

The Many Faces of Zulaikha

Hana Ayoob Khan

The Safavid dynasty is responsible for many magnificent Islamic manuscripts. Of those that have survived, the *Haft Awrang*, commonly known as the *Freer Jami*, is a lavishly decorated volume created during the 16th century that documents and illustrates a series of seven poems written by the famous mystical author Jami (Simpson 105). One of these seven poems is the popular love story of Yusuf and Zulaikha, an epic that reframes previous traditions and the Quranic story through the Sufi mystic lens. For this essay, the focus will be on the role and representation of Zulaikha from three perspectives. Namely, how the Quran represents Zulaikha, and how Jami's epic changes the Qur'anic story. This will be related to several miniature illustrations from the 15th to 17th centuries that chose to illustrate the story in reference to Jami's epic. The comparative analysis on the subject of Zulaikha's representation will be roughly divided to five different episodes in the storyline.

Before exploring the implications of Zulaikha's representation in relation to the Persian miniatures, some context and background into the Quranic and Jami narrative of the story is in order. The majority of Jami's material is unrelated to the Quran and draws on other circulating narratives during that time period. This is partly due to the fact that the Quran tends to be concise and does not give much detail in its narrative. The Quranic representation of Zulaikha has themes of female desire interwoven with that of love, repentance, honesty and fidelity, thus making this tale embody the worst and the best in a woman's nature (Stowasser 50). In the Quran (*Yusuf*, 12:21), which is considered infallible by Muslims, it is the Aziz who buys Yusuf; Zulaikha is the wife of the Aziz of Egypt. Whereas in Jami, the roles are swapped and Zulaikha is the one who buys Yusuf at a great cost. The change adds dramatic effect, but it also paints Zulaikha as a more involved protagonist. In fact, the Aziz plays a far more prominent role in the Quranic version, whereas Jami's story switches the weight onto Zulaikha, with the Aziz being a mere plot device that allows for Yusuf and Zulaikha's ultimate union.

Though Jami does refer to Zulaikha's guile and cunning during her various attempts to seduce Yusuf throughout the poem, it is important to note that the qualities he chooses to highlight before she meets Yusuf are positive rather than negative:

None like Zulaikha loved. far above
 All women's her immeasurable love!
 To age from childhood, love's unconquered flame
 In wealth and poverty burnt on the same.
 When after age, infirmity, and pain,
 Her youth, and strength, and gladness came again,
 She never turned from love's true path aside. (Jami 28)

She is exemplary in her love, someone that women should look up to. Jami frames the story so that she is the primary lens through which the story is going to be narrated. The purpose is to show Zulaikha's earthly love for Yusuf as a manifestation of love for God, therefore it is appropriate that her love occupies the story from beginning to end (Merguerian 497).

Though Zulaikha is not converted to Islam till the very end, when the poem talks of Zulaikha's pain when she realizes the Vizier is not the man from her dreams. She is visited with a message from the angel Gabriel: "Then the Bird of Comfort came near, and there fell / On her ear the sweet message of Gabriel: / 'Lift thy head, sad maiden, and cease to repine.'" (Jami 92). In the Islamic tradition, this is an honour reserved almost exclusively for the best of humankind, mainly the prophets of God. By having Gabriel intervene, Jami reminds the reader that she was chosen for her life of love and suffering by a higher authority; that what she does and what happens are preordained and out of her control. This removes some of the blame from her future actions.

Before Zulaikha gives in to her baser emotions, her characteristics are nobly portrayed: "Oh save me from being another's bride. / Preserve the pure name of the hapless maid, / No polluting touch on her vesture laid. / made a vow to my lover, mine own, / To keep my love ever for him alone." (Jami 91). In this quote, her resolve to stay pure for Yusuf is something that would be considered commendable by Jami's audience. She wants to preserve her virtue and virginity for the one man she loves. Though her later attempts are anything but virtuous, her redeeming quality is that she does not deter from being faithful to Yusuf.

When Zulaikha finally acquires Yusuf into her household and showers him with everything she could materially offer, she starts to yearn "for a sweeter prize" (162). Though she is finally given a chance to have Yusuf by her side, she starts to yearn for more of a physical affirmation of her heart's wishes. But as the story goes, Yusuf does not give into her numerous attempts to seduce him. He remains obstinately cold and unmoving, while Zulaikha's attempts and pain simultaneously increase in intensity (163-171). When Zulaikha despairs because of her failed attempts, her nurse is sent to Yusuf to mediate and convince him on Zulaikha's behalf. In reply, Yusuf breaks his silence and explains why he would not return her affections. Though he is grateful for all that she has done for him, he fears God and does not wish to cause the Vizier any harm or bring shame to his household (171). This is similar to his sentiment in the Quran, where he reminds Zulaikha of the harm her actions would cause to the Vizier, who has been kind to both of them: "...Come on now!' Joseph answered: 'May Allah grant me refuge! My Lord has provided an honourable abode for me (so how can I do something so evil)? Such wrong-doers never prosper.'" (*Yusuf* 12:23). In the earlier commentaries of the Quran, the chapter is more about the strength and humility of a prophet tested by God, and Zulaikha's role in the narrative is as a figure of temptation. Merguerian explains that it is only in the later commentaries that the story ceases to be the story of Yusuf and becomes the story of Yusuf and Zulaikha: "Not only are new details added that give Zulaikha a more active and willful presence, but, more important, the addition of punishment brings into the narrative a moral dimension" (Jami 493).

Both Figure 1 and Figure 2 (on the next two pages) illustrate when Zulaikha's initial efforts to seduce Yusuf fail, and she starts concocting other ways to fulfill her wishes. In this scene, she lures him into a garden where he is to be entertained by a group of beautiful women. Hoping that Yusuf would desire at least one of them, Zulaikha plans to change

places with the woman he chooses to spend the night with. Contrary to her plans, Yusuf spends the night preaching to them about divine wisdom (Jami 180-181). In the illustration, the incident takes place in front of a large garden pavilion not mentioned in the text. Fig 1 is taken from the *Haft Awrang* of Jami, Fig 2 is from another manuscript illustrating Yusuf and Zulaikha's story according to Jami. Both paintings use the same materials - opaque watercolour, ink and gold on paper. Both portray Yusuf with a golden flame around his head to show his prophetic status, and portray a hill in the background. The maidens surrounding him in a circle, listening to him preaching about God, just as Jami describes. Both Fig 1 and Fig 2 also show Zulaikha with her hand on her head in regret, but on different upper corners of the painting, isolated from the rest below in the garden: "Neath the palm-tree's shade she would watch and wait, / And count herself blest with a stolen date." (Jami 182). The biggest distinction is that Fig 1 from the *Haft Awrang* includes the palace in the background, with Zulaikha looking below in dismay as her plan unravels.



Figure 1: Jami. *Yusuf Preaches to Zulaikha's Maidens in Her Garden*. 1556-1565. Freer Gallery of Art. Freer Sackler. Google Cultural Institute.



Figure 2: Jami. *Zulaykha's Maids Entertain Yusuf in the Garden*. 1575. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. Freer Sackler. Google Cultural Institute.

Another thing worth noting is that, in both paintings, Yusuf is portrayed as looking in the opposite direction from Zulaikha. He is never portrayed facing her, which reflects Jami's poem, since he is described always avoiding her gaze and seduction. In both paintings, her position indicates that she has, once again, failed at her attempt in securing Yusuf's affections. She is recognizable among the other women because her headdress, which includes a golden crown, as well as a feather on Fig 1. They signal her higher status.

As mentioned before, the Quran barely talks of Zulaikha, and is sparse with details. This scene does not appear in the Quranic version, though commentaries may have referenced this scene based on circulating oral traditions. The only reference possible is that this scene illustrates the guile of women as mentioned by the Aziz in verse 28 of the chapter on Yusuf in the Quran. After her declarations and initial attempts fall on deaf ears, Zulaikha increases the intensity of her efforts, and starts to display the "guile" that the Quran mentions: "She would watch her time, if his love were shown, / If he faint would be with his darling alone, / Herself to his side in her stead would creep, / And the sweet, sweet fruit for herself would reap." (Jami 181). The intention of her actions is thinly veiled; the allusions are clearly sexual. Though Jami reiterates that she does sincerely love him, she becomes impatient and starts lusting for a bodily union with her beloved. However, true to his prophetic status, Yusuf "... looked on each temptress, and saw in her, / If not an idol, an idol-worshipper, / And only one wish in his heart he knew, / To lead them to worship where worship is due." (Jami 184).

Figure 3 depicts the scene which can be considered the climax of the efforts by Zulaikha to seduce Yusuf. The second seduction scene takes place in the love palace that Zulaikha builds, covered from floor to ceiling with images of her and Yusuf in embrace. She leads him through seven successive chambers in an attempt to entice him. It is also the first attempt mentioned in the Quran: "And she in whose house he was sought to seduce him. She locked the doors and said: Come here. He said: God forbid! My master has received me well." (*Yusuf*, 12:23). The only detail given in this simple verse is that the lady of the house - who is never named - sought to seduce him. It never mentions how or why she does so. However, there is a reference to 'doors'.

The next verse mentions: "And she advanced towards him, and had Joseph not perceived a sign from his Lord he too would have advanced towards her. Thus,

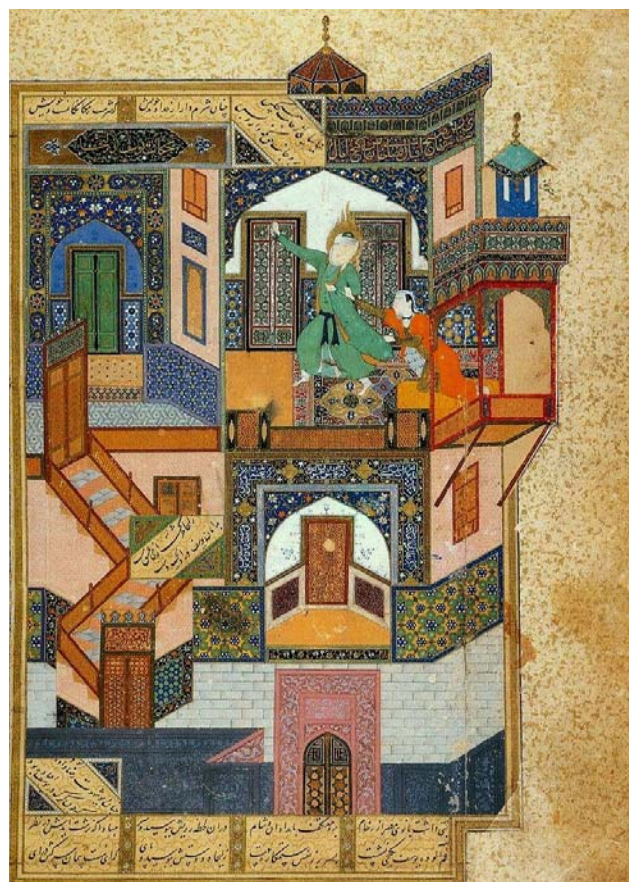


Figure 3: Behzad, Kamal Ud-din. *The Seduction of Yusuf*. 1488. National Library and Archives of Egypt, Cairo. *Art and the Bible*.

was Joseph shown a sign from his Lord that We might avert from him all evil and indecency, for indeed he was one of Our chosen servants." (*Yusuf*, 12:24). Rather than showing Yusuf as an infallible prophet, this verse admits that Yusuf was tempted. In fact, there is much debate on how far he gives in, since he needs divine intervention in order to stop himself from actually committing the deed. According to Tabari's exegesis, where he cites several traditions, "Joseph unfastened the belt of his trousers and sat before her. She lay down for him and he sat between her legs; she lay down on her back and he sat between her legs and loosened his garment, he sat with her as a man sits with his wife." (Stowasser 52). Stowasser notes that what these scenarios have in common is that the actions stop short of actual intercourse. Furthermore, that Tabari only uses these scenarios to make the distinction between natural appetite and desire as opposed to resolution and deed, of which only the latter are punishable (52). In Jami's version, however, Yusuf's strength is highlighted in that he stops out of his own accord after seeing the idols she worships.

Though at the beginning Zulaikha is portrayed as a victim of Yusuf's beauty after she has regressed to active attempts to seduce Yusuf, Jami does not hesitate to associate negative attributes to her actions and intentions: "She would woo his beauty and win success / With her tender guile and her soft caress" (Jami 196). The reference to guile invokes the same negative portrayal of her as in the Quran. The description of her preparations and construction of the love palace she builds exclusively to seduce him takes up quite some space in the epic (190-200). As soon as they reach the first chamber, the effect of her beauty and efforts to woo him start to show: "Dear lady, longer I would not be / In this curtained chamber alone with thee, / For thou art a flame, and the wool is dry / The wind art thou and the musk am I. / Is the wool secure when the flame burns fast?" (201). Repeatedly being exposed to images of him and Zulaikha lying together wherever he sets his eyes on starts to slowly unravel his restraint, because "Then the heart of Yusuf would fain relent, / And a tender look on Zulaikha he bent, / While a thrill of hope through her bosom passed" (206).

He asks her to remain patient and wait for him, but she impatiently brushes it off, to which he replies: "Two things I fear / The judgment of God, and the Grand Vizier." (207). This is similar to the sentiment he invokes in verse 23 of the Quran. The shocking twist that Jami's epic includes is that in her desperation, Zulaikha actually offers to kill the Vizier and give Yusuf all their possessions in order to win God's forgiveness:

'Fear not thy master,' Zulaikha cried;
 'At some high feast when I sit by his side,
 A poisoned cup from this hand shall he take,
 And sleep till Doomsday shall bid him wake
 [...]
 the keys I hold
 Of a hundred vaults full of gems and gold.
 All this will I give to atone for thy sin.' (Jami 208)

This makes Zulaikha seem completely reprehensible. Though her love was portrayed as pure and something to emulate at the beginning, her actions because of her impatience and desperation leads her to even more shocking demands: "No more evasion.

My wish deny, / And by mine own hand will I surely die. / [...] / My lifeless corpse the Vizier will see, / And the crime of the murder will rest on thee" (209-210). The effect of this double threat of killing herself and threatening him with being framed for her murder is that Yusuf's natural desire for Zulaikha is now replaced by his fear that if he does not respond to her sexual demand, she will make good on a threat to kill herself (Merguerian 494). She ignores his implorations to control herself, and throws herself at him, which he does not have the power to refuse (Jami 211).

If the episodes of her threatening to kill herself were not included, it could have been interpreted as Yusuf giving in to her on his own free will. However, now it is more likely that he does so mostly under duress. However, while they are about to lay together, Yusuf spies her idol and is disgusted and reminded of his fear of God's punishment (211). This is in reference to a part of verse 24 in the Quran, where: "[...] Thus was Joseph shown a sign from his Lord that We might avert from him all evil and indecency, for indeed he was one of Our chosen servants." (12:14). Yusuf's positive response to Zulaikha's advances were inscribed in Tabari's commentary as natural and normal, if misplaced; but by the 12th/13th-century, like in Jami's version, it had become cruel psychological warfare on Zulaikha's part, with Yusuf a victim and a hero (Merguerian 494). As with the later exegesis, Jami's version increases the degree of Yusuf's strength to reject Zulaikha, and makes her look pitiable, heightening her desperation and need to unite with Yusuf.

In terms of the illustration of this scene in Figure 3, it is markedly different from the other miniatures cited in this essay since this is painted by Kamal Ud-din Behzad in 1488, significantly earlier and closer to when Jami wrote his poem in 1483. Rather than being from Iran as with the previous miniatures, this is from Herat in Afghanistan. The painting style is similar in how structures are depicted. However, this structure in the painting is far more complicated because it depicts various levels of the palace with the seven different linked rooms that Jami too includes in his version of the scene. Yusuf is shown with a golden flame to indicate his status of prophethood. There is also a lot of text compared to the other illustrations, and they are placed all throughout the manuscript unlike the specific demarcations seen in Figures 1 and 2. The details are masterful and incredibly complex, especially how the artist uses different angles to create a more three-dimensional effect and manages to portray all seven doors as Jami's text indicates.

What Fig 1 and Fig 3 have in common is how they use calligraphy on the structures depicted in the paintings. Either due to the painting's deterioration or because it was originally that way, it seems that Yusuf's face is lightly veiled, which is similar to how illustrations of Prophet Muhammad are always veiled. The way that Zulaikha is portrayed is also in line with what Jami wrote in his epic. She is shown on the floor, tearing Yusuf's robe while he flees.

The size of the images attached to this essay do not quite do justice to the incredible scope and detail of these miniatures. The colours and outlines and the details that emerge when you gaze into the painting has the power to leave the observer speechless. It can be generally concluded that Zulaikha's character lost much of her human fullness because of an exegetic emphasis on her as symbol of the sexually aggressive, destabilizing, and dangerous nature of women (Stowaser 50). The love motif, as we see in Jami's version, was fully developed in the pious popular storytelling traditions. Though Jami does portray Zulaikha as a symbol of female guile, the beginning and the end make it clear that the protagonist symbolizes the enduring power of female selfless love and faithfulness, which

is rewarded with the bliss of reunion with the beloved (50). The Quran is considered infallible by Muslims, but as the various commentators that have been cited throughout this essay show, commentary of various Islamic schools of thought tend to focus on different aspects of Zulaikha. Therefore, unfortunately, the story is still used in contemporary conservative societies as so-called proof of women's 'inherent' weakness as a reason for men to continue dominating over women. The above concluding observations on the illustrations, Quran, and Jami's portrayal of Zulaikha is further evidence that though Zulaikha may be considered as a model of love and God's forgiveness because of her ultimate reward of the union with Yusuf, the specific choices taken by the painters, and Jami's ambiguity, reflect the dominant notions of patriarchal superiority over women.

Works Cited

- Ettinghausen, Elizabeth S. "Hidden Messages and Meanings: The Case of the Infant Witness Testifies to Yūsuf's Innocence". *Ars Orientalis* 29 (1999): 141–145. Web.
- Jāmī. *Yūsuf and Zulaikha: A Poem*. Trans. Ralph T. H. Griffith. London: Trübner, 1882. Print.
- Marmaduke, P. "Quran Translation." *Dar Al-Kitab Allubnani, Beirut, Lebanon* (1970).
- Merguerian, Gayane Karen, and Afsaneh Najmabadi. "Zulaykha and Yusuf: Whose "best Story"?. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29.4 (1997): 485–508. Web.
- Simpson, Marianna Shreve. "Discovering Shaykh-muḥammad in the Freer Jāmī". *Ars Orientalis* 28 (1998): 104–114. Web.
- Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. "The Chapter of Zulaykha." *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. 50-57. Print