

A FEW NOTES ON THE ANCIENT AND MODERN FOLKLORE ABOUT THE PEACOCK.

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Mr. Sarat Chandra Mitra's paper, entitled "The Peacock, in Asiatic Cult and Superstition," sent to this Society, to be read at one of its monthly meetings, has suggested to me the thought of presenting before the Society, a few notes on the subject of the Peacock, collected by me during my studies.

Before proceeding to present my Notes, I would draw the attention of the members to an interesting chapter, entitled "A Peacock's Prologue" in a book entitled "The Peacock's Pleasaunce" by an anonymous writer E. V. B.

Firstly, I would refer to the subject of what are called the "eyes" on the tail of the peacock. The following fable of the ancient Greeks, among whom the peacock was a bird sacred to Juno, refers to the transfer of the "eyes" to the feathers on the bird's tail.

In Callithyia was a priestess of the goddess Hera or Juno. Zeus or Jupiter, falling in love with her, changed her into the form of a white cow, in order to save her from the anger and jealousy of his wife Juno or Hera. According to some, Hera herself changed *Io* into a cow, out of jealousy for her. Hera got the cow in her possession and set Argus to watch over her. Argus was called Panoptes, *i.e.*, all-seeing, because he had a hundred eyes.¹ Argus tied this cow (*Io*) with an olive tree. Then Zeus sent her messenger Hermes² on an errand to kill Argus and to get *Io* in her posses-

¹ Argus is supposed to represent the star-studded Heaven. Cf. the thousand-eyed (baêvarê-chashma) Mithra, the Avesta *yazata* presiding over the Light of the Heaven.

² For a comparison between the Hermes of the Egyptians and the Greeks and the Haoma of the ancient Iranians. *Vide* my paper on "The Legendary and Actual History of Freemasonry" in "The K. R. Cama Masonic Jubilee Volume," pp. 172-74. *Vide* my "Masonic Papers," p. 71 *et seq.*

sion. Hermes killed Argus, or, according to some, lulled him to sleep and set *Io* free. Juno (Hera) then transferred the hundred eyes of Argus to the tail of the peacock which was her favourite bird.

As to why the peacock was the favourite bird of Juno, we find the following reason:—Juno has been identified with, or has been known by the names of, various goddesses, *e.g.*, Hera,¹ Inachis, Inachia, Astaroth, Astarte, Oinos or Venus, Luna, Selene, Isis, Ino, Io, Cupres, Cupra, Ionah.² As Isis, she was at times taken for the rainbow, “which God made a sign in the heavens, a token of his covenant with man.” Now, Bryant, in his *Ancient Mythology*, says that, as the peacock, in the full expansion of his plumes, displays all the beautiful colours of the Isis (rainbow), it was, probably for that reason, made the bird of Juno.³

Among the Romans, this bird became a symbol of apotheosis or deification. The Romans then gave the symbolism, in another form, to the early Christians, among whom it was a symbol of Eternity and Immortality. It is due to this symbolism, that we see the peacock on the Christian tombs of the martyrs in the catacombs at Rome.

According to Pliny,⁴ the peacock belongs to a class of birds which afford presages by their flight. The peacock has precedence of the birds of this class “as much for its singular beauty as its superior instinct and the vanity it displays.” Pliny thus speaks of the display of its plumage and of the “eyes” on the tail.

“When it hears itself praised, this bird spreads out its gorgeous colours, and especially if the sun happens to be shining at the time,

¹ Hera was not originally a proper name, but a title, the same as *Ada* of the Babylonians, and signified the lady or queen. (A new system or an Analysis of Ancient Mythology by Jacob Bryant, (1807) Vol., III. p. 19). Heer, HERN, Heren, Haren, in many languages betokened something noble (*Ibid* n. 1)

² *Ibid*. p. 193.

³ *Ibid*. pp. 194-95.

⁴ Natural History of Pliny, Bk. X. Chap. 22; Bostock and Riley's translation, Vol. II., p. 495.

because then they are seen in all their radiance. At the same time spreading out its tail in the form of a shell, it throws the reflection upon the other feathers, which shine all the more brilliantly when a shadow is cast upon them; then at another moment it will contract all the eyes depicted upon its feathers in a single mass manifesting great delight in having them admired by the spectator. The peacock loses its tail every year at the fall of the leaf, and a new one shoots forth in its place at the flower season; between those periods the bird is abashed and moping and seeks retired spots."¹

The peacock is connected with cures—some of them magical—of various diseases. According to Pliny,² its dung served as a remedy for several diseases of the eye. The tongues of peacocks were used for epilepsy.

Its feathers play a prominent part, even now, in some magical cures. Mr. Thurston³ thus refers to their use as magical remedies in Southern India.

“It is recorded by the Rev. J. Cain that when the Koyis of the Godavery district determine to appease the goddess of small-pox or cholera, they erect a pandall (booth) outside their village under a *nim* tree (*Melia Azadirachta*). They make the image of a woman with earth from a white-ant hill, tie a cloth or two round it, hang a few peacock's feathers round its neck. . . .”

Among the Nomad Basuis or Bâwarupas, a tuft of peacock's feathers is carried by robbers and manufacturers of counterfeit coins as a magical remedy to prevent detection.⁴ In Northern India, the fat of the peacock, which moves gracefully and easily is supposed to cure stiff joints.⁵ In some of the customs in Southern India, which serve as relics of former human sacrifices, effigies of peacocks are often used.⁶

¹ Pliny, Bk. X, Chap. XXII.

² Bk. XXIX, Chap 38. Vol. V., p. 413.

³ “Omens and Superstitions of Southern India.” by Edgar Thurston pp. 35-36.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 41.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 88.

⁶ *Ibid* pp. 200-201.

With some, its feathers bring evil and bad omens, because its feathers are supposed to serve demons. The author of the above-named book¹ describes the following two stories to illustrate this belief :

“There is the oft-told story of a country house and a lady, who one day while sitting in the drawing-room upstairs, laughing and talking with a party of friends, suddenly exclaimed,—starting up and hurrying to the window—‘Oh, the Peacock!’ She opened the window and instantly disappeared. The startled guests who had rushed after her, looking down beheld the lady lying dead upon the gravel beneath the window, whilst a beautiful peacock stood near her in his pride, with his round of outspread plumes” (p. XI).

According to this story, the lady saw an actual living peacock. In the following story by the same author, we find that the evil is believed to be connected, even with the picture of a peacock.

“Another tale is told of a fine old mansion somewhere in Wales that had remained empty and tenantless for a number of years. A tenant at last was found, and a family arrived on a brilliant day in the middle of June. It is said they all went out into the garden and round to the stable court-yard to meet the horses coming from town. They heard their tramp and the voices of the stablemen who were bringing them in, and one of the ladies went forward before the others to receive and welcome her own favourite riding horse, a beautiful grey, whom she saw just entering through the gate, led by the stud-groom. The horse advanced with a little neigh of recognition, but had no sooner stepped into the court-yard than he suddenly stopped short, reared up, and the next moment fell back dead at his mistress’s feet.

“A few days after the owner of the house received a letter from his new tenant, stating that an over-mantel above the fire-place in one of the principal rooms in the house had been the cause of the death of a valuable horse, and praying that it might be at once removed out of the house lest a worse thing should happen.

¹ *The Peacock’s Pleasaunce*, by E. V. B.

This over-mantel had a certain value of its own. It was a kind of drapery or hanging, made of peacock's feathers, enwound with blue and green and wrought curiously in gold thread and silken needlework, and sparkling with gems. It had been the gift of a dear friend, and had been sent from the Indies, long ago. The tenant's demand caused surprise, but was immediately obeyed; and, with the order for the removal of his peacock-hanging, a letter was sent by the landlord to his head gardener, an old retainer of many years' service on the estate. So, at dead of night, the aged, white-haired gardener, bearing a lantern and a spade, and carrying also the Evil-Eyed fabric over his arm, made his way towards the secluded, woody outskirts, of the Garden Wilderness. There he sought, under some thick trees, for a spot where the earth seemed newly disturbed, and where weeds, and wild ivy still lay cut and scattered about. The old man dug deep until his lamp shone on some ghostly grey, smooth surface, down below. There, he dropped the folded drapery down, the earth was shovelled back into the grave (for such it was) of the ill-fated horse, while with ruthless foot, the bright green feathers, and relucant gold and emerald gems were at once stamped and trod in firm. And thereafter those tentants slept in peace" (pp. XI-XIII).

This story serves as an interesting illustration of how beliefs or customs, connected with living substances, are gradually transferred even to the shadows or pictures of the thing. In the first of the stories the idea of an evil luck was connected with a real living peacock; in the second, with a mere picture or shadow.

The following story, as given by Mrs. Bishop in her book of travels shows how, in the case of a social custom also, people move from reality to a mere picture, from actuality to a shadow. Mrs. Bishop was once showing the pictures of her travels from a book to a number of *pardah* ladies, who always went with veils in the company of males. In the course of her work of showing various illustrations to the ladies, she came across a picture of some men and showed it to them. They immediately covered

their faces, because, there was before them the picture of some males, before whom it was prohibitory for women to go without veils.

This is an illustration of a gradual movement in the matter of customs from the spirit of the customs to the letter of the customs, from reality to shadow.

A book of Sir Henry Layard's travels in the East gives another instance of this kind. While travelling, he suddenly came across a number of women who were without their *pardahs* or veils. To cover their faces from the sight of Sir Henry, they immediately lifted up their loose gowns, under which there was no other under-dress and covered their faces with them, disregarding the shame of standing naked before a foreigner for the purpose of preserving their custom of the *pardah*. This illustrates an attachment to the letter of a custom instead of to the spirit.

According to the Persian poet Farirudin Attar, the author of the book entitled "The language of Birds," it was the peacock that introduced Satan into the Paradise under the form of the seven-headed serpent. In punishment for this, the bird itself was expelled from the paradise. Thus, in the East, a bad omen came to be connected with this bird.

The East, and especially the great Indian Peninsula, is said to be the home of the peacock. Alexander the Great is said to have taken it from India to the West. It is said, that he was so much pleased with its beauty that he prohibited its being killed. Alexander possibly familiarized the bird in the West to a greater extent.

Maçoudi, the great Arab traveller and historian, also refers to the beauty of the Indian peacocks. He says that when taken to foreign countries, they lost the beauty of their feathers.¹

It appears from the Old Testament that the peacock was taken to the Western countries of Asia long before Alexander's time.

¹ Maçoudi, traduit par Barbier de Meynard, II, p. 438. Chap. XXXII.

King Solomon is said to have imported it into his country of Palestine from the East.¹

The peacock is an old heraldic type of greatness and royalty on account of the beauty displayed by it when its plumes are opened. So, its crest is often presented to kings. There are 'eyes' as it were on its feathers. So a presentation of its feather to the king indicates a wish that the king may have many eyes upon his subjects. The peacock was the royal emblem of the kings of Burma, who traced their descent from the sun.

The story of the following Gujarati song is the reverse of that of the lady, narrated above and shows, how a queen loved a peacock and how she became a "Suttee" for the loss of this bird. The story embodied in it shows that, with some, a peacock is an auspicious bird and is a sign of good omen and happiness.

મોરનું ગીત.

સુનરા માર ઘેરહું રૂપલા મારી ઊધણી,
 ઊધણી ઝોલવીરે ઝાંખા ડાલસે.
 ઘેરહું મુક્યું સરોવર પાલસે
 રાણી બરે ને મોર ઘેરી ઘેરી નાંખે ને.
 રમતારે રમતાં ગોવાળીઆએ દીઠાં ને
 કુવાને કઠિરે મોરલીઓ જીવે રમે.
 રાજની રાણીએ પાણીલાં સાચ્યાં ને
 કોષ્ટએ રે જાંધને રાજને સમજાવ્યા ને.
 તમારી રાણીરે મોરસે જીવે રમે,
 ઘેવાંરે લોકો ઘેલરીઆં સીદ બોલો ને
 અમારી રાણીરે રંગત મોહોલમાં.
 લાવજોરે લાવજો ધાલ અને તરવાલ ને
 જાંધને માંરે વનનાં મોરને.
 લાવજોરે લાવજો તીર અને કમાંન ને

¹ I Kings 22 "Once in three years came the navy of Tharshish, bringing gold, and silver, ivory, and apes and peacocks." Vide also II Chronicles, IX, 21.

જાધને માઈ રે વનનાં મોરને.
 મારજેરે. મારજે હરણુનો શેકાર જો
 એક ના મારતારે વનનાં મોરને.
 કાષ્ટએરે જઈને રાણીને સંભળાવ્યાં જો.
 તમારા મોરને રાજ મારશે.
 ભાઈ કાસદીઆ! ખરે જોરા મારોજો
 જાધને જગાવો વનમેના મોરને.
 ભાઈ મોરલીઆ! ડુંગર નાસી જજો જો
 ઘેલારે રાજ તુંને મારશે.
 પેહેલીરે તોચે મોરલીઓ દુકુરાવ્યો જો
 બીજરે તોચે તો મોરને નીચે પાણ્યો.
 ત્રીજરે તોચે મોરને કાવર ધાળ્યો
 ચોઠીરે તોચે મોરને ઘેરે લાવ્યા.
 સુનાની કાવરે મોર ઘેરે આપ્યો જો.
 ઉઠોની રાણી આરલીયાં ઉઘાડો જો.
 હસતી હલલતી આરલીઆં ઉઘાડ્યાં જો.
 રરતીએ લીધેરે વનનાં મોરને.
 ઉઠો મારી રાણી મોરલીઓ સમારો જો
 રરતી રરતીએ મોરલીઓ સમાર્યો જો.
 આંસુએ વધાવ્યો વનનાં મોરને.
 ઉઠો મહારી રાણી ભોજન કહારો જમીએ જો.
 તમે જમે તમારાં છોડ્યાં જમારો જો
 મને ને મોરને રે એઉને સ્તેહ ધણો.
 દોઢ અદ્ધમના મોરલીઆને ખાતર જો
 હેંસી ટકાની મારી રાણી ચાલ્યાં રસણે.
 કહે તો રાણીની પતોરી વનાંઉ જો
 ઉપર કોતરાંઉરે વનનાં મોરને.
 કહે તો રાણી ફરી મેહેલ અ'ધાઉ' જો
 ઉપર ચીતરાંઉરે વનનાં મોરને.

કેહે તો રાણી જલ વેલ ગુઠાઈ જે

ઉપર ભરાઈરે વનનાં મોરને.

મુખડ મંગાવો ચેહ સીયાવો રાણી બધી મરે જે.

મુખડ મંગાવ્યું ચેહ સીયાવી રાણી બરી મુઝાં

મોરને રે ખાતર રાણીરે બરી મુઝાં જે.

The purport of the story sung in this song is thus :

A queen had gone to a well with her maids. When they filled up their water-pots, a peacock, close by, upset them. They filled them up again and the peacock upset and emptied them again. This served as a play to the queen and her maids, and the bird became a favourite bird with her. Somebody went to the king and said "Lo ! your queen plays with a peacock." He, thereupon, sent for his bow and arrow and his sword, with a view to shoot and kill the bird. The queen, on learning this, asked him not to shoot her favourite peacock, but to go hunting and shoot the deer etc. The king did not mind her word and went to the well and killed the bird. He then carried the bird to the palace and asked his queen to open the door of the palace. The queen opened it and was surprised to see her favourite bird killed by the king in spite of her request not to do so. The king asked her to dress the bird for being cooked. She did so, all the time pouring tears from her eyes upon the body of the bird. The king then asked his queen to have with him her meals in which the peacock served as a dish. She refused to join him at dinner and continued mourning the loss of her favourite bird and directed that a pile of sandalwood may be prepared in which she may burn herself out of grief for her bird. The king offered to do all possible things to dissuade her. He offered to build a new palace with all various decorations of peacocks in it, to soothe her grief, but to no purpose. She burnt herself out of grief for her favourite bird.

In Rajputana, the *toran* (તોરણ) hung on the door of a house as a symbol of marriage "consists of three wooden bars fastened together in the form of an equilateral triangle and surmounted by the image of a peacock. The symbol is suspended at the por-

tal of the bride.”¹ Among the Rajputs, a peacock was a favourite emblem and a peacock’s feather often adorned the turban of a Rajput warrior.²

It is believed by some that the pea-hen conceives, not by the usual process of cohabitation, but, by licking the tears shed by the peacock.

A Gujarati book, speaking of the omens from this bird, says that, if it utters one word, *i.e.*, cries once, when a person starts to go to a foreign country, that is a good omen for the acquisition of wealth. If it does so twice, that prognosticates the acquisition of a wife, *i.e.*, marriage. If it does so thrice, that portends the acquisition of wealth.³

¹ Tod’s Rajasthan. New abridged edition, p. 26.

² *Ibid.*

૩ “ ગામ જતાં એક શબ્દ બોલે તો લક્ષ્મી પામે, બે શબ્દ બોલે તો સ્ત્રી-લાભ પામે, ત્રણ શબ્દ બોલે તો દૈવ્યનો લાભ દેખાડે.”