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The Desert as a Realm of Unbound Passion: Love and Madness in the Tale of Laylā and Majnūn

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Laylā wa Majnūn is a tragic love tale which is thought to have originated sometime between the latter half of the 7th century and the beginning of the 8th in the Northern Arabian desert. It later spread widely throughout the Islamic world, and is known in Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, Pashto, Turkish and Urdu literatures. The various versions of this story depict diverse forms of love from the “platonic” to the mystical.

The content of the story changed to some extent in the process of its formation and transmission, but the general outline of the tale is as follows.

The hero of the story, Qays, is born into the ‘Āmir tribe in the desert plateau of Najd. He shares his childhood years with a beautiful girl named Laylā, and they eventually fall in love. Because of his mad passion for Laylā, people begin to call him “Majnūn” —one possessed by the jinn (demons), hence madman.” The father of Qays, seeing his son’s love sickness, asks Laylā’s father his consent to marry her to Qays. But Laylā’s father refuses to give his daughter’s hand to a “majnūn,” especially since the boy had revealed his devotion for Laylā in his poems, thus disgracing Laylā and her family’s honor in public.

This separation from his beloved thrusts Qays into the realm of insanity, and now veritably a Majnūn, he begins to roam the desert half naked, singing his love for Laylā in his poetry. Laylā, on the other hand, must wed another man, concealing her true love for Majnūn. She is caught in agony between her passion for Majnūn and loyalty towards her husband and her father, and finally, the intense suffering causes her death. Consequently, Majnūn also dies.

The protagonist of this Arabian “Romeo and Juliet,” Qays of Banū ‘Āmir, is thought to have been a character borrowed from reality, but whether a poet surnamed Majnūn actually existed at the end of the 7th century is a question already debated by 8th century Arab scholars.

Nevertheless, *ghazals* (love-poems) attributed to Majnūn and episodes related to the tragic couple were transmitted by *rāwīs* (professional story-tellers). These *rāwīs* collected poems and accounts associated with Majnūn from the people of the ‘Āmir tribe and other neighboring tribes, and passed them down with their *isnād* (chain of authorities going back to the source of the tradition).

The story seems to have been spread widely around the time of the fifth Abbasid caliph, Hārūn al-Rashīd (end of the 8th century), and the orally transmitted poems and episodes began to be recorded. The earliest surviving work containing information on Majnūn is the *Kitāb al-shi'r wa al-shu'arā'* (the Book of Poetry and Poets) by Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 A.D.). In the section dealing with the biographies of famous *ghazal* poets, the chapter on Majnūn is the longest. This fact illustrates the popularity of the Majnūn legend at that time.¹⁾ Ibn Qutayba tries to correlate different traditions handed down through various lines of transmission with a unified style of writing, and he also seems to have chosen, out of the mass of poetry attributed to Majnūn, only those poems that pass certain criteria. However, Ibn Qutayba's work contains some episodes that contradict each other, therefore as a whole it lacked the congruity of a single story line followed from beginning to end.²⁾

Ibn Dāwūd (d. 909), the first codifier of Arabic "courtly love," also quotes Majnūn's poems under different themes concerning love in his *Kitāb al-Zahra* (Book of the Flower). The figure of Majnūn in this work is rather fragmentary, but one could say that his standing as a *ghazal* poet was firmly established by Ibn Dāwūd.

In the tenth century, al-Iṣbahānī (d. 967) compiled the *Kitāb al-aghānī* (the Book of Songs) under the order of caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. Poems and accounts related to Majnūn in this book amount to four times what was included in Ibn Qutayba's *Kitāb al-shi'r wa al-shu'arā'*, and in particular, the number of poems is greater.

We cannot name here every Arabic source that contains information on Majnūn, but we must not neglect the *Dīwān Majnūn Laylā* by Wālibī (end of the 8th century?). This is a work solely dedicated to Majnūn stories and poems, not an anthology with poems and biographies of different poets like the other major sources mentioned above, and it circulated widely in the Arab world.

In these Arabic literary sources, the tale of Laylā and Majnūn seems to lack unity in structure; a mere juxtaposition of fragmentary episodes and poems that came down through different channels of transmission, revealing contradictions and repetitions. The story does not develop in a linear fashion along the temporal axis, but rather is like a collage or mosaic of many smaller scenes. This sort of composition as seen in the *Book of Songs* has been described as "pearls at random strung."³⁾

However, one should not consider this a defect or a lack of technique on the part of the Arab authors. To value and preserve traditions as they were passed down through trustworthy authorities was an essential factor of *ḥadīth* literature, which was the dominating branch of early Arabic scholarship. In Arabic literature, it seems that these "randomly strung pearls" of the tale of Majnūn were not restrung by a deliberate writer's hand (as the Persian poet Niẓāmi would do as we shall see below) until the modern period when several dramatized versions were made, the most famous one being the *Majnūn Laylā* (The Madman of Laylā) of Aḥmad

Shawqī (d. 1933).

The story of Laylā and Majnūn, originating in the Arabian desert, also found its place in Persian literature. Majnūn's fame as a poet spread to Iran as well, and his *ghazals* began to be quoted in the original Arabic within Persian prose compositions. From the 11th century on, accounts related to Majnūn and his beloved appear in works of different Persian poets such as Manūchihrī (d. 1040 A.D.), Anwarī (mid-12th century), and Khāqānī (d. 1199 A.D.).

The most famous Persian rendering of this tale is the epic romance *Laylā va Majnūn* by Niẓāmī Ganjavī (1141-1209 A.D.). His *Laylā and Majnūn* (1188 A.D.) is the third work in his *Khamza* (Quintet, a collection of five great epic poems), and was written by the order of Akhsatān, a king of the Shirvan-shah dynasty.

To suite the taste of his courtly patrons, Niẓāmī changed the frame of this tale from the nomadic Bedouin setting to a more urban backdrop. In the Arabic tradition, it was told that the two lovers were herding sheep together as children, but Niẓāmī refashions the scenery so that the two meet in a school where sons and daughters of distinguished families gathered. Moreover, in accordance with the Persian epic tradition, the poet introduces battle scenes in the episode of King Nawfar who attempts to be a mediator between the separated lovers.

What is noteworthy is that Niẓāmī gave this tale a coherent narrative structure. In his work, Laylā and Majnūn's tragedy develops in a linear fashion along the temporal axis, from their meeting to their death, without repetitious or contradicting episodes, and the mark of the poet's own creative hand left its stamp throughout the entire story.

Furthermore, whereas the Majnūn traditions of the Arabs were centered mainly on Majnūn's love poems, Niẓāmī also gives subtle psychological portraits of other characters, such as Laylā, Majnūn's father and his mother. In particular, there is a sensitive depiction of the emotional struggles of Laylā who has to conceal the burning love for Majnūn, harbored deep in her heart, with the mask of the ideal daughter and wife, and who cannot sever family and social ties to become the erring fool in the desert like her lover.

In the following passage, Laylā laments her entangled destiny as a woman who can only offer resistance by refusing to surrender her chastity to a husband she does not love.

He is maddened by the dark star of love, but I am crazed a thousand times more. Even if he became captive of distress, he is yet a man, not a woman like me. In the tactics of love he is cunning, for he fears no one. He does not languish under the torment of love as I do, and he goes wherever he wishes. Wretched, I am alone, and do not have a single soul with whom I can share this sorrow.

(...) I have fallen into a tug-of-war, bound between two strong attachments. The heart cannot contend with my husband, the spirit cannot flee my father. At one moment, the love of my heart tells 'get up! Flee from the raven and

kite like a partridge.’ At another moment, it says ‘guard your name and honor, for the falcon is mightier than the partridge.’⁴⁾

Let us turn now to the anxiety of Majnūn’s parents, who are deeply concerned with their son’s perturbed condition. The father searches out his son roaming in the desert, and tries to give him words of worldly wisdom:

Take pleasure in flirting, be it but a breath of wind. Many clever wise men are happy with coquetting. Whether it be false or true, alas, one can embellish the moment.

Better enjoy the moment, for who knows what the next instant will bring.⁵⁾

Thus he implores his son to leave such a wild life, regain his sanity and come home, but to no avail. When this father passes away in despair, the mother visits Majnūn in the desert. Seeing the completely changed state of her son, she takes him in her arms and cares for him.

She washed him with the tears of her eyes, then she combed the locks of his hair.

From head to toe, she caressed him with love, and touching every swollen wound she moaned feeling the pain. She carried her hands over every corner of his body, rubbing a blister here and closing a wound there. Now she washed his head full of dust, then she took the thorns out from his tired feet.⁶⁾

She then tells him gently, “life lasts only a fleeting day or two, come rest your body on your own bed.”⁷⁾

To his parents, who thus tried to persuade him with the paternal wisdom of the ways of life and with motherly affection, Majnūn answers, “You wish to trap me into the snares once again, so that I shall be caught in the two cages (of family love and home). Do not take me back home. I fear I shall die from its oppressiveness.”⁸⁾ He remains alone in the desert.

So far we have seen different manifestations of love; that of a woman, a father, and a mother. Let us now examine how Niẓāmī captures the ardent love of Majnūn himself. Majnūn’s love poems, in the early stages of their transmission, belonged to the category of *Ḥubb ‘udhrī* (‘Udhrī love)⁹⁾, but his poetry contained certain mystical connotations not found in other ‘udhri poets.¹⁰⁾ Eventually Majnūn’s passion becomes a model of mystical love, the love for God (mahabbah).¹¹⁾ Majnūn shuns the mundane world and lives naked with the beasts in the wilderness, refusing food and sleep, and only thinking of Laylā. If we substitute Laylā by God, his manners are exactly that of a Sufi seeking oneness (*jam’*) with God through ascetic practices. His acts of self-mortification, which only appeared as signs of insanity to people, can be interpreted as the practice of the steps of the mystical

ladder (*maqām*) to reach mergence in the unity of God (*tawhīd*); namely, abstinence (*zuhd*), poverty (*faqr*), perseverance (*ṣabr*), trust (*tawakkul*).

Nizāmī's portrayal of Majnūn harbors these mystical elements. For example, near the end of the story, Majnūn speaks thus to a broken-hearted young man named Salām who came from Baghdad to see him.

He (Majnūn) said; do you suppose that I am inebriated, or are you astonished that I am drowned in love? I am the King of kings of love. My soul bears no shame. From the yearning for earthly excuses, I am cleansed by the purifying ablution. From the corruption of the soul I am liberated, and the teeming bazaar of the senses is shattered. The substance of my existence is love. Love became a fire and in it I am like burning incense. Love moved in and adorned the abode (the body), so I packed up and left it. My figure that you see before you, it is not I. What is there is only the beloved.¹²⁾

Here Majnūn is liberated from the pains of longing, and the Self is completely effaced, until his whole being becomes love itself. This state of self-nullification and being one with the beloved is none other than *fanā'* (the annihilation of all things except God) which Sufis strive towards. It is questionable whether Nizāmī himself intended this work to be a kind of "textbook" of Sufism, but it is certain that it was read as the ultimate story of love for God by later mystics and poets.

As we have seen in the above passages of Nizāmī's work, one can say that the figures of Laylā, the father and the mother of Majnūn personify certain elements that confine ordinary humans within the boundaries of "sanity" or "equilibrium," such as society, urbanity, and domesticity. These three characters — Laylā with her moral concern for her role as daughter and wife, the father with his worldly advice, and the mother caring for the well-being of her son's body — are all skillfully set in contrast by the author to Majnūn's unconstrained existence in the outer realm. To Majnūn, the city, the home, and the body are all shells that needed to be shed off in order to reach the true essence of his love. Only in the wilderness of the unbounded desert could he let his soul free to search for the beloved. As the harsh elements of nature devoured his body, the intensity of love increased until finally his Self was completely consumed.

The story reaches its climax with the death of Laylā, and Majnūn also quietly passes away on the tomb of Laylā guarded by wild beasts. When even these beasts die away and disperse, lovers begin to visit their grave in pilgrimage. A single path forms leading to their tomb, and the tale of Laylā and Majnūn becomes immortalized.

NOTES

- 1) Bombaci, Alessio. The History of *Leylā* and *Mejnūn*. in Fuzūlī's *Leylā and Mejnūn*. Trans. from Turkish by Sofu Huri. London, 1970, p.49.

- 2) Khairallah, A.E., *Love, Madness, and Poetry: An Interpretation of the Magnun Legend*. Beirut, 1980, p.51.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p.55.
- 4) Niẓāmī Ganjavī, *Laylā va Majnūn*. ed. V. Dastgerdī, Teheran, 1374, p.544.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p.527.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p.554.
- 7) *Ibid.*
- 8) *Ibid.*, p.555.
- 9) "Love of the 'udhrī tribe." Jamīl, who dedicated his life to a pure love for Buthayna, belonged to this Arab tribe. Similar to the Greek "platonic love," this theme upholds the ideal of chaste, unconsummated love.
- 10) Ritter, H., Die Frühgeschichte der Erzählung von Macnūn und Lailā in der arabischen Literatur, Nachtrag. *Oriens* 8, pp.49-50.
- 11) It is thought that the first to suggest Majnūn to be a model of a Sufi was Sibli (d. 945 A.D.). (Bombaci, op. cit. pp, 60-1.) Majnūn episodes are used in the poems of 'Aṭṭār (1136-c. 1230 A.D.), the founder of Persian mystical epics, as well as in Rūmī's (1207-73 A.D.) *Mathnavī*.
- 12) Niẓāmī, p.565.