

Reborn with digitization: A study of popular short Qissa in Punjabi

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Abstract

Digitization has given a new birth to the cultural, religious and regional heritage of any geographical space, Punjab being no exception. The genre of Qissa has been popular amongst the elite, literate and illiterate alike. While Qissa became popular with the legendary stories of Puraan Bhagat, Heer-Ranjha, Sohni-Mahival, Laila-Majnu, Mirza-Sahiban, Sassi-Punnu, and more recently, Loona, a number of unknown short Qissas about frivolities were written by many writers. These Qissas, sans any artistic value and aesthetic quality, had appropriately been buried under the temporal dust. With advent of digitization, such 'lesser' literature has come to the surface once again. This paper tries to evaluate the worth of such literature, and also tries to answer whether such literature should be given the archival space when there is already a lot of much significant analogous data that is on the verge of loss.

Keywords: digitization, Qissa, Punjabi, analogous, cultural

Introduction

"Nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless; everything useful is ugly, for it expresses a need, and the needs of man are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor weak nature. The most useful place in a house is the lavatory."

(Théophile Gautier)

Even though Qissa as a genre has a different name in different cultures, this sprouted from a tradition of oral story-telling with its origins in Arabia and Iran before it evolved into a standalone genre of scripted literature. A number of Qissas are celebrated in many countries of South Asia with somewhat different plots and almost similar endings. Initial Qissas were of the religious nature about which Kreyenbroek notes that:

"A group of storylines that have felt to have religious significance forms the core of the religious knowledge of... traditions. These include what Westerners would call myths, legends, edifying tales, and stories about the great figures of the faith. The storyline may generate a range of actual narratives. They may popularly be told in prose as short and relatively simple stories" (Kreyenbroek 158).

Qissa has been a part of the oral, literary and musical tradition enriching the collective culture of the sub-continent. Qissa tradition is very significant as can be comprehended from its massive use as allusion or otherwise in Gurbani and its explanatory literature, Sufi writings, contemporary writings, and Punjabi heritage in general. Many preachers of the religious texts use references from Qissas to support their argument. Qissa was lyrical initially and poets wrote romances such as Heer Ranjha, Laila Majnu, Sheeri Farhad, Sohni Mahival, Sassi-Punnu and Mirza Sahiban et al. Most of the Punjabis can relate to one or more of these love tales. These legendary love stories, mostly tragic, in a way weaved an

essence of romanticism in the Punjabi character of the Qissa tradition. The tradition has sustained itself through all the upheavals and shifts, and one can easily find allusions to these Qissas even in the music albums and singles of Punjabi musicians and singers being released every other day.

Not alone in recent times, Qissa culture has always been exploited by different stakeholders at any given times. As it was hailed by the elite and the literate, Qissa culture was equally popular amongst the less privileged, uneducated populace. Due to the oral tradition traversed through folk songs and the custom of *satth* (common sitting place in a village) among rural folks, majority of people could relate to these Qissas. Kreyenbroek notes that:

"The richness and complexity of these traditions suggest that further study of these and similar traditions can be expected to add materially to our knowledge of the cultures concerned, and for oral literature in general." (Kreyenbroek 167)

As a genre, Qissa had a mass appeal to those looking for something interesting, and the writers who understood the genre started thinking on the new lines of creating new Qissas on basis of their own imagination and from the frivolities of the lives around them. Around the beginning of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, certain writers started experimenting with the genre and Qissa poetry was further exploited to present short stories about triviality and meanness. Booklets, manuscripts and books of about five to fifty pages began selling amongst the literate who would read these Qissas about topics such as flirtation, adultery, domestic fights and a woman's plight at the house of her in-laws among others. Readers and listeners must have welcomed this change in the texts of the Qissas which is why hundreds of such short Qissas were written around this time.

While some of these Qissas were printed and published, many still appeared in form of manuscripts. The idea about these Qissas was to have a catchy half-a-phrase in title, a short story with a convincing beginning, a rising action and a denouement, all in the span of pages, sometimes less than ten. At times, the content would be in form of dialogues. Some of the Qissas are too lousy and loose in their language and content that they can be dubbed as second-rate rural debonair, many a time their content being erotic. But such developments over time certainly brought Qissa into more popular culture. The tradition stayed alive despite the fact that no Qissa of the worth of Sassi, Heer etc. was produced ever again just because of its becoming rooted in the popular culture. Titles of some manuscripts of such Qissas contain *Kissa Mashooq Daghabaaz*, *Kissa Solan Saheliyan*, *Kissa Sharabi aur Uski Aurat ke Sawaal va Jawaab*. Many printed and published books of the similar genre had reprints because of the newly gained popularity upon the revival of Qissa as a genre. *Qissa Anoop Kaur* (70 pages), *Qissa Shiv ji Mela Nilaas ka* (28 pages), *Qissa Sham Kaur ka* (40 pages), *Qissa Sayad Rehme ki Bahaduri* (8 pages), *Naddhe di Naar da Qissa* (22 pages), and *Qissa Ghugi Kaan* (20 pages) among others are the titles under popular short Qissa around the same time when the above-said manuscripts were written.

In *Qissa Mashooq Daghabaaz*, the verse portrays a faithless beloved compared with a poisonous snake and prophesizes that only God can save someone from such a beloved (Singh 7). While the booklet refers to a particular woman as beloved of the narrator who ditched him for someone else, the overall direction of the Qissa makes generic statements about volatility of woman character and repercussions of its fluctuating tendencies. The poet makes reference to seven lovers and their beloveds while alluding to the male and female characters from other Qissas along with a reference to seven days of a week. He repeatedly refers to the dubious character of the woman in question, and uses the title of the Qissa as a refrain in all the parts of the Qissa. In each of these, he attempts to prove that the woman character ditched the male protagonist of the story. He ends at the note that it is hopeless to think that a woman can be faithful to her lover. The worth of the content of such Qissas can be measured from the following example:

“Love the beautiful on a Monday in part.
Give her gifts, money but not your heart.
When you give your heart little does she care,
‘You are sick in love’, say people here and there.
Had I not given my heart, I would have been glad,
Sobha Singh says, ‘my faithless beloved I’m sad’.” (Singh 4, trans. mine)

In another Qissa titled *Solan Saheliyan* (Sixteen She-friends), sixteen friends meet after a long period, for the first time after their respective marriage. These women share their views about their husbands, which have been presented in a largely stereotypical fashion. These women talk about their men in terms of their handsome or ugly physical traits (Munshi 2-3), seriousness or joviality in their behavior towards their respective wife (Munshi 5). If one of them makes others envious by sharing that she had a hen-pecked husband, badly

in love with her, another one complains of her husband being someone always full of anger and beating her black and blue at any instance of little provocation. Another one nonchalantly shares that her husband is a simpleton who does not understand anything said in a diplomatic way and that she makes a fool of him whenever she wants to, through her extravagant ways and lavish shopping habits (Munshi 6). One of the friends is happily married to a wrestler who is sweet-spoken and despite his matchless bravery, is down to earth (Munshi 7). The seventh woman complains that her parents have married her off to an old man, most likely because they were economically not well-to-do. They had to succumb to the fate due to their financial limitations and had to wed their daughter off to the elderly man to save cost of her marriage. Another one lives in a world of abundance and has everything that a woman desires for (Munshi 9). In parallel, the next of the speakers is happily married to a man whom she loves a lot but who lives elsewhere due to his work. In another stereotypical description, the next one’s husband does not work and she has to make both ends meet by taking odd jobs (Munshi 10-11). A didactic, religious husband always preaching his wife to read her namaz every day and do everything in sync with right conscious is a contrast to the next one who is too proud of his family, riches and himself and who gives no importance to his wife (Munshi 13). The next woman goes on to sacrifice herself upon the wisdom of her husband who is a worldly wise man and understands everything better than any other man in her opinion (Munshi 14). The fifteenth woman talks about her overly self-conscious husband who loves to wear and look neat as he has an air of self-importance. The last woman is unhappy about her husband for being too foolish in material matters. She takes a dig on him by saying that he does not earn profits in anything he puts his hand into (Munshi 15-16). The woman-friends who are happy in their married life are thankful to God for His blessings upon their households whereas others find themselves unjustifiably unhappy.

In *Qissa Sharabi aur Uski Aurat ke Sawaal va Jawaab* by Churanji Lal, the structure is similar to the first two Qissas taken up earlier. The narration is by a woman who is glum because of her husband’s drinking habit. She, using reference to months of the Bikrami Samvat calendar, conveys the husband’s atrocities upon herself. The language of the Qissa is inane and the woman narrator is frustrated because she is unable to understand her husband. Towards the end of the Qissa, the woman’s tone is more sympathetic towards the man. With overindulgence in whisky, the man stops paying heed to her as well as their children. She takes help of someone to get rid of her husband’s drinking habit and is finally content with his improved version.

There is nothing in the contents of such Qissas which has any artistic marvel. This form of literature sans genius, and with little merit, only addressing to the erotic and the libidinal had still found a readership for a little time. This was the time when Punjab witnessed moral lapses in the religious, social and public life of those occupying the seats in the religious places. The moral penury in the character of those sitting in the sanctums sanctorum of various religions and sects led to moral degradation of the public in general. The movements initiated in the next few decades stirred the emotions and

morals of the general public. The morally corrupt leaders were dethroned as the result of the abovementioned movements and the sense of morality prevailed. With rebirth and rehashing of spirituality, and introduction of more structured religions, a renaissance was witnessed amongst the people and followed by this awakening, people turned more towards the structured, institutionalized form of religion. The routine reading of scriptures and visiting religious places everyday became a routine for them and slowly, publication of such sub-standard literature too subsided.

One hardly finds a similar set of literature published in the era after the said religious reformation in Punjab. So this “unwanted” treasure was pushed down the lanes of time under heaps of dust, hidden inside the infested areas of libraries of old institutions, organizations and individuals. It was when the digital waves awoke some individuals, organizations and governments that the thought to digitize the literature with “heritage value” took shape. This was the next shift to the earlier preservation techniques of the written, printed material that were deemed useful till almost a score of years ago among all the countries somewhat concerned about saving articles of their heritage. In the recent technological shifts, digitization has almost taken over all other modes of preservation, and “[f]or many items, a digital version will be a substitute for the original and will be all the user needs” (Lesk 235). While digitization and shelving of multiple backups including images in RAW; TIFF; and original JPEG formats – the largest, direct camera files; lossless, highest quality format; and most convenient format of pictures, respectively, all make it a costly affair (Scantips.com). Probably this is what Domenico Fiormonte is trying to convey through his explanation of the changes that take place between the processes of turning analogous pages into digital. He conveys:

“In order to understand how these changes affect the work of the humanities scholar, it is necessary to look further afield, into the larger world of digital representation and preservation of cultural heritage... This extends beyond merely preserving in digital form previously nondigital objects, such as books and other analog objects.” (Fiormonte 129)

These factors force the digitizing agencies to judiciously choose what should be digitized and prioritized with their usual limited resources and time. Yin-Len Theng also discusses the importance of restraint while choosing material for digitization through these words:

“The metaphor of the traditional library is both empowering and constraining: (i) *empowering*, because digital libraries automate and extend opportunities offered by traditional libraries, as well as harnessing opportunities not possible on the anarchic Web; and (ii) *constraining*, because the metaphor evokes certain legacy impressions, many originating in arbitrary physical constraints.” (Theng, Preface xxxvi)

The role played by digital libraries in retrieving such dead material by turning these analogous pages into digital has been

immense. Even the discussed old manuscripts, books and booklets of the early nineteenth century were found by Panjab Digital Library (PDL) during digitization of libraries such as those of Language Department Punjab, Patiala; Guru Nanak Bhawan, Ludhiana; Punjab State Archives, Patiala; and certain personal libraries. Due to the abovementioned factors and priorities given to more important works on basis of pre-digitization policies of the organization, many of such Qissas have been kept in wait for their turn of digitization someday. But the quality of the content of such Qissas is quite similar to those taken up in this paper as examples. These can give the reader a miniscule vision of what such Qissas are about, and help them understand the worth or worthlessness of such material. But despite little literary, moral, artistic or aesthetic value, these manuscripts, books and booklets of once popular readership and cheap quality become important ingredients of the anthropological study of these Qissas and their stakeholders. These cannot be labeled as useless and downrightly rejected as they stand as a mirror to the Punjabi society of its times. Such culture was produced during this period when the society was going through the times of moral bankruptcy. But still, in this age when every thought is so short-lived and many-a-time has an existence within the means of as less as 140 letters, is it worth to preserve things that most of the stakeholders of preservation and digitization would label as insignificant? Usually, the documents are digitized for public access for the reason that they “serve all areas of education, business and industry, the medical profession, independent writers and researchers, local and national government and the library and information sector” (MacDonald 3), and these Qissas hardly serve any such purpose. The following quote by Ruth Ozeki would appropriately conclude the argument:

“The only time they ever throw anything away is when it's really and truly broken, and then they make a big deal about it. They save up all their bent pins and broken sewing needles and once a year they do a whole memorial service for them, chanting and then sticking them into a block of tofu so they will have a nice soft place to rest. Jiko says that everything has a spirit, even if it is old and useless, and we must console and honor the things that have served us well.”

(Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale from the Time Being*)

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