy is typically characterized as the "manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children within the family" (Lerner 239). Its ideological manifestation lies in portraying female independence as a structural threat; the way the vizier must control the king's passions to preserve the empire, the parrot must control Khojeste's passions to preserve the household.

It seems this transposition of political logic into the domestic sphere was ideologically motivated by Nakhshabi's own intellectual and religious background. Ziauddin Nakhshabi was not just a translator but a prominent fourteenth-century Sufi saint. He was a disciple of the renowned Sufi Shaykh Farid-al-Din Nagiri, a member of the Chishti order and scholar who

migrated to Badayun, India (Hanif 262). Operating within this Sufi tradition, Nakhshabi's worldview reflects the foundational gender doctrines of Islamic theology, most notably articulated in Abu Ḥamid al-Ghazali's renowned work, *Iḥya ulum al-din* (1096-7), a masterpiece offering a comprehensive manual for Muslim piety. The *Iḥya* is highly esteemed for its deep influence on Sunni Islamic tradition. In his discussion of the "secrets" of marriage, he addresses various aspects related to marriage, including the recommended age for marriage, the impact of marriage on a man's fidelity to God, the proper way to formulate a marriage contract, and the characteristics of a suitable bride, aligning with broader Islamic traditions. (al-Ghazālī 21–43). Al-Ghazālī's conception of the "good wife," female piety is constructed as an instrument for male spiritual devotion; conversely, an impious or autonomous wife is imagined distracting the husband from full devotion to God (Weitz 209).

This dual, theological and political, view of women fundamentally alters the ethical logic from *Sukasaptati* to *Tutinama*. Women, displaying proper modesty become essential to ensuring moral value, creating a dialectical relationship between honour and modesty in family or lineage. Losing honour equates to losing authority, and restoring authority requires 'cutting-away' the source of shame. The merchant's wife in Nakhshabi's *Tutinama*, deciding to meet her lover and confiding in the nightingale bring humiliation or dishonour. Therefore, the ending drastically differs from Śukasaptati. In Nakhshabi, the husband does not condone or overlook the wife's behaviour. In this narrative, Khojeste is punished by being killed. Here, Nakhshabi's implied author actively intervenes to prevent the reader from sympathizing with female survival. This way, the implied author constructs a rigid moral universe where the reader is forced into a 'communion' (Booth 300) with patriarchal retribution. The implied author redefines the core norms of the text: transgression is no longer just the physical act of adultery, but also its inherent desire.

Focalization and the Erasure of Agency

As the narrative refracts through other cultures (Deccani Urdu and Colonial Hindustani), the ethical logic established by Nakhshabi gets intensified. The pervasive view of women's innate nature as lascivious and malevolent is reinforced. Pegah Shahbaz points out that in these narratives, "woman is considered as the reason for man’s miseries and is normally punished at the end of the story by being condemned to death evidently because she walks out of the norm or breaks a taboo" (2). Because male honour resides largely in the fidelity of their women, keeping women under continuous surveillance is an obsession in these texts. For instance, Meimun assigns the task to a sagacious parrot and a nightingale, instructing Khojeste: “In my absence, do not undertake any significant actions without seeking the counsel of these two birds” (dar ghaybat-e man bi-mushāwara-ye in du murg na kārī kunī) (Nakhshabi 11). In the subsequent versions, the narrative’s objectification of the female character is consolidated. The absence of rationality does not remain confined to Khojeste alone, but also extends to the female bird, the mynah. While mynah advises the wife against infidelity, the parrot dismisses it as folly: “Sharak is a female and often perceived as lacking intelligence” (shārk mūnath ast va aksaran nāqiṣ al-‘aql mī-shavand) (Qadiri 59). In Haidri too, mynah lacks intelligence, “Bano, Maina displayed a lack of intelligence and wisdom. Such traits are occasionally observed in women, too” (Bāno Mīnā nāqiṣ ʿaql thī. Aur aksar yih khalqat auraton kī bevūqūf hotī hai) (12). As a result, Khojeste strangles the mynah. According to Perry, ‘The myna dies, but there are no dead parrots in the tradition of parrot stories’ (72). This ethical recalibration is also seen in the narrative structure and in the manipulation of agency and perspective.

Later in Nakhshabi's *Tutinama*, when the wealthy merchant Meimun expresses his desire to embark on a lengthy voyage to accumulate wealth, his wife Khojeste offers to accompany him and advises him about the importance of things beyond money. Meimun, however, declines her offer, using the analogy that she, as a woman is like a threshold meant to

remain at home. In Gawwasi's Deccani version, Khojeste neither offers counsel to Meimun nor expresses a desire to accompany him on his journey. Instead, Meimun independently announces his decision to undertake the long voyage, driven by his quest for experience and wealth. This change in the story removes the interaction and dialogue between Meimun and Khojeste, changing the dynamics between the characters and emphasizing Meimun's autonomy in making this significant life choice. However, in Qadiri and Haidri's versions, Meimun's journey shift more toward a pursuit of pleasure than a strictly business-orientated venture. "I too should venture out and make some money while exploring new destinations" (tamāshā dekhūn māl le kuchh main ā'ūn shahrōn kī sīr se) (Haidri 9). This reflects a shift in the implied author's ethical parameters; the female subject goes from experiencing refusal (her voice is heard but rejected) to total silence (she is not granted a voice at all). This systematic stripping of agency is most visible in how desire is narratologically framed.

In the versions of Nakhshabi and Gawwasi, Khojeste is portrayed as having agency as she is shown to being naturally attracted to the man due to his well-defined physique and striking looks. Her wish to be close to him illustrates her active participation in the narrative. "In that moment, she stumbled, lost consciousness, her composure slipped away, and the army of passion overwhelmed patience" (fī l-ḥāl az pāyī dar āmad va bī-hūsh shud va az dast bar raft va mudhūsh gasht va lashkar-i shauq bar ṭalī'a-yi ṣabr istīlā yāft) (Nakhshabi 11). In Gawwasi too, "her longing for a man was so intense that the moment she laid eyes on one, she fell head over heels" (jo thā mard kā 'ishq dil mẽ awal / jo dekhī o se so ga'ā woh nikāl) (15). However, in Qadiri and Haidri's subsequent versions, this agency and desire are totally erased.

"Seeing the radiant countenance of Khojeste drove him to madness" (aftāb-i rukhṣāra-yi Khujasta rā dīda majnūn va dīvāna kardīd) (Qadiri 14). "The moment he laid eyes on Khojeste, he fell in love with her" (Khujasta ko dekh-te hī 'āshiq huā aur us kā dil us par ā gayā) (Haidri 4). In narratological terms, this represents a violent shift in focalization (Genette 189-190).

Gerard Genette defines focalization as the perspective through which a narrative is presented. In Nakhshabi, Khojeste is granted internal focalization as the reader is given access to her overwhelming "army of passion." Booth reminds us that an author manipulates narrative distance to control readerly sympathy and judgment (155). By moving to an external, male-centric perspective in Qadiri and the later Hindustani text, the new implied authors deliberately distance the reader from female subjectivity. The narrative systematically locks the reader out of Khojeste's consciousness and places all emphasis on the man's desire. What is also evident is that in each version, the implied author curtails the agency of women and adopts a more misogynistic tone. By the time it reaches the colonial adaptation, it culminates in the absolute commodification of women's desires. So, in the Haidri version, the male character employs financial incentives to entice Khojeste: "Should you visit my residence for a duration of four hours one evening, I will gift you a ring valued at one lakh rupees" (agar tum ek rāt chār ghaṛī ke vāsṭe mere ghar āo to us ke 'uvāz mẽ ek angoṭhī lākh rupaye kī tumhẽ doṅgā) (Haidri 4). This transactional aspect reduces a woman of elevated societal status to the position of a sex worker, wherein women are objects of desire that can be monetarily acquired.

Doxa and Epistemic Violence

We can apply Pierre Bourdieu's concept of doxa to understand how such a radical degradation of the female character is achieved without disrupting the narrative flow. Doxa, by Bourdieu, is defined as the unquestioned, naturalized beliefs of a society where arbitrary social power structures are accepted as self-evident truths. This way, the individuals operating within doxa, accept "many things without knowing them," leading to a form of unquestioning "bodily submission" (Bourdieu and Eagleton 113, 121). In Nakhshabi's *Tutinama*, Khojeste's subjugation was intricately woven into a Sufi context and doctrinal rationale which Qadiri later writes in easier to read Persian for more people. However, the most violent change happens in Haidri's *Tota Kahani* when the text is changed for the colonial classroom. As the text at Fort

William College was a language guide for British officials, it was mostly received in a secular way. In this version it gets stripped of its theological and allegorical ecosystem, and the financial transaction of Khojeste's body is laid bare. It relies on purely doxic logic which it is presented as "common sense" that male wealth can purchase female bodies. There is no need for any moral justification because the text's worldview has completely naturalized mercantile patriarchy. The evolving depiction of Khojeste illustrates the difficulties women encounter when their stories are rewritten by male authorities. It exemplifies what Gayatri Spivak describes as the positioning of the colonized woman "[b]etween patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation" (234). As Khojeste moves across this spectrum, she starts out as an active subject with misplaced desires in the original Sanskrit; shown as an inherently sinful subject who needs spiritual discipline in the Persian Sufi text and Deccani Urdu; and turned into a pure object of trade in the colonial Hindustani. Through this chain of versions, her original voice is constantly overwritten by patriarchal scribes which shows that the machinery of world literature often works by systematically erasing women's inner lives.

Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that *Tutinama* is not just a book of stories. Its adaptations and lasting popularity show that it built a moral framework which said that controlling women's desires was necessary to keep social and political order. It becomes more of an important ideological tool that passed on ideas about gender, power and authority from one culture to the next. Its genealogy therefore complicates Damrosch's framework of world literature. Damrosch says that elliptical refraction is a generative process, infusing texts with renewed vitality and significance as they traverse boundaries, but the *Tutinama* chain makes us ask: what ethical possibilities are foreclosed during this refraction? It is true that the narrative gains new meanings, but those meanings consistently narrow ethical possibilities for women. The wife who could be forgiven (*Sukasaptati*) becomes the wife who must be executed (*Tutinama*). The

wife who had a voice (Nakhshabi) becomes the wife whose voice is silenced (Gawwasi), and finally, the wife who is a purchasable commodity (Haidri). This pattern shows that world-literary circulation has never been ideologically neutral as refraction often enables circulation by making texts more legible to the patriarchal and imperial ideologies of the receiving culture. By attending to the ethical recalibration of texts like these, we confront not just historical literary perspectives, but the very machinery through which ideologies are globalized and sustained.

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i The oldest known manuscript of the Shuka Saptati is from the fifteenth century AD. Academic opinion holds that the work was in existence long before it emerged in the form in which it is now available. One scholar traced it to the sixth century AD. Another suggested that it is referred to in the eleventh century treatise on poetics, the Shringdraprakdsha of Bhoja. More certain is its mention in Hem Chandra's commentary on the Yogashdstra, which was written after AD 1160 (Haksar, A. N. D., translator. Shuka Saptati: Seventy Tales of the Parrot. Rupa & Company, 2009).

ii "... such a manuscript has now appeared, and it is of the highest importance in confirming the viewpoint of those who suggested the continuity of the native Indian painting tradition from the West Indian style of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, through the hitherto controversial Chaurapanchasika-Lor Chanda group to the early Mughal and the early Rajasthani styles. The manuscript is a *Tutinama* (Tales of a Parrot) acquired this year by the Cleveland Museum of Art by purchase through funds generously provided by Mrs A. Dean P" (Lee, Sherman E., and Pramod Chandra. "A Newly Discovered Tūti-Nāma and the Continuity of the Indian Tradition of Manuscript Painting." *Cleveland Museum of Art eBooks*, 1963, ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA67423456).