

The Chenab River

Khaldoon Ahmed

I was brought up on a fable that we were cast out of the Eden that was Pakistan into a harsh cold London.

Do we define ourselves by what we do or what we dream? I am a doctor, a filmmaker, a Londoner, and a lover. I sometimes go to raves and listen to techno music. I also read the Persian poetry of Hafiz, Saadi and Rumi, and long for the sound of water in the palace of Alhambra in Granada.

On my laptop in bed in London, I listen to the Pakistani YouTube channel Coke Studio and hear the song of the Punjabi Sufi fable of Sohni Mahiwal. I am moved to tears by its tragic love story. How can a folk story a thousand years old speak to me so directly? The tale is about Sohni, a villager in love with Mahiwal. She swims the River Chenab holding onto a

clay pot as a float. But the clay wasn't fired properly, and she is doomed to drown. It's an allegory of love, of taking to treacherous waters, but still trying. It moves me in the same way the Sufi mystic poet Rumi does, who sees love as a key to opening up greater mysteries. The fable of Sohni Mahiwal is from a particular South Asian Sufi lineage, deeply connected to local rivers and forests. But at the same time, it communicates something very universal.

Sohni Mahiwal comes to me through interrupted sources – the migration of my parents to Britain, and my inheritance of broken forms of Urdu and Punjabi. The fact that it reaches me says something both about the power of these stories and the need for them. Maybe the treacherous waters my parents crossed did not lead them to a secure shore. My mother taught me and my brothers the Urdu poetry of Allama Iqbal. Iqbal said, *Paiwasta re shajar se, umeed e bahar rakh* ('Stay attached to the tree, and wait for spring'). Attachment to Islam was how my mother escaped the reality of life as an immigrant in East London.

For Borges, the library contained the universe. For me, my library is the garden. More specifically, the Persianate Garden. As a child on trips to Lahore, my family would visit the Mughal gardens of Shalimar. Perhaps

that is when I formed my image of paradise as divided in four parts by terraces and water fountains.

From an early age, my identification with Islam has been more aesthetic than religious. I took up calligraphy, and travelled from Istanbul and Isfahan to Lahore and Delhi. I realised that there is no one singular Islamic world, but many diverse cultures.

In the geometry of tiles in the Great Mosque of Fez and the elegance of Arabic calligraphy in the Taj Mahal, there is however, an imagined order, beautiful because of its symmetry. We all have multiple selves now. One of my 'selves' resides in the aesthetics of Islamic art. I wonder if this is compensation for lack of faith, or the replacement of religion with culture. The Sufi poetry of Rumi or Saadi Shirazi, both from the thirteenth century, somehow gives more meaning to my life's intractable questions than, say, psychotherapy.

The question 'who are you?' can lead to you to reduce or expand the idea of the self. I like what the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin says about stories – that our reality is really a moving composite of all the stories we have heard.

Maybe that is why the fable of Sohni Mahiwal, composed on a river in Punjab, speaks to me.

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Khaldoon Ahmed was born in London and works as a psychiatrist in the NHS. He writes non-fiction and makes short creative films which have been screened around the world.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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