

environment leaves its clear impressions on their way of thinking, feelings and traditions. They know that they need some sort of justification so as to reduce the ghastliness of their crime:

Surely in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for those who inquire. They said [to one another]: 'Truly, Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we, even though we are many. Surely our father is in manifest error. Kill Joseph, or cast him away in some faraway land, so that you have your father's attention turned to you alone. After that you will [repent and] be righteous people.' One of them said: Do not kill Joseph, but rather – if you must do something – cast him into the dark depth of this well. Some caravan may pick him up.' [Thereupon] they said [to their father]: 'Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers? Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him.' He answered: 'It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.' They said: 'If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost.' And when they went away with him, they resolved to cast him into the depth of the well. We revealed [this] to him: 'You will tell them of this their deed at a time when they shall not know you.' At nightfall they came to their father weeping, and said: 'Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him. But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth.' And they produced his shirt stained with false blood. He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.' (Verses 7-18)

We subsequently see them reflecting the same characteristics on every occasion, just as we see one of them always adopting a different stance. Later on, to comply with Joseph's demand, they take his brother to him, not knowing Joseph's true identity but aware only that he is the Chief Minister of Egypt. They only want to buy their supply of grain from him during that period of drought. God, however, allows Joseph to retain his brother under the pretext of finding the King's measure in his luggage. The other brothers had no idea how this had come about, but their old grudges against Joseph immediately surface: "They said: 'If he has stolen – well, a brother of his had stolen previously.' Joseph kept his secret to himself revealed nothing to them, saying [within himself]: 'You are in a far worse position, and God knows best what you are speaking of'" (Verse 77)

Their old grudges manifest themselves again when they tell their father, now an old and sorrowful man, about the second calamity. They realize how this second event will renew all his grief for Joseph. Again, their old grudges against their lost brother are seen at full strength. They pay little heed to their father's old age and his

sense of bereavement: *"He then turned away from them and said: 'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow. They said: 'By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead.'"* (Verses 84-85)

The same may be said about their remarks when Joseph sent his shirt to his father after having identified himself to them. When they saw their father detecting Joseph's aura, they were upset as this indicated the profound relationship that still existed between father and absent son. They were quick to remonstrate with their father and reproach him: *"As the caravan set out, their father said [to the people around him]: I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me.' They replied: By God! You are still lost in your old illusions."* (Verses 94-95)

Realism and Propriety

The Chief Minister's wife is another character that reflects consistency in all situations. We see her first in the grip of desire, heeding nothing as she tries to satisfy her uncontrolled lust. She is restrained neither by feminine shyness, self respect, social position nor by a potential family scandal. She is quick to employ all her female guile and craftiness in order to show herself free of blame and at the same time protect her loved one, at whom she deliberately levelled a false accusation. Her aim here is that he should be given a mild sentence that spares his life. Again her guile helps her to answer other women's accusations, utilizing their similar weakness against sexual desire. When her own lack of control is exposed, she owns up to her determination to get what she wants, declaring this to the other women who share with her the same lust that sees nothing wrong in satisfying carnal desires.

Although the story paints this type of woman realistically and faithfully, showing the moment of uncontrolled desire at its most urgent, the Qur'ānic account, which provides the best example of Islamic artistry, maintains a very clean line throughout. Even in the description of a woman exposing her physical and mental nakedness, the Qur'ān steers away from the squalor of explicit eroticism which characterizes what is called realism in literary works of contemporary societies that pay little regard to religious values.

The man from Egypt who bought him said to his wife: Be kind to him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son.' Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose; though most people may not know it. And when he attained his full manhood, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good. She in whose house he was living tried to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said, 'Come.' He said: 'God protect me. Goodly has my

master made my stay here. Those who do wrong come to no good.' She truly desired him, and he desired her. [He would have succumbed] had he not seen a clear sign from his Lord. Thus We averted from him evil and indecency. He was truly one of Our faithful servants. And they both rushed to the door. She tore his shirt from behind. And at the door they met her husband. She said: 'What ought to be the punishment of someone who had evil designs on your wife other than that he should be thrown in prison or some grievous punishment. '[Joseph] said: It was she who sought to seduce me.' One of her own household testified: If his shirt has been torn from the front, then she is speaking the truth and he is lying. But if it has been torn from behind, then she is lying, and he is speaking the truth.' When [her husband] saw that Joseph's shirt was torn from behind, he said to her: 'This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed.' Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.' In the city, women were saying: 'The Chief Minister's wife is trying to seduce her slave boy, as she is passionately in love with him. We see that she is clearly going astray.' When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them, and prepared for them a sumptuous repast, and handed each one of them a knife and said [to Joseph]: 'Come out and present yourself to them.' When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: 'God preserve us! This is no "mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel.' Said she: 'This is he on whose account you have been blaming me! Indeed I have tried to seduce him, but he guarded his chastity. Now, however, if he does not do what I bid him, he shall certainly be thrown in prison, and shall indeed be humiliated. ' [Joseph] said: My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do. Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly.' His Lord answered his prayer and warded off their guile from him. It is He alone who hears all and knows all. (Verses 21-34)

We meet her again after Joseph had been a prisoner for years as a result of her and the other women's scheming. It was only when the King experienced his dream that Joseph's former fellow prisoner remembered that Joseph was the only one who could unravel a true interpretation of dreams. When the King ordered that he should be brought to him, Joseph refused until the King had investigated his case to determine his innocence. The King thus called the Chief Minister's wife and the other women. As she responds, we see her again as a woman in love, even though time, aging and events have left their mark on her. But we also realize that faith, which she had observed with Joseph, found its way into her heart. "The King said: 'Bring this man before me.' But when the [King's] envoy came to him, Joseph said: 'Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands. My Lord has full knowledge of their guile.' The King asked [the women]: 'What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?' The women said: 'God save us! We did not perceive the least evil on his part.' The Chief Minister's wife said: Now has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him.

He has indeed told the truth. From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man's soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful." (Verses 50-53)

Joseph, a goodly type of man, is painted faithfully. The Qur'ān does not alter the slightest feature of his character. Having been brought up in a prophet's home as very religious, he is shown as a young man facing the trial of temptation. Indeed, his real character combines his natural human tendencies with his religious upbringing. When the woman tempted him openly, he almost responded to her, but the other influence saved him from falling into her trap. He felt his own weakness as he faced the women's guile coupled with the pull of his environment and the social milieu. But he remained steadfast. There is no distortion of his character. He is faithfully painted.

Then we have the very special character of the Chief Minister, who has to balance the dignity of his position with the weakness of pride. With him, social pretences and covering up what is unbecoming are essential characteristics: *"When [her husband] saw that Joseph's shirt was torn from behind, he said to her: 'This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed!' Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault."* (Verses 28-29)

We also see the women in that society: their gossip about the Chief Minister's wife and her slave boy whom she tries to seduce; their disapproval of her conduct based on jealousy rather than the error involved; their infatuation with Joseph; their feminine cognition of the reason behind the conduct of the woman at the centre of their gossip; her awareness of this recognition prompting her to complete confession feeling completely safe to do so; their collective attempt to seduce Joseph despite their immediate recognition of his purity: *"When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: 'God preserve us! This is no mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel."* (Verse 31) We understand all this from Joseph's prayer: *"He said: My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do. Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly."* (Verse 33) It was no longer his mistress that was after him, but the whole array of upper class women.

The whole social environment is clearly seen in the way Joseph's fate is determined even though his innocence is fully established. In this way, the decision was taken to suppress the social scandal, even though a wholly innocent person was made a scapegoat: *"Yet for all the evidence they had seen, they felt it right to put him in jail for a time."* (Verse 35)

The Development of Joseph's Character

If we follow Joseph across the whole story, we find his character shining throughout, reflecting its essential characteristics in every environment he finds himself in. He is a God-fearing young man brought up in a prophet's home where he acquired his faith. At no point do we see him losing sight of any of these elements. In the dark hours when he is unjustly thrown into prison, he continues to advocate his faith gently but firmly, aware of his environment and knowing how to approach people in such an environment. He realizes that he must always reflect the superiority of his faith by his conduct which maintains high moral standards and values:

Two young men went to prison with him. One of them said: I saw myself [in a dream] pressing wine.' The other said: And I saw myself [in a dream] carrying bread on my head, and birds were eating of it.' 'Tell us the meaning of these dreams, for we can see that you are a man of virtue.' [Joseph] answered: 'Your food which is provided for you will not have come to you before I have informed you of the real meaning of [your dreams]. That is part of the knowledge which my Lord has imparted to me. I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come. I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God. This is part of God's grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks. My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it. My two prison companions! One of you will give his lord wine to drink. The other will be crucified, and the birds will eat from his head. The matter on which you have sought to be enlightened has thus been decided.' (Verses 36-41)

Nevertheless, he is a man with normal human weaknesses. He is eager that the King be informed of his case, hoping that the King would uncover the plot that ended with him being unjustly imprisoned. But God wanted to teach him to place his hopes in Him alone. "And [Joseph] said to the one whom he believed would be released: 'Remember me in the presence of your lord.' But Satan caused him to forget to mention Joseph to his lord, and so he remained in prison for several years." (Verse 42)

We see the same personality again after the lapse of several years. During which time Joseph has gone through the divine educative process and has placed his full trust in God, reassured about his future and fate. The King has his dream and his

nobles and religious leaders cannot find a suitable interpretation for it. At this point, the released former prisoner remembers Joseph and obtains his interpretation of the King's dream. The King orders that Joseph be brought to him. But Joseph is reassured, confident of his position. He refuses to leave prison until his case is properly investigated and he is acquitted:

And the King said: I saw [in a dream] seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered. Tell me the meaning of my vision, my nobles, if you are able to interpret dreams.' They replied: 'This is but a medley of dreams, and we have no deep knowledge of the real meaning of dreams.' At that point, the man who had been released from prison suddenly remembered [Joseph] after all that time and said: I will tell you the real meaning of this dream, so give me leave to go.' 'Joseph, man of truth, tell us of the seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered, so that I may return to the people [of the court], and that they would come to know.' He replied: 'You shall sow for seven consecutive years, but let the grain you harvest remain in its ear, except for the little which you may eat. Then after that there will come seven hard years which will devour all that you have laid up for them, except a little of what you have kept in store. Then after that there will come a year of abundant rain, in which the people will be able to press [oil and wine]. The King said: 'Bring this man before me.' But when the [King's] envoy came to him, Joseph said: 'Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands. My Lord has full knowledge of their guile.' The King asked [the women]: 'What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?' The women said: 'God save us! We did not perceive the least evil on his part.' The Chief Minister's wife said: Now has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him. He has indeed told the truth. 'From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man's soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. And the King said: 'Bring him before me. I will choose him for my own.' And when he had spoken to him, the King said: 'You shall henceforth be in a position of high standing with us, invested with all trust.' Joseph replied: 'Give me charge of the store-houses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom.' (Verses 43-55)

Here we see that Joseph has matured. He is fully aware of what goes on around him. He is calm, confident, reassured. From this point onward, he is the central character in the story, while the King, the Chief Minister, the women and the whole set up move out of stage. The *sūrah* prepares us for this change with a couple of verses: "Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, free to do what he willed. We bestow Our

mercy on whom We will, and We never fail to give their reward to those who do good. But as for those who believe in God and keep away from evil, the reward of the life to come is much better indeed." (Verses 56-57) From this point onward, Joseph faces new types of trial, unlike those he had hitherto faced. In all these, he loses nothing of his calmness or reassurance.

First we see Joseph encountering his brothers for the first time after their crime against him. Now however he is far superior to them and in a stronger position. Yet his actions reflect his self control: "Joseph's brothers arrived and presented themselves before him. He immediately knew them, but they did not recognize him. And when he had given them their provisions, he said: 'Bring me that brother of yours from your father's side. Do you not see that I give just measure and that I am the best of hosts? But if you do not bring him, you shall never again receive from me a single measure [of provisions], nor shall you come near me.' They said: 'We shall endeavour to persuade his father to let him come. We will make sure to do so.' Joseph said to his servants: Place their merchandise in their camel packs, so that they may discover it when they return to their people. Perchance they will come back.'" (Verses 58-62)

We meet Joseph again carrying out a plan sanctioned by God to detain his brother. With this we see a mature and wise person, one who is full of confidence and self control:

And when they presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his brother to himself and said: 'I am your brother. Do not grieve over their past deeds.' And when he had given them their provisions, he placed the [King's] drinking-cup in his brother's camel pack. Then an announcer called out: 'You people of the caravan! You are surely thieves.' Turning back towards them, they said: 'What is it that you have lost?' 'We have lost the King's goblet, "they answered. 'Whoever brings it shall have a camel-load [of grain as a reward]. I pledge my word for it. 'They said: 'By God, you know that we have not come to commit any evil deed in this land, and that we are no thieves.' [The Egyptians] said: 'But what shall be the punishment for this deed, if you are proved to be lying?' They replied: He in whose camel- pack it is found shall be enslaved in punishment for it. Thus do we punish the wrongdoers.' Thereupon, [Joseph] began to search their bags before the bag of his brother, and then took out the drinking- cup from his brother's bag. Thus did We contrive for Joseph. He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother, had God not so willed. We do exalt [in knowledge] whom We will, but above everyone who is endowed with knowledge there is One who knows all. [Joseph's brothers] said: If he has stolen – well, a brother of his had stolen previously.' Joseph kept his secret to himself and revealed nothing to them, saying [within himself]: 'You are in a far worse position, and God knows best what you are speaking of' They said: 'Chief Minister, this boy has a father who is very old. Take one of us instead of him. We see that you are indeed a generous man.' He answered: 'God

forbid that we should take any other than the man with whom we found our property; for then we would be wrongdoers.' (Verses 69-79)

Once more we see Joseph when the trial had taken its toll on Jacob and God has willed that the trials that engulfed him and his household should now come to an end. Joseph is now longing to be reunited with his parents, and he feels sympathetic towards his brothers who appear before him suffering hardship. He gently remonstrates with them as he identifies himself to them, and follows this with total forgiveness stated at the most opportune moment. All circumstances lead to such forgiveness which is the only attitude to be expected from Joseph, the God-fearing, mature, kind and reassured person.

When they presented themselves before [Joseph] again, they said: 'Exalted one! Hardship has befallen us and our people, and so we have brought but little merchandise. Give us our full measure [of grains], and be charitable to us. Indeed God rewards those who are charitable. 'He said: Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother, when you were still unaware?' They said: 'Why – is it indeed you who are Joseph?' He replied: 'I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has indeed been gracious to us. If one remains God-fearing and patient in adversity, God will not fail to reward those who do good.' They said: By God. Most certainly has God raised you high above us, and we were indeed sinners.' He replied: None shall reproach you today. May God forgive you. He is indeed the Most Merciful of those who show mercy. Now go and take this shirt of mine and lay it over my father's face, and he will recover his sight. Then come back to me with all your family.' (Verses 88-93)

We finally see him at the climax, when the reunion takes place, Joseph is at the height of his power, his dream has come true and all his aspirations have been fulfilled. At this moment, he steps aside to be alone addressing a prayer of complete devotion and full humility. His position of power means nothing to him at that moment: *"My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous."* (Verse 101)

Joseph's character reflects his integrity, consistency and the environment in which he was raised.

The Bereaved Father

Another character is Jacob, the loving kindly father and confident prophet who experiences a combination of apprehension and hope when his son tells him of his

dream. He recognizes that the dream heralds a very promising future, but he fears at the same time that Satan might prompt his other children to take some undesirable action. We see him here reflecting on all aspects of his character: *“Joseph said to his father: ‘Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrate themselves before me.’ My son, he replied, do not relate your dream to your brothers, lest they plot some evil against you. Satan is indeed man’s open enemy. Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise.”* (Verses 4-6)

We then meet him again as his sons try to persuade him to let them take Joseph with them, followed by them giving him the shocking news of Joseph’s disappearance:

[Thereupon] they said [to their father]: ‘Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers? Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him. ‘He answered. ‘It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.’ They said: ‘If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost.’ And when they went away with him, they resolved to cast him into the depths of the well. We revealed [this] to him: ‘You will tell them of this their deed at a time when they shall not know you.’ At nightfall they came to their father weeping, and said: ‘Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him. But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth.’ And they produced his shirt stained with false blood. He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.’ (Verses 11-18)

Again we meet him, in all his humanity, when his sons are trying once more to persuade him to part company with another son, Joseph’s full brother, now the focus of all his love and kindness. For them, they must get Jacob’s consent that the brother travel with them, because the Egyptian Chief Minister, whose identity is unknown to them, requires his presence in order to give them their full measure of grain.

When they returned to their father, they said: ‘Father, any [further] grain is henceforth denied us. Therefore, send our brother with us so that we may obtain our full measure [of grain]. We will take good care of him.’ He replied: Am I to trust you with him in the same way as I trusted you with his brother in the past? But God is the best of guardians; and of all those who show mercy He is the Most Merciful.’ When

they opened their camel packs, they discovered that their merchandise had been returned to them. 'Father,' they said, 'what more could we desire? Here is our merchandise: it has been returned to us. We will buy provisions for our people, and we will take good care of our brother. We will receive an extra camel-load: that should be an easy load.' He said: I will not send him with you until you give me a solemn pledge before God that you will indeed bring him back to me, unless the worst befalls you.' When they had given him their solemn pledge, [Jacob] said: 'God is witness to all that we say. 'And he added: My sons, do not enter [the city] by one gate, but enter by different gates. In no way can I be of help to you against God. Judgement rests with none but God. In Him have I placed my trust, and in Him alone let all those who trust place their trust.' And when they entered as their father had bidden them, it did not profit them in the least against God. It was but a wish in Jacob's soul which he had thus fulfilled. He was endowed with knowledge which We had given him. But most people do not know it. (Verses 63-68)

We meet him again after his second calamity, to see him once more as a bereaved father and a reassured prophet. Joseph carried out his plan sanctioned by God to detain his brother. But another of Jacob's sons, who stands out as one with a special character that distinguishes his attitude at different junctures in the story, decides to stay behind as well. He cannot face his father after having given him a solemn pledge that he could not now honour. Therefore, he decides to stay until his father gives him permission to do otherwise, or until God has judged in his case:

When they despaired of [moving] him, they withdrew to begin earnest consultations among themselves. The eldest of them said: Do you not recall that your father took from you a pledge in God's name, and that previously you were at fault with respect to Joseph? I shall not depart from this land until my father gives me leave or God judges for me. He is certainly the best of judges.' Go back to your father and say: 'Father, your son has stolen. We testify only to that which we know. We cannot guard against the unforeseen. You may ask the [people of the] town where we were, and the caravan with which we travelled. We are certainly telling the truth.' He said: 'No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise.' He then turned away from them and said: 'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow. They said: By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead.' He said: It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of God what you do not know. My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother; and do not despair of God's mercy; for none but unbelievers can ever despair of God's mercy.' (Verses 80-87)

In the last episode of his long trial we see Jacob, the old man, demonstrating the