Tales Told by God: Stylistic Peculiarities of *Qur'anic* Narratives

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The word 'story' is more comprehensive in application and more convenient in definition than its purely literary counterpart—'fiction'. *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary* has defined the former as 'an oral or written account of a real or imagined event or events' while the latter is illustrated as 'literature consisting of invented narratives, esp. the novel and short story; a false story or statement.' We may define 'story' or 'tale'—the two words used as synonymous substitutes throughout—as an account of a happening that began, progressed and ended in the past. The three phases are important for signifying the fact that it should have appropriate length, encompassing a sequence of events in order to create the desired effect. As such, it must have a particular scheme of progress, or plot as we refer to it in literary discourses. Unlike fiction, however, a story is free from the compulsion of being fictitious or un-factual. Fiction inevitably negates pure or absolute fact. It may either be an abstract product of imagination with no factual foundation, or, in cases like historical literature, an imagined description of recorded events. In non-literary discussions also, 'fact' and 'fiction' are taken as antagonists that can hardly coexist simultaneously. Occasionally — though erroneously — confused as identical with 'fiction', 'story' or 'tale' might be a purely faithful account of true happenings. The real life of flesh and blood has enough complexity, wonders and marvels to provide material for highly interesting narrations and fascinating accounts or descriptions. Like

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fictitious tales, the ones based on factual or actual happenings also have a clear *moral* —another important feature that distinguishes story from novel or drama where the moral may either be non-existent or too implicit to be unanimously interpreted or even conveniently perceived. Interesting narrations of factual accounts may rightly be termed as greater masterpieces of art, implying demonstration of greater communication skills and certain artistic capabilities as compared with the purely imaginative versions where the author or narrator has the liberty to create unrestrictedly situations and characters that may suit his purpose. The requirements of an ideal and truly sublime factual narrative are manifold: it should faithfully report the actual happenings it claims to describe; it, more importantly, should be coherent, interesting, properly developed and impressively designed so that it not only attracts but also arrests and continuously retains the attention of listeners or readers; and, last but not the least, it should have a clear moral(s) and easily perceivable message(s).

Qur'anic narratives present an ideally valid case from this angle. Though basically the holy scripture of Islam believed to be a code of guidance revealed by God to Prophet Muhammad, an enormous part of the text of *the Qur'an (Qur'an* as properly transliterated by Muslims) is dedicated to telling stories, remarkable not only for the significance of their subject matter, but also for their literary value and unparalleled narrative style. As *the Qur'an* is extensively read throughout the Muslim world, most of these stories are known even to laymen and some statements therein have attained proverbial status. Along with the much attempted themes of Satan's rebellion, creation of Man, loss of Paradise and subsequent first experiences on the earth, there are also fascinating

accounts of historical events and lives of great individuals, particularly the prophets. The narrative dimension of *the Qur'an* is so conspicuous that, in its own words, the Prophet's opponents repeatedly called it 'nothing but the stories of past generations'(6:25, 8:31,16:24); and God had to give elaborate responses to repudiate this impression. One of its tales, with Yousuf (Joseph) as its central character, is termed by *the Qur'an* itself as 'the best story ever told.'(12:3)

Qur'anic narratives may be roughly divided into two types: those that were either already recorded in the then existing history or were fresh in public memory by virtue of other sources; and those that were either utterly unknown or told in a version substantially different from the Qur'anic one. The first type includes the following: account of the creation of Adam and Eve, Satan's rebellion, Man's first disobedience and its destined but dire consequences; description of Noah's ark, the story of Ibrahim's family and migration by a section of it to the desert of Hijaz (Saudi Arabia); the fascinating account of Jacob's losing one of his twelve sons—Joseph, his being transported to Egypt as a slave, his significant and interesting adventures there, his becoming the ruler of Egypt and his final reunion with family members (providing an authentic historical record of immigration to Egypt by the offspring of Israel—Jacobs's nickname); story of the immense sufferings of the Children of Israel by the hands of Pharaohs of Egypt, Moses's confrontation with the most influential Pharaoh resulting in the latter's monumental destruction and the redemption of the Jews, their subsequent indulgence in evil and their breach of all commitments and accords. The second type of narratives include the tale of Zulqarnain (erroneously confused by some with Alexander, the famous Greek monarch) who traveled pole to pole

and subjugated most of the inhabited globe, the story of the fellows of the cave, queer undertakings of the soothsaying and forestalling companion of Moses (named by many as Khizr the long-lived), and many more. Besides, there are also repeatedly reminded shorter accounts of the tragic dooms of many rebellious nations like Aad, Tamud, residents of Madyan and owners of the elephant(s) (*Ashab-al-feel*).

Depth and diversity are common to all Qur'anic narratives. None of them is just a story for its own sake, meant to amuse or entertain. Each one embodies highly significant messages and impresses upon the mind and the heart impressions of far-reaching implications. They marvelously converge and diverge simultaneously: having striking affinities on the one hand to render them unmistakably components of the same text, and equally conspicuous diversities to give each one or a class of them a distinctive character suiting the specific objective of the narration concerned. Despite having the same unaltered factual foundation, each repeated version of the same narrative opens new avenues of interpretation, provides new perspectives, or points towards new angles of approach.

Like the entire text of *the Qur'an*, its narrative part is a rare masterpiece of stylistic glories. (Throughout our current discussion, the term 'stylistic' should be taken in its most comprehensive form encompassing both theme and style of the text). Cohesion, unity, completeness and compactness are its salient features. Within the overall scheme observing these features, the length of the narratives varies according to a number of factors. Cases where the available or known versions are contested or record meant to be corrected have got elaborate description. On the other hand, very recent happenings recorded

undisputedly have been mentioned very briefly with focus on the underlying theme rather than the event itself, like the following one about 'Owners of the Elephants' whose obliteration took place in the very year of the birth of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS).

Hast thou not seen how thy Lord dealt with the owners of the Elephant? Did He not bring their strategies to naught, And send against them swarms of flying creatures, Which pelted them with stones of baked clay, And made them like green crops devoured (by cattle)? 105: 1-5

Economy of words in the form of leaving unstated or implied those notions and comments that may be understood even when deleted, is an outstanding quality of the Qur'anic text. For instance, one of the injunctions of Luqman the sage to his sons is this: '*Be modest in thy bearing and subdue thy voice. Lo! the harshest of all voices is the voice of the ass.*' (31: 19). There should normally have been a linking statement saying that loudness of voice is not reflective of power but rather of harshness, ugliness and stupidity. Similarly, one can simply wonder at the amazing compactness and implied ellipsis and abridgement of Noah's conversation with Allah (God). It was promised by God that Noah's family members would remain unhurt. When he saw his son Kinaan drowning, he exclaimed in a rare demonstration of rhetoric: '*And Noah cried unto his Lord and said: My Lord! Lo! my son is of my household! Surely Thy promise is the Truth and thou are the most [Just of Judges] Omnipotent (11:* 45). One may not agree with Pickthall's translating *AhkamulHakimeen* as Just of Judges. As interpreted by majority of Qur'anic exegesis, it means possessor of absolute authority. Now one can look at the exclamation's rare combinations: it reflects Noah's strong faith and absolute conviction that

Allah is true in promise and absolute in authority; his certainty of Kinaan being his son and a son being unequivocally inclusive of a father's family; and a shocking wonder at the fact of his son being drowned despite the above mentioned facts. In other words he seems to contend these points: My Lord, You had promised that except my wife no member of my household would be hurt. I am sure You never violate Your commitment; I am sure You have the absolute power and authority and none can render You helpless to honour any commitment; I don't see any reason why my son shouldn't be counted as part of my household; then how can I bear the fact of my son's being drowned. Even the most elaborate interpretation falls short of the nutshell phrases of the Qur'anic narration of the exclamation. God's reply has been conveyed in an equally impressive form:

He said: Oh Noah! He is not of thy household, he is of evil conduct, so ask not of Me that whereof thou hast no knowledge. (11: 46)

So Allah repudiates Noah's assertions and resolves his wonder by negating that part of exclamation which belonged to Noah's personal understanding, declaring that Kinaan was no son of his.

Out of dozens of stories narrated by *the Qur'an*, we henceforth focus on two of them: the first one comprising the divine account of Creation of Man, Satan's Rebellion and subsequent condemnation, Man's first disobedience and the loss of Paradise—a theme recurrently discussed in all revealed scriptures and many human compositions; while the second one is Prophet Joseph's fascinating tale which *the Qur'an* calls the best tale ever told and which is the most elaborately told of all Qur'anic stories.

The first one has been mentioned at twenty-five different places, but the most detailed account is in *Al-Baqara*, the second surah, verses 30-39 and *Al-A'raaf*, the seventh surah, verses 11-25. In the former one it goes like this:

'And when thy Lord said unto the angels: Lo! I am about to place a viceroy in the earth, they said: Wilt Thou place therein one who will do harm therein and will shed blood, while we, we hymn Thy praise and sanctify Thee? He said: Surely, I know that which ye know not.

And He taught Adam all the names, then showed them to the angels, saying: Inform me of the names of these, if ye are truthful. They said: Be glorified! We have no knowledge saving that which Thou hast taught us. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Knower, the Wise.

He said: O Adam! Inform them of their names, and when he had informed them of their names, He said: : Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of the heavens and the earth? And I know that which ye disclose and which ye hide.

And when We said unto the angels: Prostrate yourselves before Adam, they fell prostrate, all save Iblis. He demurred through pride, and so became a disbeliever.

And We said: O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden, and eat ye freely (of the fruits) thereof where ye will; but come not nigh this tree lest ye become wrong-doers. But Satan caused them to deflect therefrom and expelled them from the (happy) state in which they were; and we said: Fall down, one of you a foe unto the other! There shall be for you on earth a habitation and provision for a time.

Then Adam received from his Lord words (of revelation), and He relented toward him. Lo! He is the Relenting, the Merciful. We said: Go

down, all of you, from hence; but verily there cometh unto you from Me a guidance; and whoso followeth my guidance, there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve. But those who disbelieve, and deny Our revelations, such are rightful owners of the Fire. They will abide therein.' (2: 30-39)

In the textual order of the scripture, this section comes after two initial sections that introduce the three classes of humans namely believers, disbelievers and hypocrites. This section relates how these three classes came into existence following the polarization of good and evil and Man being attracted by both of them. It also provides the most authentic account of the origin of our species. It performs these complex functions with an unsurpassable brevity and conciseness. Before pondering over it in detail, let us add to it those verses from the second elaborate narration of the same episode where some additional information has been given, so that a comprehensive evaluation based on their joint text could be undertaken.

' He [Allah] said [to Iblis]: What hindered thee that thou didst not fall prostrate when I bid thee? (Iblis) said: I am better than him. Thou createdst me of fire while him Thou didst create of mud. He said: then go down hence! It is not for thee to show pride here, so go forth! Lo! thou art of those degraded. He said: Reprieve me till the day when they are raised (from the dead). He said: Lo! thou art of those reprieved. He said: Now, because Thou hast sent me astray, verily I shall lurk in ambush for them on Thy Right Path.'. 7:11-16.

The above listed verses not only narrate the eternal and everlasting story of cosmogonic conflicts in a highly coherent and

orderly manner, but also expound a number of supplementary themes, both profound and vast. Satan refuses to acknowledge the superiority of Adam by virtue of knowledge on the grounds that he was made of a different matter. This is the foundation of ethnicity and these verses can be interpreted projecting Satan as the first ever champion of ethnic nationalism. Equally significant is the fact that, unlike many other sources claiming divine origin, the Qur'an doesn't blame Eve for loss of Paradise. Either both of them, with Adam as the prime one, have been held responsible (as in the listed verses), or it is Adam alone that has been specifically charged: '*And Adam disobeyed his Lord, so went astray. 20:121*' Similarly, God's reprieving Iblis for a period shows the pre-planned and pre-destined nature of the seemingly tragic loss and its preceding episodes.

Such a brilliant combination of narrative and argument is hard to find anywhere else. Elsewhere, in the primary flow of one, the other is normally put as a secondary connotation; homogeneous blend of the two, however, with each retaining its spirit distinctly, is a marvel of theme and style so brilliantly accomplished by *the Qur'an.*

'Narrative and argument, as cultural textual forms, provide sharply contrasting means of dealing with the same—fundamental—social and cultural issue: how to accommodate difference, contestation, conflict around salient social and cultural values in any domain, and provide integrative rather than fissive resolutions of such differences. Narrative and argument are, from this point of view, likely to be forms common to all cultures. ... So, for instance, narrative might appear in an oral culture in the generic form of 'story', or of 'anecdote', or of 'epic'. Argument might appear in the textual form of 'debate', or of

'discussion', or of 'quarrel'. The availability of the everyday labels is itself an indication of a widespread and common-sense recognition, and therefore of the ubiquity and stability of these forms.' (Andrews 11)

Ordinarily, the style of a narrative is deemed subservient to its subject. Manner is taken as a factor to determine the authenticity of the matter. The narrator may present anything in pure fiction, but he has to authenticate his assertions and quote the sources when he claims to inform or argue. The Qur'anic narrative style is unique in being absolutely free from this thematic compulsion. Nothing can be expected from its text unless one suspends all disbeliefs and confirms as a pre-requisite the Omniscience of the narrator. It means that these narratives are primarily unparalleled due to the narrator being uniquely and distinctly superior to all other narrators.

'One of the distinctive characteristics of narrative concerns its necessary source, the narrator. We stare at the narrator rather than interacting with him as we would if we were in conversation; at the same time, in literary narratives especially, that narrator is often 'impersonalized', and attended to as a disembodied voice.

'This thing brings us to another important asset of narrators: narrators are typically trusted by their addressees. In at least implicitly seeking and being granted rights to a lengthy verbal contribution, narrators assert their authority to tell, to take up the role of knower, or entertainer, or producer, in relation to the addressees' adopted role of learner or consumer. To narrate is to bid for a kind of power. Sometimes the narratives told crucially affect our lives: those told by journalists, politicians, colleagues, employers..., as well as those of friends, acquaintances, enemies, parents, siblings, children—in short, all those

which originate from those who have power, authority or influence over us. Any narrator then is ordinarily granted, as a rebuttable presumption, a level of trust and authority which is also a granting or asserting of power.' (Toolan 3)

Now let us proceed to examining the most fascinating Qur'anic story of Joseph and his family, first viewing the account of events therein and then focusing on its stylistic distinctions as per the wording of our topic.

Joseph's story, the longest and most elaborately told narrative in the Qur'an, extends over 102 successive verses. It may be roughly summed up like this: Once Joseph (one of Jacob's twelve sons) told his father of a dream in which he saw eleven stars, the sun and the moon laying prostrated before him. Jacob cautioned him not to let his ten step-brothers (the eleventh was from his own mother) know of his vision as it may alarm them and tempt them to harm him. The brothers, however, felt jealous of Jacob's special affection for Joseph and planned to remove him from their way. They persuaded their father to let him accompany them on a trip, assuring his safety and protection. They threw him into a deep deserted well and told their father that he was devoured by a wolf. They presented Joseph's blood-stained (but intact!) shirt as a proof of their truthfulness. Jacob didn't believe them and kept weeping till he became blind. Meanwhile a band of travelers lifted Joseph from the pit and sold him in a fair to the chief (governor) of Egyptian capital, who wanted to adopt him as a son. The chief's wife was an amorous lady who couldn't withstand the temptation caused in her heart inadvertently by young Joseph's monumental beauty. Once she called him in, bolted the doors and tried to tempt him into the evil act, which he resisted. While he

(with torn shirt) was trying to escape and she was following, they met her husband at the door. She accused Joseph of having attempted on her honour while he rejected her charge. A person of her family suggested to examine Joseph's shirt: if it was torn from the front, then he was the guilty assailant and she the innocent victim; in case it was torn from behind, then she was the false assailant and he the truthful victim. The tears from behind exposed her falsehood; The chief scolded her and requested Joseph to forget and forgive the move. The episode, somehow, got leaked and elite ladies of the city started ridiculing the lewdness of the chief's wife in falling in love with her slave.

She decided to respond befittingly, invited them to a feast, gave them knives for cutting and asked Joseph to come out unto them. They were all dazzled by his beauty, cut their hands in bewilderment and joined her in tempting him for themselves. Failing to win him over, they accused him and, consequently, he was cast in prison. Two fellow-prisoners asked him to interpret their dreams: one saw himself squeezing grapes while the other saw himself with bread on his head from which birds ate. After some impressive intermittent words of preaching Islam, he told them that the former will be set free while the latter will be hanged. A few years later, the king saw a complicated dream which none could interpret. Joseph's freed prison-fellow was then in the King's court and informed him of Joseph's miraculous sooth-saying. The king sent for Joseph, but he refused to come out unless his innocence was proved. The king called the chief's wife and her companions who all confessed the truth and declared him innocent. He interpreted the king's dream as foretelling seven years of plenty to be followed by seven years of famine. He also suggested effective ways of countering the famine years.

Impressed by Joseph's sagacity and knowledge, the king handed over to him the charge of the state and Joseph virtually became the ruler of Egypt. The famine years came and people from the neighbouring areas thronged Egypt for getting food-grain as discounted ration. Joseph recognized among them his ten step-brothers and asked them to bring their eleventh brother if they desired ration in future. Jacob was reluctant to let them take Joseph's brother but had to yield to the persuasion and promises of his sons. Joseph secretly disclosed his identity to his brother, put royal bowl in his saddlebag and then arrested him on the charge of theft. The brothers told him that he was not from their mother and he had a brother who was also a thief like him. They begged Joseph to have pity on them and their aged father. Joseph asked them that (while talking of pity) didn't they remember what they had done to Joseph. They exclaimed that undoubtedly he was Joseph himself whom Allah had elevated despite their evil designs. They begged pardon which he graciously granted. He sent them back to their parents. Jacob rejoiced in the good tidings, and regained his eyesight when Joseph's shirt was put on his eyes. The whole family immigrated to Egypt and, according to the custom in vogue, the parents and the eleven brothers prostrated before Joseph on their first entry into the Royal Court. This reminded Joseph of his childhood dream and he thanked Allah for His blessing.

The story is so thrilling and interesting in itself that in the first reading almost every reader's attention is absorbed in the flow of events. Resultantly, other thematic or stylistic glories are hardly noticed. Subsequent readings, however, invariably and infinitely reveal them. Its being terse and concise along with being elaborate, complete and comprehensive is a fact so well established that it hardly needs any

elaboration. Nothing is missing which is significant either from historical or moral angle. Still, however, the great stylistic device of 'ellipsis' has been brilliantly employed. Derived from 'leaving out' in Greek, it is 'a figurative device where a word (or several words) is left out in order to achieve more compact expression' (Cuddon, 217). In Joseph's tale, this device has been effectively used at more than a dozen points, instances being verses 17, 19, 25, 29. Occasionally deep and detailed arguments have been accommodated and important authorial or *narratorial* comments passed (Instances are Joseph's preaching in prison and God's observation on Jacob's asking his sons not to enter the Egyptian capital through a single door—'*And when they entered in the manner which their father had enjoined, it would have naught availed them as against Allah; it was but a need of Jacob's soul which he thus satisfied.*' 12:68)

A keen observer can easily witness the use of some highly significant and interesting symbols. Among them, 'shirt' and 'dream' are the most conspicuous ones. Both have been used three times—in the beginning, middle and end of the story—signifying crucial turns in the flow of events. On some occasions the meaning has been brilliantly left open to possibilities of multiple interpretations, each marvelously fitting in the overall scheme of the narrative. For example, when Joseph puts the condition of getting the formerly alleging ladies' testimony a precondition for his coming out of prison, and when the chief's wife confesses her falsehood and testifies his innocence, there is an amazingly open verse: *'I do not exculpate myself. Lo! the human soul [self] enjoineth unto evil, save that whereon my Lord hath mercy.'* (12:53). Now this verse can be equally attributed to the lady as part of her

confession or to Joseph as admitting the possibility of his susceptibility to evil if not blessed by God.

A highly distinctive quality of this story is its high seriousness without any obvious tragedy. It is a classical masterpiece with a happy ending, a truly rare combination. It achieves catharsis without catastrophe and falsifies the concept (floated by Aristotle and supported by many established critics) that the former is not possible without the latter. Furthermore, there is detailed account of the unsuccessful adventures of an amorous woman in love and her ambitious mates; but, despite befitting notions of emotional outburst, the 'high seriousness' of tone—as Longinus has termed it—has never been abandoned. Euphemism has been frequently adopted for mentioning lewd conducts in ways not unbecoming the textual grandness of the scripture. Instances are: '*And she, in whose house he was, asked of him an evil act. She bolted the door and said: Come!'* (12:22); '*She verily desired him, and he would have desired her if it had not been that he saw the argument of his Lord*' (12:24); '*She said: This is he on whose account ye blamed me. I asked him of an evil act, but he proved continent, but if he do not my behest he verily shall be imprisoned.*'(12:32).

Even in highly emotional situations, the language is never utterly emotive—'intended to express or arouse emotional reactions towards the subject; to be distinguished from referential language which aims only to denote; for instance, the language of the scientist and the philosopher' (Cudden 217). Qur'anic language is unique in appealing both to the heart and the mind, neither emotive like an orator nor referential like a scientist, neither classical nor romantic in the typical meaning of the terms. Taha Hussain, a famous Egyptian scholar, has paid a unique

tribute to this marvel of style. He contends that unlike all other languages having two types of text—prose and poetry, Arabic is the only language in which there are three types—prose, poetry and *the Qur'an.* (Khalis 282)

Qur'anic text thoroughly retains stylistic sublimity as the nobility of the cause is all-pervasive and recurrently projected. I use the term 'nobility of cause' instead of Longinus's 'Nobility of Soul'—the first requirement of the sublime. He contends: "First, then, it is absolutely necessary to indicate the source of this power, and to show that the truly eloquent man must have a mind that is not mean or ignoble. For it is not possible that those who throughout their lives have feeble and servile thoughts and aims should strike out anything that is remarkable, anything that is worthy of immortality or fame (109)." This argument projecting the point that the sublimity of a text depends essentially on the nobility of the creative author speaks long and loud for the uniqueness of Qur'anic text in general and its narrative part in particular. Despite His unequivocally unparalleled authorial sublimity and nobility, God repeatedly highlights the purposefulness—nobility of purpose—of the narrative: *we narrate unto thee (Muhammad) the best of narratives in that We have inspired in thee this Qur'an, though aforetime thou wast of the heedless (12:3); Verily in Joseph and his brethren are signs (of Allah's sovereignty) for the inquiring (12:7).* And despite its being the extraordinarily sublime text authored by the Creator of the Universe, it speaks to the human heart and mind with considerateness and mutual confidentiality in a tone more engaging, appealing and involving than any known human text.

Note: All translated extracts have been taken from Pickthall's translation of the Qur'an listed in 'Sources'.

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