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## **Exploring the Nexus of Locale and Love: Investigating the Role of Place in Historical Fiction through *Khusrau Parviz and Shirin* by Mirza Sibtain Beg**

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### **Abstract:**

This study juxtaposes the intricate interplay between literature and landscapes within Mirza Sibtain Beg's acclaimed work *Khusrau Parviz and Shirin*. Attention is paid to how play's diverse landscapes contribute to characters emotional and physical restoration. This paper mainly focuses on the narrative that delves into individuals' reverent attitudes towards the natural world and the relationship between literature and landscapes. The primary focus of this study is on the historical narratives, which can be understood by describing of the landscapes of that time. Prominent cities in the play Armenia and Persia will be examined analytically through the lenses of Ecocriticism, Historiography, Phenomenology and Memory studies.

It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the narrative integrates ecological and psychological dimensions, ultimately contributing to a nuanced exploration of historical spaces, and their value during and after that particular epoch.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, space/place, Historical Narratives, landscapes, memory.

The importance of places in literature is the subject of prominent studies in recent times. Every facet of human lives intersects with the places traversed, landscapes observed, and the pathways treaded. It is as though individuals form an intricate rapport with their surroundings, a connection that sometimes is hard to explain, as it lacks a scientific foundation yet is deeply entrenched in the most poetic manner conceivable. To emphasize this perspective is imperative

for environmental conservation efforts, because the central environmental crisis often occur not due to a lack of scientific means, but because of ethical reasons. As elegantly expressed in the book *The Wealth of Nature* by Donald Worster—“We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function” (Worster 27). In the introduction of the book *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Gloatfelty elaborated the expansive scope of ecocriticism as— “But nature per se is not the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation. Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage and the body” (Glotfelty and Fromm 11).

This paper aims to analyze the relationship between literature and places, examining how places are portrayed in literature and elucidating their significance. To explore this relationship, the paper focuses on literary works where places are depicted as vibrant and imbued with character. In *Literature and Place, 1800-2000* by Peter Brown and Michael Irwin affirm that while place criticism is in “its early stages of development,” the setting itself may be understood as a forum of “exploration of various aspects of identity, whether personal, social and national.” Moreover they assert that “an individual’s self discovery is often enacted in relation to place” (Brown and Irwin 15).

In this paper, the analysis of the relationship between characters and their respective surroundings is conducted through *Khusrau Parviz and Shirin: A Play in Ten Scenes* by Mirza Sibtain Beg. The play is set in Persia present-day Iran, and revolves around Sasanian Empire, providing a perfect backdrop for the portrayal of mystical love that permeates the play. Although the central theme of the play revolves around the love between the star-crossed protagonists, Khusrau and Shirin, it is imperative to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of the play. Notably, the meticulous portrayal of Sasanian Empire in the background, the contribution of play’s setting to every event that unfolds, and the depiction of Zoroastrian religion and their adherents in the region. Ultimately these interwoven elements collectively shape the overarching narratives and lives of characters throughout the play. “As this is an epic, we may leave aside the dominant issue of Persian romance, namely that love is the power that helps the individual to attain self awareness” (Ruymbeke 141). The significance of place in historical fiction is paramount, as it vividly reveals aspects that may not be fully apprehended through characterization alone. Places hold a profound influence on individuals across time, and their impact during particular epochs

must also be noted in historical fiction. The depiction of places and their consequential effects are also imperative to attaining the comprehensive understanding of a given period and its inhabitants. As stated by Kent den Heyer in his paper—“The city absorbs all of the narratives, past and present, into itself, like paper absorbing ink.....the novelist becomes someone who discloses rather than imposes,....And at such times, the storyteller feels himself in the presence of something greater than him-self”(qtd. in Heyer 145).

In *Khusrau Parviz and Shirin*, the relationship between cities and citizens is evident within two prominent cities: Persia and Armenia. Persia was governed by men, while Armenia was ruled by women. This contrast also reflected in their portrayal; Persia is depicted as rugged, harsh, fortified with solid walls, and boasting a formidable military, whereas Armenia is characterized as beautiful, vibrant, and similar to heavenly paradise on earth. Thus, Persia embodies qualities of masculinity, while Armenia exudes a more feminine nature. Shapur, Khusrau’s friend and adept artist described Armenia as:

“What an enchanting place is this!

Springs showers its blessings in abundance,

Hills looked draped in bridal zest and nonchalance

Sky kissing mountains covered with scarf of snow (Beg 33).

This juxtaposition of cities embodying qualities reflective of the gender of their rulers can also be observed in William Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. The Contrasting realms of Rome and Egypt reflect the gender qualities of their rulers. Rome under the reign of Octavius Caesar was associated with masculinity, order, discipline and military strength. While, Egypt governed by Cleopatra embodies traits of femininity, sensuality, passion and allure. As Amitabho Sengupta articulated in his scholarly discourse, “Rome has been characterized as a male world, presided over by the austere Caesar, and Egypt as a female domain, embodied by a Cleopatra who is seen to be as abundant, leaky, and changeable as the Nile” (Sengupta 1).

Persia, in the play, governed by Khusrau Parviz, possesses Rome like characteristics,boasting rich culture and a strong military capable of defeating invaders. The people in Persia are drawn towards this rich culture and art showcasing it in innumerable ways. This is evident in their description of art and methods of installing it in various places to enhance its appeal. In the play special mention is given to city’s cartographers, calligraphers and sculptors because these artists can give localeslifetoenhance their appeal. They are named in the play as

Farhad, Ibtisam etc. They were given orders by Khusrau, who embodied Persia himself, to enrich the land culturally:

*Taq-e-Bustan* is one of the potential site to erect a majestic *Ayvan* on it. Chisel on rocks our iridescent images of *Ahura Mazda* (our god) and *Anahita* (goddess of water) exuding our faith in Zoroastrianism and its humanistic appeal.....Engrave images of eagles and deer amid lush green trees to validate our love and concerns for environment (Beg 26).

The play mainly concerns on the mystic love between star crossed lovers. However, this study focuses on the concerns and love inhabitants have towards their land and environment. This theme might not be predominant but runs parallel with the main theme. Upon closer examination, one would notice that the central reason for Khusrau to marry Shirin is to enrich his empire further, as rightfully stated in the initial pages, “A new golden dawn awaits for me to evolve./In this astral flight, *Shirin* will be my side (Beg 15).

In *Antony and Cleopatra* this dynamic is completely reversed, as Cleopatra not seen as someone who enriched Antonio’s empire but rather as a significant figure in his downfall. Conversely, in the play, Shirin, contributes to everything Khusrau possesses with her innocence, helping him to expand and strengthen his empire. Cleopatra, On the other hand, is depicted as someone who destroyed Antony and everything he ever possessed—his land, glory, and status. As Abdullah Kodal explained in his paper:

The inconsistency in Cleopatra’s character together with her permanently cunning ability plays both a submissive or subversive role in different moments and situations toward Antony.... Antony as a Roman general is “so enchanted” by Cleopatra’s beauty and his obsession with beauty and sexuality are the crucial points in understanding the downfall of the great Roman general (Kodal 749).

In the play, Shirin embodies Armenia, a land described as “enchancing,” “marvelous,” and “paradise.” The character of Shirin in the play has similar qualities that make the place she lives reflect some of her attributes, while the place also influences her to reflect some of its qualities. In this manner, the place becomes another character intricately intertwined with the character of Shirin. As Leonard Lutwack’s *The Role of Place in Literature*, argues that settings in novels serves metaphorical purposes, “The quality of a place in literature is subtly determined by the manner in which character arrives in it, moves within it, and departs from it” (Lutwack 12).

The concept of Phenomenology by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, where he draws attention to the relationship between humans' experience of places, values, memories, dreams, anxieties, and other such affective state that sculpt that experiences. Places have a relationship with the subject who experiences and how they experience them. The body also acts as the main centre of expression, and places reflect themselves in the bodily reactions of individuals. When Khusrau made his journey to Armenia, he was firstly fascinated by the beauty of the land he was travelling to. Though he did not meet Shirin, throughout journey he could only think about her. He was enthusiastic about going to Armenia so all the obstacles, and the duration of the journey seemed invisible to him. His body reflected his anticipation of the forthcoming enchanting land of Armenia, which in itself is embodied by his eternal love, Shirin.

Cleopatra, in Egypt, symbolizes the power of the mind. Antony, captivated by Cleopatra, turned away from his military duties, while Khusrau, sought to make his land flourish by cherishing Shirin. Both rulers pursued their love for reasons intertwined with their land: one to prosper other to lose all that he possessed.

Both plays are a great source of historical data of that time. History plays serve as a significant window into the prevalent dynamics of respective eras. They offer present-day readers insight into the mentalities, customs and cultures of different epochs. Even in cultural studies, historical fiction plays a vital role because it educates readers about the past and enables them to compare it to their present cultures. As Hayden White suggested, no historical data is entirely accurate; it inherently contains elements of fiction echoing the lines written by T. S Eliot in *Four Quartets*—"human kind cannot bear very much reality" (Eliot, lines 44-45). Historical plays reflect the reality of the age which they are set in, which the author fictionalizes to make it engaging and appealing to readers. The settings depicted in historical plays symbolize much more than mere locations where characters travel. They absorb characters' emotions and reflect them in every possible way. Places in historical plays act as monuments, as they no longer exist in the same way in individuals' lives, and when one travels to familiar places through words, it enhances their experience of dwelling in those particular settings. In fiction, not necessarily historical fiction, authors often refer to real places. For example, the chosen play for Study discusses Persia and Armenia as their settings, which are still actual countries today. The author's depiction of nature in the play is captivating and rich with natural imagery. The picturesque descriptions unfold through the characters' experiences of the places they inhabit. In

Armenia Shirin and her maids adorned themselves with delicate flower ornaments enhancing their beauty as they sang, “Spring has spread its wings,/Nature makes celestial rings,/ O my love, come and cure green sickness...” (Beg 38).

Persia, on the other hand, is also portrayed as the “soulful place”. Characters often seek solace in nature to distance themselves from courtly affairs. Khusrau describes the beauty of Persia and the reverence shown by its inhabitants towards the natural world, stating—“Rivers are treated equal to deities as they serve source of fertility for farmers” (Beg 87). The people of Persia deify the natural world and live in harmony with nature, considering it a source of fertility for its inhabitants. The relationship between people and the natural world can be seen through the concept of eco-spirituality, which is evident in the play. The Environmental movements of the 1960s and the 1970s laid the groundwork for eco-spirituality. In 1970s, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naes coined the term ‘deep ecology’ that changed human attitudes towards the natural world and promoted a spiritual connection with nature. In the play, the natural description is lively and full of picturesque elements, such as—“Nightingales and larks are chirping giving a call/ Chalices are intoxicated to turn landscape a ball” (Beg 38). Natural imagery, be it an animal or a morning view, is described in a picturesque way. The author seems to be hinting that characters contribute to the entire course of the play, as well as to the setting and that royals are also like ordinary people and can act on their whims.

On the theme of historical fiction, British writer Mary Renault, best known for historical works, wrote a novel called *The Persian Boy*. It is a 1972 historical novel narrated by Bagoas, a young Persian, who has been castrated and sold as a slave to king Darius III. Eventually, he came under the ownership of Alexander the Great, who made him his lover. The novel is a significant work in Queer studies, which constitutes a distinct genre in itself. In the novel, according to the author, Alexander’s love for Bagoas made him unite the Greek and Persian people. The novel talked about ancient time where relationship between adult boys and men were celebrated, perfectly portrayed through the characters of Alexander and Bagoas. Alexander and his relationship between his two lovers were highlighted and illustrate how these relationships influenced him and contributed to his historical legacy. Renault described Alexander as, “He needed love as a palm tree needs water, all his life long: from armies, from cities, from conquered enemies, nothing was enough” (Renault 63). His relationship with Bagoas explored the historical epoch where Queer relationships were accepted norms, and young boys were

castrated and sold to rulers of that era. In the work mentioned above, the description of Persian Empire is with rich imagery and eloquent diction, same as in the play being discussed in this paper *Khusrau Parviz and Shirin*. Both authors describe the Persian Empire in distinct way but emotions which they evoke in characters are identical. In *The Persian Boy* Mary Renault portrayed Alexander filled with love for his lovers, his empire, his land and his people. Individuals' love for their land reflected through the people they cherish is perfectly presented through the character of Alexander and his relationships. Similarly, Mirza Sibtain Beg in *Khusrau Parviz and Shirin* portrayed this theme through the character of Khusrau Parviz. Beg depicted Khusrau patriotic yet an ardent in love, masculine yet emotional, passionate yet just in his actions and his love for Shirin influenced him similarly to how Alexander was inspired by his love for Bagos. People would not understand the customs and cultures of ancient times without history blended with fictional elements. That is why the connection of land and locale is best explored in historical works, which delve into specific epoch which no longer exists.

Places depicted in historical fiction have memories of that particular epoch. Considering places full of memory evokes a shrine-like treatment for the place that earlier had no value. Individuals' emotions attached to a place make it essential in one's eyes. Some places are famous for commemoration sites; they earlier had no importance but their connection with something significant makes them valuable. In memory studies, the depiction of a place in a particular work contributes to the construction and transmission of historical memory. It studies how characters' memories and experiences are linked to specific locations and landscapes. Indeed the memory of a place endures indefinitely within an individuals' psyche; revisiting such locales invariable rekindles the same visceral experiences, persisting throughout one's lifetime. An ephemeral encounter with particular place leaves an indelible imprint on one's consciousness, until the day they die. In historical plays, places have multifaceted purposes; they tell individuals' experiences in particular settings and their memories that are now as important as historical memories. Individuals are always located within a place, and their selves are actually defined by them.

Locales play a pivotal role in the process of self-construction, and being displaced can have significant consequences in individuals' lives. About places & memory Trigg Says in his book *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, "...we can thus speak of memory in terms of its being as much bound with subjectivity as it is the materiality of objects



in the world. In a word, *the places in which we live, live in us*. More precisely, those places live in our bodies....” (Trigg 33). Locales possess the capacity to evolve into sites of commemoration and contestation. Places can commemorate historical events, cultural practices, and societal values imbued with symbolic significance. They can also become the arenas of contestation where different interpretation of history, identity or power dynamics collides. In a play, the grave of Farhad serves as one such example. Farhad, a skilled stone engineer and sculptor becomes enamored of Shirin. He receives an order from Khusrau to carve a highway through Taq-e-Bistun, with the intention to foster trade and commerce, and facilitate smooth travel for merchants. In return for his work, Farhad requested Shirin as his reward, which enraged Khusrau. Despite this, Khusrau commanded him to complete his task, and upon failing, the punishment was death. Farhad, having lost all hope upon hearing false news of Shirin’s demise, ultimately met his end by jumping off from the high cliff with the pomegranate he was consuming scattered around at the site of his fall. The scattered seeds of the pomegranate grew into the large trees later nourished travelers. This symbolism is deeply connected to the place of his demise, which subsequently became a site of commemoration for Farhad and his unwavering love for Shirin. Later, Khusrau ordered a tomb to be erected on the site of Farhad’s death, stating, “A tomb to be erected on his grave to honor him. He will inspire people with his devotional ardor that he had for art” (Beg 86). Thus, a place that held little value previously transformed into a source of inspiration following Farhad’s death.

In a literary work, settings influences characters’ behavior and how they react in specific locations. This paper explores the concept of place attachment, highlighting how certain places hold more excellent value than others. While places themselves may not inherently possess value, when individuals inhabit them, they become intertwined with their identity. Human experiences deeply influence our psyche, and the entire self is defined by the experiences they had in their lives. Everything—every place, every person—holds a significant value in one’s life that might not be comprehended by others. The significance of a place lays not in its grandeur, but in the personal memories and emotions it evokes. For instance, Shirin’s love for Armenia demonstrates this attachment. Despite Khusrau’s grand gestures, her longing persists for the familiarity of her homeland; she says— “...ambience is not too friendly as I’m used to be with. I miss the breeze that plays with me and my senses here” (Beg 53).

Places have always held a central position in human consciousness. This attachment with places often remain subconscious, individuals may not even recognize it until they face displacement. In historical narratives, settings serve the primary source for understanding the cultural contexts and behavioral patterns, as characters may vary. However places are constant and experienced by many in numerous ways. Although historical figures no longer be present, the places they once inhabited retain the essence of their enduring experiences. Therefore, the significance of places in literary works should be regarded as valuable as that of the protagonists, as they offer certainty, consistency, and a sense of eternity.

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