

YUSUF SURA: CHARACTERS IN ACTION

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Whether or not character theoretically occupies the second place after plot in Aristotle's Poetics, it means little in practical terms because a play or story simply cannot proceed without it; character indeed "emerges from the play, it is not put into it," and it shares with us the human qualities and attributes.⁽¹⁾ When one watches a character in action, one is in close contact with "humanity in human situations: the figures in the pattern are, after all, human figures in a human pattern."⁽²⁾ This, however, illustrates that a character in play (as well as in real situations) fails to make a life of his/ her own. The character's being is shaped as long as he/she interacts with others who give meaning to his/her existence. This is exactly the case with the characters in Yusuf Sura, for, despite the prophet-like traits granted to Yusuf, almost all the characters' features are akin to, and identical with, human qualities and attributes. This characteristically keeps Yusuf Sura very close to the human pattern. Besides the prophet-like features of such figures as Jacob and Yusuf, they acquire traits that represent them as figures in blood and flesh.

The progress of the action in the Sura entails that the characters (at least most of them) respond to the surrounding events according to the stimulated drives that call for a stance (on their parts). It is indeed unmistakable that the characters' reactions exhibit their real nature; any one response is furthermore a manifestation of the 'self', and a reformulation of the 'ego' defined by the outward motivations. The character's behaviour under such circumstances is a demonstration of how the faculty of mind and power of passion operate. The situations under which the character goes become touchstones that faithfully and powerfully test goodness and integrity; or, on the other hand, falsehood and evilness. The following sections attempt to pursue the characters in Yusuf Sura when they are in action. The sections also undertake to portray these characters when they are expected to react to events that are crucial enough to resolve critical situations in their lives. On the other hand, the character study is also hoped to reveal how the character's responses are dramatically functional, i.e., how the reactions contribute to the working out of the drama in the Sura.

YUSUF

The one character that is accordingly tested most in the Sura is Yusuf: he occupies the widest space of the action not only because the Sura carries his name, but also because the themes of the whole text are explored through his life story and in relation to his attributes. The audience is confronted with Yusuf at the very beginning of the Sura (action) when he confides to his father the dream he has already seen (Q: 12: 4).⁽³⁾ An air of purity and serenity engrossing Yusuf is created at the start. This mood is enhanced by the likely optimistic interpretation of the dream, which anticipates a uniquely distinct grandeur and dignity for the young Yusuf. On the other hand, Jacob's advice that Yusuf should not disclose his dream to his brothers anticipates the expectation of that honour although Jacob also forecasts an aura of peril and menace. (Q: 12: 4-5)

Yusuf's manner of relating the dream displays due respect to his father. Rightly, Mustansir Mir attributes what he thinks of as Yusuf's hesitancy to report the dream to Yusuf's

shyness and modesty. Mir illustrates that Yusuf twice repeats the words “did see” and “saw” in the verse:

**I did see eleven stars
And the sun and the moon:
I saw them prostrate themselves
To me! (Q: 12: 4)**

for fear that his father might think him presumptuous. Consequently, Mir claims, “after having begun to relate it, [Yusuf] breaks off in the middle. And yet he realizes that he must go on, and so he repeats the word ra’aytu [saw], completing the sentence.”⁽⁴⁾In fact, Mir’s reading of the incident is interesting because Yusuf, being very young, is expected to be shy and modest as a would-be prophet, but he might equally be overwhelmed by the feeling of amazement, too. Given Yusuf’s age and experience, it is most likely that the dream also mystifies him by its early timeliness and rectitude, which Jacob resolves through his address in the next verse: “Thus will thy Lord/ Choose thee and teach thee/ the interpretation of stories!” (Q: 12: 5).

Yusuf is soon put to test with the first incident: the plot of his brothers to throw him into the bottom of the pit. The audience’s sympathy immediately follows Yusuf; the Qur’anic discourse intriguingly orchestrates the audience’s feelings to go with Yusuf who shows all the signs of a talented and innocent boy dreadfully ravaged by his brothers for no reason but hatred and jealousy. The focus on Yusuf’s virtuous attributes is dramatically employed to highlight the great loss of such a figure if ever the conspiracy gets ahead; this is why, when the rescue is granted by Providence, the audience is relieved. The Qura’nic text informs the audience of this rescue:

**And we put into his heart
(This message): “Of a surety
Thou shalt (one day)
Tell them the truth
Of this their affair
While they know (thee) not.” (Q: 12: 15)**

In fact, the Qur’anic Sura does not report any response on Yusuf’s part; (What does one expect a young boy to have said or done when encountered with such a frightful distress?) Yusuf must have been haunted with too much awfulness and agony for words to elucidate, and the audience can certainly envision how appalling Yusuf’s misfortune may in fact be!

Yusuf’s dealing with his brothers’ plot must have augmented his virtuous attributes; his worth is now witnessed, and manly beauty observed. In fact, the effect of his brothers’ scheme must have broadened the scopes of Yusuf’s mind, and both physically and intellectually matured him. The Qura’nic text refers to these new attributes:

**When Joseph attained
His full manhood. We gave him
Power and knowledge: thus do We
Reward those who do right. (Q: 12: 22)**

Yusuf must have gained conspicuous features of beauty that make the Potiphar’s wife fail to control her lust and passions. It does not, however, imply that Yusuf exercises a sort of power or authority for being ‘beautiful’; the only ‘beauty’ Yusuf pursues is that of goodness, faith, and steadfastness. Interestingly, Elaine Scarry comments on such conditions when she hypothesizes that it “may be accurate to suppose that most people who pursue beauty have no

interest in becoming themselves beautiful.”⁽⁵⁾ Yusuf, however, does not seek to become beautiful as much as he seeks to do the ‘beautiful’, be it of faith or integrity. There is, in fact, a close relation between the thing sought and the pursuer’s features and attributes. When one pursues goodness, one certainly declares oneself good; when one seeks truth, one surely acknowledges that he wishes to be true; and when one strives for justice, one clearly takes oneself among the just. Interestingly, Yusuf’s dedication to beauty of goodness, truth and justice is an expression of his endeavour to carry out acts of such attributes, and further their position in the world. In his act of seeing beauty; i. e., goodness, truth and justice, he seeks to bring more beauty into the world, and, consequently, positively helps those around him to try to be good, true and just.⁽⁶⁾ In this respect, Yusuf’s beauty fulfils Scarry’s thesis of what beauty is: it is sacred, unprecedented and lifesaving.⁽⁷⁾ Yusuf’s beauty is sacred because it transcends the ‘physical’ into the ‘religious’ (sinlessness); unprecedented in the sense that it has no precedent but its ‘own’: comparable only to itself; and lifesaving because it gives more values to life, rendering it more worth living.

The realm where Yusuf’s beauty functions so fruitfully and instructively is better witnessed in his struggle with the Potiphar’s wife, when a tougher trial is confronted. If Providence defends Yusuf against his brothers’ plot, it is radically different in the Potiphar’s wife’s episode. So far, Mir says that Yusuf’s success or failure in the moral struggle with the Potiphar’s wife is not the “result of independent choices made and executed during the struggle itself.”⁽⁸⁾ On the contrary, it is a status attained by Yusuf’s relentless struggle exercised consciously: the moral attributes and spiritual potency powerfully resist the temptations that are offered. Yusuf, in fact, could not have triumphed over these temptations unless he had possessed the essential faculties appropriate for that success; he is endowed with the ‘virtuous’ that is strong enough to defeat the ‘vicious’; and the ‘holy’ that fiercely outshines the ‘worldly’: the Potiphar’s wife fastened the door to seduce him, (Q: 12: 23) and with passion she frankly desired him. (Q: 12: 24)

Yusuf’s attainment of piety and reverence is the outcome of his conscious tolerance of the prerequisite appropriate for the enactment of a deed to defy evil and vileness. In fact, Yusuf is fully aware that he should not only withstand the Potiphar’s wife’s appetite, but actively repel her lure in action, not only in words. This is what he has instantly done; he has raced her to the door to escape her urge and compulsion. (Q: 12: 25) Given the circumstances, Yusuf is surely sensible enough to understand that this is the most secure and harmless resistance he can attempt. He must have comprehended that as the Potiphar’s wife has fastened all the doors and, most likely, dismissed all the servants and people, he is, therefore, short of any evidence to defend his cause and speak for his innocence once he is accused by her; over and above that, he is only a ‘servant.’ But, to his amazement, the Potiphar’s wife’s reaction is reckless, for she races him to the door, holds him tight from the back and tears his shirt. The struggle is now highly precarious; her passion is too unruly to control; therefore, he must seek a rescue, but before he can ever think of escape, he is, astonishingly, encountered by the Potiphar at the door.

To Yusuf’s good fortune, he is saved by one of the lady’s household who bears witness to what has ensued, and judges according to wherefrom the shirt is rent. (Q: 12: 26) The audience does not question the whereabouts of the witness so much as the validity of the verdict itself. The Potiphar also never questions the witness’s whereabouts, he is quite sure that Yusuf is innocent. Yusuf is in fact temporarily rescued: the struggle with the Potiphar’s wife is left open-ended.

The progress of action categorically provides Yusuf with more insight into life, and enriches his experiences in such a way as to grace him with more wisdom and knowledge. Dramatically enough, the geographical transposition of the action from Canaan to Egypt effectively entails a marked growth in Yusuf's personality, and nurtures his maturity as well. If in Canaan he was only a shy, feeble and submissive boy who sought the protection of his father, the Well experience seems to have granted him more insight and knowledge both distinctively perfected by the consequence of the Potiphar's wife's scene. Ironically, the journey from Canaan to Egypt is a journey from the bottom of darkness into the high estate; a journey from weakness and feebleness into firmness and strength.

The growth in Yusuf's character is better apparent in the second temptation test: it is not only the Potiphar's wife who seduces him now, but he has become the 'idol' of all women of the city who are too amazed to believe him mortal: "...no mortal/ Is this! This is none other/ Than a noble angel!" (Q: 12: 31) Out of pride and arrogance, the Potiphar's wife threatens Yusuf with more chastisement if he does not abide by her passion; this announces the second round of the struggle which seems more stressed: "if he doth not/ My bidding, he shall certainly/ Be cast into prison." (Q: 12: 32) The Potiphar's wife has besieged Yusuf so aggressively that he has only one choice: either to requite her desire or to go to prison. As a man of firm belief, Yusuf does not take much time to think it over: experience has taught him to be more steadfast, and the prison is much better than sinful transgression: "The prison is more/ To my liking than that/ To which they invite me." (Q: 12: 33)

Yusuf's prison's experience manifests more of his virtues and traits of personality. It is indeed in the jail that he is reputed for his talent at, and power of, dream interpretation. The Sura is so dramatically constructed that whatever is mentioned (though casually) is serviceable to the story texture; Yusuf's effortless interpretation of his prison-mates' dreams predicts his success as interpreter (i.e., his wisdom and knowledge), and it threads the incidents with the episodes that will ensue, the scene when the King's dreams resist the chiefs' power to yield meaning. The prison life has established Yusuf as distinguished among the people in the jail: his prison-mates always seek his advice and opinions, and they often address him in terms of respect, and dignity: "That [who] doth good (to all)" (Q: 12: 36) and "Man of truth." (Q: 12: 46) The prison years seem to have augmented his self-esteem, self-confidence and devotion to his faith. Although he is unjustly imprisoned, the experience does not make him despair, a trait that traditionally corresponds with the dispositions of pious and true believers.

The occasion on which Yusuf's worth is manifested turns up when the King decrees that Yusuf should be released from prison and brought before him. Yusuf knows he has been sent to prison for no crime or sin he has actually committed, and he therefore insists that he will not get out of prison unless his innocence is publicly and thoroughly proclaimed. He is a man who is prepared to sacrifice his freedom for his dignity; consequently, he sends the messenger back with a reminder about the women of the city. (Q: 12: 50) The women's confession as well as that of the Potiphar's wife is the ultimate testimony of Yusuf's innocence now publicly acknowledged: this is, indeed, the actual moment of his triumph over evil and the defeat of the guile of women (not of a woman) by the dedication to faith. Besides, it is also a dramatic turning point in Yusuf's future domain of struggle. This time it is not a physical struggle against mortals, but it is a spiritual fight against the temptations of power. Before he enjoys the privileges of power, Yusuf humbly describes himself as subject to err: "Nor do I absolve my own self/ Of blame; the (human) soul/ Is certainly prone to evil," (Q: 12: 53), but simultaneously he recognizes his worth and justice, too:

“Set me
Over the storehouses
Of the land: I will
Indeed guard them
As one that knows
(Their importance)” (Q: 12: 55)

Yusuf’s responsibilities in Egypt demonstrate that he is unbiased and administratively qualified; news of his management of the famine crisis seems to have travelled far off Egypt. His humanitarian impulses rest on the treatment of man as a creature to be respected, dignified and guarded against all perils that may humiliate him or degrade his noble status. Accordingly, he attempts to fight famine and hunger because they actually humiliate man, whoever he is and wherever he dwells. This also explains why foreigners are encouraged to come to Egypt for provision and supplies. The situation is dramatic: Yusuf’s brothers will arrive in Egypt to seek his aid after they have suffered badly because of famine and shortage of food. This, however, emphasizes that the Qur’anic Sura is sufficiently well-knit that no remark or hint is irrelevant; whatever is mentioned in the Sura is naturally and coherently incorporated with the major action of the story: Yusuf’s rise to power.

The episode devoted to Yusuf’s confrontation with his brothers reveals that Yusuf is not vindictive; he has supplied his brothers with their due shares and rights (as human beings) despite the bitterness of the Well experience. In fact, his plans of reunion with his full brother, Benjamin, is justified (he might be concerned about him), and, indeed, it is a prelude to the full reunion with the whole family. Even when he tactically manoeuvres to confuse and amaze them (Q: 12: 59, 65, and 70), it is essentially intended to teach them moral lessons that may encourage them to confess and eventually repent. Yusuf’s treatment of his brothers is educationally and intellectually instructive; it certainly corresponds with the pious and benevolent attributes of his personality. (Q: 12: 90-92)

Yusuf’s respect for his father and his devotion to him recur at the end of the Sura as potently as had occurred at the beginning. When Yusuf relates the dream to his father, he commences with the ‘eleven’ stars prostrating themselves to him, and hesitantly defers the “sun and the moon” (symbolizing his father and mother) out of full shyness, modesty and respect to them. At the end of the Sura, he raises his parents to the throne in an effort to demonstrate their regard and esteem. (Q: 12: 100) These attributes harmonize with his ‘beauty’; he endlessly seeks to do the ‘beautiful’, therefore, he aptly deserves the title of ideal perfection. Yusuf’s life story, in fact, confirms that when beauty of goodness and intellect (soul) are wedded to the beauty of form (body), the outcome is a sublime being that transcends the ‘physical’, seeking full unity with the ‘spiritual’. It is, however, a transformation of the ordinary mortal soul to a state of full human perfection. This is unfortunately what the Potiphar’s wife has failed to comprehend and, therefore, to do in her relation with Yusuf.

THE POTIPHAR’S WIFE

The first mention of the Potiphar’s wife in the Qur’anic story is associated with her lust and lasciviousness: “But she. . . / . . . sought to seduce him,” (Q: 12: 23) a trait of her personality that lasts all through the course of the action, although it takes a variety of forms, intensity and manifestations. She is infatuated with Yusuf physically; this explains why she blatantly forces him to yield to her temptation. The Potiphar’s wife is indeed an image of a person whose pursuance of beauty does not prettify her: unlike Yusuf, she is interested in neither becoming ‘beautiful’ nor doing it, simply because the nature of beauty she pursues

always appears aggressive. It is most likely that the Potiphar's wife suddenly notices her love to Yusuf; it is a love that breaks violently in her consciousness. This is a kind of beauty which Guy Sircello envisages as catching our attention; "it 'breaks on us'; it 'leaps out' at us; it 'strikes' us. We seem powerless before its pull."⁽⁹⁾In this sense her love is more absence of 'beauty' than devotion to it.

For the Potiphar's wife, love is a game; hence, she has something to play with Yusuf. As a player, she definitely has a task in playing: seeking the satisfaction of her lust. Her sense of failing certainly depends on the character of the task (love satisfaction), and when she realizes that she cannot perform the task as she plans, she is transformed into somebody else. In fact, her frustration in satisfying her hedonistic lust results in utter aggressiveness: she ruthlessly resorts to threats of dire punishment. Here, then, beauty is disparaged because "it gives rise to material cupidity and possessiveness."⁽¹⁰⁾ The banishment of the 'beautiful' in the Potiphar's wife's early relationship with Yusuf indicates that beauty as a contract between the 'beautiful being' and the 'perceiver' is no longer enacted. The experience of the 'beautiful' has failed to create a "cognitive act beholding the beautiful thing, and at still other times, on the creative act that is prompted by one's being in the presence of what is beautiful."⁽¹¹⁾

On the other hand, the Potiphar's wife's frustration and her failure to satisfy her lust have rendered her vengeful and vindictive. Her pride and arrogance increase her aggressiveness; when the Potiphar encounters them whilst Yusuf is racing out of the room, she obviously schemes so maliciously that her guile calls on her to make up a story that she is subject to rape, and determines a punishment for the doer:

**"What is the (fitting) punishment
For one who formed
An evil design against
Thy wife, but prison
Or a grievous chastisement?" (Q: 12: 25)**

The Potiphar's wife implicitly confirms her innocence of the plot; at the same time, she wickedly threatens Yusuf of dire penalty if he refuses to comply with her desire. Tactically, she suggests that she is powerful enough to inflict more harm upon him. It is interesting that force in this instance should not necessarily be exercised; it is just a scourge with which she thinks she can torment his mind in order to force him to change his stance. Besides, she also resorts to telling lies to fulfil her schemes and to avenge her scorned passion; it seems that the Potiphar's wife is determined to exercise all devices to ensure that her lust is satisfied. It is really evident that her ferocious mood, like the iceberg, is a depth hardly visible on surface.

At the moment, the Potiphar's wife is psychologically under the pressure of three forces: the unsatisfied desire and the huge drive of unfulfilled lust, what she considers Yusuf's scorn of her pride and passion, and the surprise of confronting her husband at the front door whilst she races Yusuf to detain him. It must be uncomfortable for the Potiphar's wife to control her feelings and look self-possessed when the turbulent powers inwardly clash. But, despite the audience's condemnation of the motives behind her moves and the adulterous passion and desire she seeks, the audience may also admire her manipulation of the situation. The Potiphar's wife seems well-composed and confident of her might even in the presence of her husband. Indeed, the audience is quite aware that the Potiphar's wife knows well what she wants, and she equally understands that she will not be met with refusal and objection.

The Potiphar's wife is presented as an exceptionally domineering woman; she powerfully forces her will upon the Potiphar and usurps his right to enquire or even pass a judgment. She herself adjudges Yusuf's "crime" and scourges him with a punishment she herself pronounces. She does not even listen to the Potiphar when he, out of discreet conduct, asks her to beg Yusuf's pardon after he has discovered that she has really lied to him about the unfair charges against Yusuf : "(O Wife), ask forgiveness/ For thy sin, for truly/ Thou has been at fault!" (Q: 12: 29). But she asks for no forgiveness! Furthermore, when she invites the ladies of the city to mock their sneering gossip about her passion to Yusuf, she, in fact, does that with no consideration of the status and reputation of her husband; she shows more self-centeredness than respect to her husband, and concern about his title and name.

The Potiphar's wife's strong will and egotism are better manifest in the scene of the ladies of the city. (Q: 12: 30-32) The scene is indeed an embodiment of her uncontrolled passion, pride and arrogance; her conflicting responses indicate how deep the scar of Yusuf's protest must have been. She invites them for a banquet and furnishes them with knives, forcing Yusuf to appear before them. She awaits their reaction to start her counterattack as if she were certain of what responses they would have. This scene has received varying views with respect to the implication of the women cutting their hands with the knives. Apparently and literally, the act of cutting their hands is enhanced by their utter amazement at Yusuf's beauty; they in fact admit that he is too angelic to be mortal. (Q: 12: 31) But the scene may have much more to yield than this simple understanding. The ladies actually gossip about the Potiphar's wife's vulgar passion, mocking her failure in relishing her 'servant's' love; but they themselves attend the banquet with no lesser desire for him: the use of the knives can be an indication of the severe punishment they insinuate that the Potiphar's wife could have used to force him to yield to her will. A more interesting conception of the knives is delivered by Merguerian and Najmabadi who believe that the hands-cutting is a dramatic image, and symbolically it is viewed as a "scene of collective menstruation and a display of female sexuality."⁽¹²⁾ This opinion corresponds with Gilbert's and Gubar's association of pricking fingers in the fairy tales "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty" with heroines' "being assumed into a domain of sexuality."⁽¹³⁾ Indeed, it sounds quite remarkable that Yusuf employs the same words of prayer to God to shield him against seduction when first desired by the Potiphar's wife. (Q: 12: 23; Q: 12: 33) His words transform "the scene from one of collective empathy by the women of the town for [the Potiphar's wife] into a scene of collective seduction."⁽¹⁴⁾

The women's bleeding is therefore a sign of sexual threat, not by one woman, but collectively by all women of the town⁽¹⁵⁾ The women of the town are infatuated with Yusuf's external beauty in the same way the Potiphar's wife has been, because they have cut their hands all at one time; no single woman reacts differently as to what to do with the knife upon seeing Yusuf's miraculous beauty; they all cut their hands, similarly bleed, indicating that they have uncontrolled desire to bodily enjoy Yusuf's love. The women are fully identified with the Potiphar's wife in this respect. She must have understood what the ladies really signify, and equally mocks them back when she confesses before them that she has sought to seduce him but he has strongly been unyielding. It seems likely that she is encouraged by the ladies' appreciation of Yusuf's beauty to acknowledge her failure: now she is a woman talking to women who share the same plight. But her injured pride and the ladies' encouragements (of passion) have transformed her into a brutal figure who ruthlessly threatens Yusuf with frightful punishment if he does not yield to her gratification:

"And now, if he doth not

**My bidding, he shall certainly
Be cast into prison,
And (what is more)
Be of the company of the vilest!” (Q: 12: 32)**

The variability of the Potiphar’s wife’s character fascinates the audience because it enriches the action with more varying paces and rhythms, appropriate for the dramatic qualities of the Sura. Besides, it also secures more psychological vigour and profundity for the character’s impulses and drives. Indeed, the Potiphar’s wife is a very rich character, because her love of Yusuf easily entices opinions that inspire various arguments. From the purely religious point of view, for instance, her love is merely adulterous and hedonistic; religion does not favour it at all; indeed, it

. . . stringently establishes the boundary for acceptable/moral and unacceptable/immoral sexual desire, behaviour, and identity. . . [Islam] is often perceived as rigid in controlling all aspects of its believers’ lives, and intolerant of any expressions of sexuality outside of the context of heterosexual marriage. . . . Outside this . . . frame work, all sexual activities . . . are . . . considered not only sexual deviation, but also revolt against [God].⁽¹⁶⁾

For long centuries, the Potiphar’s wife has been viewed by conservative-minded Muslims as a “despicable symbol of lust, hedonism and, ultimately, feminine evil.”⁽¹⁷⁾

On the other hand, there are alternative approaches to the story thoroughly. The Potiphar’s wife’s love story has also been investigated as an embodiment of the Sufi understanding of love; the Persian fifteenth century Hakim Nuruddin Jami makes the Potiphar’s wife’s “earthly love a manifestation of the love of God.”⁽¹⁸⁾ The Potiphar’s wife is no longer a temptress, but she is a true devoted lover; the object of her passion and desire “is transformed from an earthly man to union with the divine. Or rather, the desire for sexual union with Yusuf represents a preliminary manifestation of [the Potiphar’s wife’s] total desire to reach God.”⁽¹⁹⁾ The evil temptations to test Yusuf’s purity disappear, and the Potiphar’s wife occupies the action from beginning to end. Had the character not been creative, it would not have, of course, provoked such numerous opinions and sentiments.

YUSUF’S BROTHERS

Not only has the Potiphar’s wife failed to ‘become’ the ‘beautiful’ or to do it, but Yusuf’s brothers are too passive to even imagine what the ‘beautiful’ is: they are fully devoid of any virtuous trait: the Qur’anic Sura portrays them as short of any human attributes; they are jealous, vengeful, and ruthless. They are almost flat; they seem the least dramatic in the sense that they do not develop through the course of the action, until they eventually manage to recognize Yusuf by the very end of the story. Only when they have recognized Yusuf’s virtues and goodness do their interior lives become beautiful; i. e., changed. Yusuf’s brothers’ awareness of his beauty, their perception of his goodness, has conferred on them a surfeit of aliveness”; they are born anew and they now stand accompanied by “additional life.”⁽²⁰⁾ Beauty, then, becomes a compact between the perceiver and the perceived when each ‘welcomes’ the other. Beauty becomes a cognitive event that is associated with the continuation of both sides’ existence ; it becomes “ an inclusive affirmation of the ongoingness of existence’ and of one’s own responsibility for the continuity of existence.”⁽²¹⁾ Yusuf, as a beautiful being, “confers on the perceivers [his brothers] the gift of life”⁽²²⁾ experienced afresh.

Yusuf’s brothers are treated collectively by the Qur’anic Sura; the brothers’ individual identities are totally shattered. Besides, they also call themselves (‘usba`), a “goodly body!” a

strong band, (Q: 12: 8) thus annihilating any differences among themselves. Their description of themselves as a band befits them only when it is that of evil, for their envy of Yusuf and his full brother, Benjamin, rests on their charge that their father favours Yusuf more and it disparages their physical might as a “goodly body!” (Q: 12: 8) Their self-esteem depends solely on their physical worth, but, on the other hand, the Qur’anic text describes them as intriguing (Q: 12: 5), unwitting (Q: 12: 15), and ignorant and reckless (Q: 12: 89). They are deprived of the awareness of Yusuf’s worth and the divinity he really symbolizes because they have been so blinded by their jealousy and hatred that they cannot (or, perhaps, do not want to) see what future awaits their brother. This is an unhappy irony, for they belong to Jacob, the prophet and the line of prophets, too.

The first appearance of Yusuf’s brothers takes place immediately after Yusuf has related his dream to Jacob. Unfortunately, they reach an agreement to perform a malicious deed; they conspire to kill their brother, because they believe that Jacob favours Yusuf more than he does them. (Q: 12: 8-10) Their vileness is relentlessly put into effect soon after they have planned the intrigue and requested their father’s leave to let Yusuf join them. The plan is conducted promptly, and the only change that befalls their plot is their substitution of Yusuf’s murder by throwing him to the bottom of the well, an act that does not alter their villainous intentions. However, when the deed is done, Yusuf’s brothers devilishly return with the pretext Jacob’s fear has already inspired: a wolf devoured Yusuf. They show Jacob Yusuf’s shirt, presumably stained with his blood. This likewise illustrates how unwitting they seem, for they are unable to fabricate a pretext other than the one Jacob has feared before.

It is evident that the rhythm of Yusuf’s brothers’ action has categorically remained of the same pace. Their characters, however, do not reveal them to be imaginative, and they do not unfold any profundity or insight. All the time they behave so crudely that they look brute and cruel. When the King’s cup is found in Benjamin’s sack, they irresponsibly charge Yusuf with thievery, an accusation that has saddened him even more. The Qur’anic Sura insinuates the audience to condemn the brothers by portraying them as unwitting. It is unquestionable that the audience feels unsympathetic towards them, not necessarily only for their vile intrigue, but also for their lack of wit. This is clear when they have failed to recognize Yusuf even when some of the signals of his inquiries and requests are partly decoded. Their wit always fails them, and it is only when Yusuf inquires what they have done with Yusuf and his full brother (Q: 12: 89) that they recognize him as their brother whom they have betrayed. (Q: 12: 90) This portrayal of Jacob’s sons is dramatically eclipsed by Yusuf’s, which brightly outshines theirs and surpasses their qualities. Indeed, they have been pictured as not only devoid of the ‘beautiful’, but devoid of identifying, knowing as well as doing it.

Nevertheless, their presence in the Sura is dramatically significant; they contribute to eventually transposing Yusuf from Canaan into Egypt through their conspiracy. Without their plot to get rid of Yusuf, the action of the Sura would have most likely pursued an essentially different course: Yusuf would not have been taken to Egypt and the sequence of events would have required other manipulations. Indeed, without their scheme, the vision would not have been fulfilled.

JACOB

Jacob is next only to Yusuf in the sense that he too, is capable of not only identifying the ‘beautiful’ but doing and feeling concerned about it. His sons’ disapproval of what they view as his senseless favouritism towards Yusuf rests on their inability to comprehend the reasons behind Jacob’s exceptional devotion to Yusuf. Jacob is quite aware of the ‘beautiful’

in Yusuf; the goodness, the piety and the sacredness which his sons have failed to grasp because they lack the penetrating insight into Yusuf's future, worth and beauty. Jacob's prophetic anticipation of Yusuf's fortune is evidently expounded by his address to Yusuf after the latter has related his dream to him. Jacob has, indeed, understood what the dream may prophesy, but he does not elucidate it to his son. Joseph, instead, advises Yusuf not to relate it to his brothers lest they should "concoct a plot against [him]" (Q: 12: 5). Jacob's love for Yusuf, and his sons' perception of this love constitute the beginning of the dramatic conflict in the action of the Sura; it is, in fact, a conflict between what Jacob foresees in Yusuf (the inheritor of his tradition, and for which he certainly loves him) and how his sons (blinded by mere jealousy and ominous hatred) envision that love.

Jacob's role in enhancing the dramatic constituents of the action is acknowledged when Jacob's sons beseech him to allow Yusuf to join them; he consents although he has already warned Yusuf not to relate his dreams to them lest they should conspire against him. Moreover, he voices his fear that Yusuf may be devoured by a wolf, (a pretext later employed by his sons). Jacob's consent to let Yusuf join his brothers must not be taken to indicate that Jacob is credulous, because he has already suspected his sons' tale of the wolf. (Most likely, Jacob's sons have brought Yusuf's shirt stained with blood but intact) On the other hand, Jacob's consent arises from his fatalistic perception that whatever befalls man is indeed God's will, and he must therefore abide by it. Jacob's fatalistic philosophy, therefore, dramatically serves the action, for if Jacob had not granted his son this opportunity, there would not have been any action. Similarly, Jacob's permission to let Benjamin go to Egypt functions analogously. These consents are two dramatic moves; they have resulted in highly dramatic tensions and consequences of Yusuf's life. Jacob's first assent has caused Yusuf to be victimized by his brothers' scheme: he is cast into the bottom of the pit, overcome by fear and rapt with terror. Ironically enough, the second consent is radically different in consequence; it optimistically foreshadows a happy reunion with the whole family: Yusuf's reunion with Benjamin is a prelude to the culmination of the family's plight as well as the denouement of the dramatic action, for Yusuf will soon arrange to have his parents and family stay with him in Egypt. (Q: 12: 93)

Jacob, in fact, is a distinctive archetype of trust in God despite the anguish that wraps his own life. (Q: 12: 18, and 83) He is the ideal image of patience, which, in the Sura, he identifies as "sweet" (Q: 12: 18) and "praiseworthy." (Q: 12; 83) His trust in God keeps him well-composed although he often resorts to tears as an outlet for his grief. When Benjamin is reported to have been charged with thievery, Jacob addresses his sons, requesting that they should inquire about Yusuf and Benjamin: his telepathic attributes have initiated a sense of optimism and sanguinity out of the midst of his misfortune. This awareness he emphatically confesses at the end of the Sura when his sons bring Yusuf's shirt which miraculously restores his sight to him: "Did I not say to you,/ 'I know from God that/ Which ye know not?'" (Q: 12: 96)

THE POTIPHAR

The character whose technical function is more significant than his personal traits is the Potiphar. In fact, he appears briefly at the beginning of the Sura: first when he buys Yusuf as a slave and requests his wife to take care of him and "[m]ake his stay/ (Among us) honourable." He also perceives that Yusuf may bring them 'much good', or they may even "[adopt] him as a son." (Q: 12: 21) The Potiphar is both generous and tender-hearted. It sounds as though he is childless; a situation that must have influenced his relationship with

his wife. His concern with his childlessness shows that he must have internally been suffering a lot, either as the chief officer or as a husband. Commentators on the Qur'an sometimes attribute his wife's vigorous passion for desire to his impotence as a eunuch; they even assume that his wife has been a virgin when she has seduced and tempted Yusuf. The Potiphar's wife's failure to satisfy her needs is therefore the undercurrent desire behind her uncontrolled lust; hence, the Potiphar's discreet treatment of her when he is certain that she lies to him upon charging Yusuf with raping her. He seems fair-minded enough to rebuke his wife, but he is unable to oblige her to apologize to Yusuf for her false charges: "(O Wife) Ask forgiveness/ For thy sin, for truly/ Thou has been at fault!" (Q: 12: 29) His decision to let the story pass over illustrates that he is conscientious about his title and reputation; besides, it is dramatically indispensable to revive the course of action. The Potiphar's wife is encouraged to pursue her temptation of Yusuf and it will also give rise to her challenge of the women of the city in the banquet scene, and, consequently, Yusuf's imprisonment. The Potiphar's silence as to Yusuf's unfair punishment emphasizes that, although he can be honest and understanding at heart, yet he is so passive that he allows himself to be used by his wife to the extent that he is speechless when an innocent man is sent to prison for no sin. The Potiphar's inaction functions as a technical device to reveal how Yusuf will respond to the prison experience, thus revealing more about Yusuf's character when engrossed with the bitter experience of the dark dungeons. Eventually, what follows this experience dramatically functions as a 'falling action', when Yusuf wisely interprets the prison-mates' dreams, calls to decipher the King's dreams, and finally prepares for the final stages of the action. The brief actual appearance of the Potiphar reinforces the impression that his value is merely technical; i.e., providing dramatic instances for the action to develop.

THE CARAVANEERS, THE WOMEN AND THE PRISON-MATES

The Caravaneers, the Women and the prison-mates function in almost the same way: they mainly assist in the progress of the action. The Caravaneers are essential dramatically because they rescue Yusuf from a fatal end. Had they not passed by the well, Yusuf would have remained there to receive his definite death; but, although it is God's Providence that manipulates the action and decides fate, dramatically speaking, the Caravaneers are the actual human saviours of Yusuf and of the action as well.

The Women of the city play an identical role. They underscore Yusuf's beauty and the collective feminine quest of sexual passion in the Sura. When they attend the banquet they have already maliciously gossiped about the Potiphar's wife's vulgar love to her 'servant,' but when they see him, they share in her experience: the cutting of the hands serves as an indication of their internal passion to lustfully enjoy Yusuf. Besides, they encourage the Potiphar's wife to confess her temptation of Yusuf and his strong resistance to decline her request. The Women have in fact hastened in sending Yusuf to prison when he publicly refuses to abide by the Potiphar's wife's lust and their temptations. In revenge, she inflicts her dire chastisement when he has to spend long years in the Potiphar's cells.

The other characters who technically serve the dramatic action of the Sura are the two prison-mates. They are introduced whilst Yusuf is at prison. They seek Yusuf's help to interpret their dreams, which he easily works out. Yusuf requests that the one who is saved should mention him to his Lord in an attempt to declare his innocence, but the cupbearer forgets to do that for years. Dramatically, the years of oblivion are purposed to emphasize Yusuf's trust in God: he is not desperate for God's mercy which falls when time ensues. The cupbearer is the agent through whom Yusuf is transposed from the prison cell into the

glorious renown of the palace: the cupbearer plays the messenger-like role that ends once the message is delivered. This is exactly what happens: he reminds the King of Yusuf's talents to interpret dreams and the King enthusiastically orders to have Yusuf taken out of prison; since then we have heard nothing about the cupbearer at all.

Although these characters are deprived of individual attributes, they function quite dramatically. They help the progress of plot (action) and they also contribute to shedding light on the major characters of the story. This, however, explains why when they appear/disappear, the audience does not necessarily feel their presence/absence when the role is done with.

EPILOGUE

The study of the characters in Yusuf Sura illustrates that it is a drama of how characters react while they are in action; in other words, it is what Mustansir Mir describes as the "dramatization of . . . the relationship between character and action."⁽²³⁾ Characters exhibit their actual attributes when they act and react; when they are tested in actual conflicts, when their genuine qualities are spontaneously revealed and their motives frankly unfolded. The characters in the Sura embody these requirements: all the major characters who shape the action of the story are depicted when in action; hence, their responses are, in fact, factual and indicative of their internal impulses.

It is also very interesting that the characters in the Sura are very few in number, an act which intensifies the dramatic pace of the Sura. Both the major and minor characters amount to eight only. They all undertake to underscore Yusuf's experience and highlight the conflict he undergoes. These characters are all absorbed in the task they perform: whatever individual attribute is revealed, it is only in relation to Yusuf's experience. The brothers' conspiracy, for instance, is a test of Yusuf's reaction to human villainy; the Potiphar's wife and the women are introduced as tempters to his faith; and power is a touchstone to try his own pious and fair qualities. Only occasionally (with respect to the Potiphar's wife) does the individual trait matter, but with the rest of the characters it hardly does. This is, perhaps, one reason why the characters are all (except for Jacob and Yusuf) unnamed. Individualized as such, their beauty is indeed highlighted, and their uniqueness significantly emphasized. The Qur'anic Sura aims at foregrounding the worth and merits of these characters as being matchless among the people of the Sura.

The action in Yusuf Sura is the most condensed and straightforward in the Qur'an: Yusuf occupies the centre of action because the action is his; the Sura not only lends its title to his name, but the whole episodes of the story are allotted to his life story, from the bottom of the dark well somewhere away from Canaan to the high prestigious bright estate of palaces in Egypt. All the other characters revolve around the centre point where Yusuf resides. Hence, it seems quite dramatic to adopt Daven Kari's image of the 'Wheel of Being' which he employs to critique T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Similarly, one can effectively use the wheel image that turns, and, therefore, identifies other characters' relations with the one in the centre. Yusuf occupies the centre, and the other characters are only recognized according to the identifiable roles they fulfil.⁽²⁴⁾ In the Sura, one may envision Yusuf as the figure who makes spiritual progress and gains insight (his experiences with his brothers, the Potiphar's wife and power support this expectation). There are the helpers who assist Yusuf in gaining understanding, or, at least, clarify what his experiences are; Jacob is the figure who represents this group; and Jacob permanently occupies the position closest to Yusuf in the centre. Significantly enough, there are the tempters that tempt to stifle Yusuf's progress but,

unwisely, they promote the growth they strive to prevent. Here stand the Potiphar’s wife, the women of the city and (only occasionally) Yusuf’s brothers. The tempters are far off the centre, away from Yusuf, and when the wheel turns, they are expelled away from its axis, hence away from the privileges of growth and understanding.

NOTES

- (1). J. L. Styan. *The Elements of Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 163.
- (2). Ibid., 164.
- (3). Abdullah Yusuf Ali. *The Meanings of the Holy Qur’an* (London: The Islamic Computing Centre). All references to the Qur’an interpretation and translated texts are from this edition. Sura number as well as the verse number will be parenthetically cited within the text.
- (4). Mustansir Mir, “The Qur’anic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters,” *The Muslim World*, 1986, Vol. LXXVI, No. 1, 9.
- (5). Elaine Scarry, 87-88
- (6). Ibid. 88.
- (7). Ibid., 23-25.
- (8). Mir, 8.
- (9). Guy Sircello. *A New Theory of Beauty*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 19.
- (10). Elaine Scarry, 7.
- (11). Ibid., 95.
- (12). Merguerian and Najmabadi, 489.
- (13). Cited in Ibid., 505.
- (14). Ibid., 489.
- (15). Ibid.
- (16). Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip,” Islam and Sexuality: Orthodoxy and Contestation,” *Contemporary Islam*, 2009, 3, 1-5. 2.
- (17). Elif Shafk,” Women Writers, Islam and the Ghost of Zulaikha,” *Words Without Borders* (The Online Magazine for International Literature), retrieved on 11 Nov., 2009.
- (18). Jami’s Sufi poem is famous in this respect. It is a long poem in which he envisions the Potiphar’s wife’s love as pure Sufi sentiment, hence departing from the interpretation of that love as mere lust and passion:
 “Not love thee!- ah! How much I loved
 Long absent years of grief have proved.
 Severe rebuke, assumed disdain,
 Dwelt in my words and looks in vain:
 I would not passion’s victim be,
 And turned from sin – but not from thee.
 My love was pure, no plant of earth
 From my rapt being sprung to birth:
 I loved as angels might adore,
 And sought, and wished, and hoped no more.
 Virtue was my belov’d: and thou
 Had virtue’s impress on thy brow.

 The God we worship was thy friend,
 And led me to my destined end,

- Hakin Nuruddin Jami. *Joseph and Zuleikha*, edited by Charles F. Horne. (Iowa: Omphaloskepsis, 2000), 28.
- (19). Merguerian and Najmabadi, 497.
It is significant that for such Sufi poets as Jami, the Potiphar's wife, named Zuleikha (or Zulaykha), is the main character, "even more important thematically and narratively than Yusuf. By comparison, Yusuf is a flat two-dimensional character."
David Beutel," Jami's *Yusuf and Zulaikha: A Study in the Method of Appreciation of Sacred Text*," *Peoples of the Book Religious Studies*, 121, March, 14, 1997.
- (20). Scarry, 91.
- (21). Ibid, 92.
- (22). Ibid., 90
- (23). Mir, 8.
- (24). Daven Kari. *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Pilgrimage: A Progress in Craft as an Expression of Christian Perspective*. (New York: The Edwin Mellen, 1990), 32.

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