BOOK REVIEW

History, myth, scholarship: This qissa-as-novel by Musharraf Ali Farooqi looks power in the eye

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Musharraf Ali Farooqi.

The fact that the main protagonist of Musharraf Ali Farooqi’s latest fictive offering is the historical figure of the polymath scholar, Zakariya Qazwini, indicates many of Farooqi’s predilections and concerns for The Merman and the Book of Power. The novel is written in the form of a qissa, or an epic-like fabulist tale. It combines history with myth to give a trenchant insight into civilisations past in order to reflect on the contemporary zeitgeist and to break many of its stereotypes.

Qazwini, perhaps like Farooqi himself, is an eclectic reader, who is researching for his magnum opus, the cosmography, Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing. The action of the story begins after the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad to Hulagu Khan’s Mongol army, when the Baghdad governor Juvayni is confronted by the discovery of a merman, Gujastak, whom he hands over to Qazwini to study.

The novel follows the discoveries of Qazwini into the study of this strange creature both through observation and intertextual research that takes us back and forth across different political histories, geographic landscapes, and realms of knowledge of the Byzantines, the Abbassids and the Greeks. A looming doomsday, with the coming of Gog and Magog, is prophesied here, as in many monotheistic traditions, that is to be guarded against. One may read this as a signal for civilisation and culture to hold out against its demise in the face of absolute (evil) power.
Where power is knowledge

Farooqi’s qissa in English gives us the rich tapestry of a West Asian world with its flourishing knowledge systems that are often forgotten today when most research and technology are seen to be centred in the West (or, sometimes now, in the Far East). Moreover, the interactions between the Mediterranean empires of Christians and Muslims are pointedly continuous and overlapping, albeit contentious, as they indeed were in history, until the renaissance gave birth to a united Europe that has resulted into the fortress of today.

In contrast, the Levant of the novel is a dynamic space of fertile exchange. Power here is knowledge that must be retained by empires, but exchanges hands, and becomes unwieldy until it lands finally in the hands of the scholar who is almost a Platonic philosopher king. A deeply research-oriented tradition and a strong spirit of enquiry is evident in the works of the Muslim scholars who are working with Islamic and other texts to strive towards truth. An alternative academia is at play.

This is interestingly captured by (real and imaginary) abstracts quoted and translated from different languages by the author, Farooqi, but being collected and researched in the fictive space by the main protagonist, Qazwini. An interesting design and publishing moment is achieved here for the book we hold as each of such numerous textual extracts have margins decorated with geometrical arabesque designs, reminiscent of miniatures, setting them apart from the rest of the diegetic text.

Enquiry and evolution

There is also awareness and internal criticism in the novel of different strands of all thoughts, including the Islamic, and the main protagonist recognises as he reads certain manuscripts that there were elisions, censorship, and additions to texts that were sometimes dependent upon the religious school of thought a text arose from. The Merman’s erotic magic led some to “think that the world might be returning to an older, happier order, as it was seven centuries earlier in the age of jahiliyya, the golden age of paganism, licentiousness and great poetry.”

There is also a strong presence of the occult in the knowledge systems of the caliphate, it seems, contrary to contemporary perceptions of stern discountenance of any such propensities in these lands. All this alerts us to the diversity of thought endemic to what is literally Edward Said’s Orient, which Farooqi recreates with all its richness. Even as he describes it using fabulism, which includes an Asian metamorphosis as humans may transform into mermen, he obliterates the Orientalist depictions of the Orient, presenting us with a world fascinating for not just its rich objects but its spirit of enquiry and constant evolution and change, and its participation in the global epistemic tradition.

And as part of this, what is particularly apt today is the realisation of Qazwini in the face of the tyrant Hulagu Khan’s conquest and destruction of the seat of power, culture, and civilisation of the Abbasid caliphate, Baghdad. This is the need to demolish all that has gone on before to create their own that has been practised for ages by empires, and democratic sovereigns may be no different:

“The Mongols were doing what every empire before them had done: destroying nurseries of culture and learning founded by their predecessors before setting up their own. The lion in the desert sought out and killed every offspring of the old lion and lioness, before coupling with the same lioness to
beget cubs of his own. It was a terrible principle with power to take pride in that alone which it had created.”

We too have many autocrats, like Hulagu Khan, busy creating their own ugly legacies, while engaging in wanton destruction of the creative best that we have inherited from the past.

The book thus is an interesting journey, a bibliomystery of sorts, delving into the fantastic and historical, the mythic and the poetic, to try to find answers in life and books. One wishes sometimes during the middle that the narrative moved faster, but the conclusion sneaks up stealthily, and the book is highly recommended to bibliophiles for its encyclopaedic narrative, as well as the book object, which is handsomely produced by Aleph and appropriately packaged by the combined art and design efforts of Michelle Farooqi, Fyza Noon, and Bena Sareen.


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