**Reviving a moral universe**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-02-24

IN or around the year 1210 a poet was born in the Persian city of Shiraz. Not unlike now, those years were a moment of transformation in the Muslim world. Mongol expansion had led to the f all of many cities and dynasties. It was in this atmosphere of fear and change that the young poet grew up.  
  
Before long, he left to travel the Western Islamic world and took the pen name `Sa`adi` by which he is known even today.  
  
The selection of the name was a homage to the Salghurid Atabegs who ruled Shiraz at the time and in particular to Abu Bakr bin Sa`ad. When Sa`adi returned to Shiraz in or around 1257, he immediately set about writing. In the year 1258, Shaikh Muslih al Din Sa`adi took his work Gulistan of Sa`adi and presented it to the ruling family. Historians note that ever since it was written, the Gulistan was the first book to be studied by schoolchildren in the Persianspeaking world and f ar beyond.  
  
In the substance of the Gulistan, a book written at a time when the author was said to have been afraid to have his homeland destroyed by conquering hordes, one can see the crucial connection in the way the Persianate world connected adab (proper form) with akhlag (proper morals).  
  
According to Mana Kia, Persianate scholar and author of Persianate Selves: Mernories of Place and Origin Before Nationalisrn, the literature that delved into akhlaq looked to the proper moral principles, the literature into adab in turn looked to the proper form or conduct. Proper morals and proper conduct went together and formed two indivisible parts of an individual`s moral conduct.  
  
Those who possessed good akhlaq revealed it in their good adab or conduct.  
  
Together the two formed the basis of the moral imagination and the material for social interaction. Adab itself had two parts, the literary and the social; knowledge of history, poetry, ideas, philosophy and precedent, parallels that Kia writes were the `essential intellectual and social currency of the day`. Both those in power and those who aspired to wisdom and learning were required to possess them.In that world, rooted as it was in the Persian language which was the language of the refined and the learned, aesthetics and ethics were thus intertwined. Those who were well-schooled and practised in the aesthetics of social interaction which went by these particular performative rules were also looked upon as ethical and informed by good ethical norms.  
  
The darker side of this worldview was that not everyone was considered capable of truly understanding and absorbing these norms; The poet does not shy away f rom noting that even the children ofthe wealthy can be stupid and thus lack the material for the cultivation of adab and akhlag. These texts and this sort of education was the basis of Muslim princely and wealthy households when the British arrived with their own epistemology.  
  
The Gulistan was picked up again as a particular text worthy of attention around this time by none other than the British themselves eager as they were to obtain inside knowledge of how the existing rulers of India saw the world and their place in it. When the East India Company set up its college in Fort William in Calcutta, the Gulistan was used as part of the syllabus for the study of Persian. The text was by now several hundred years old but remained relevant as the concepts to which it referred continued to have significance as essential components of the moral imaginary.  
  
The validity or parallels between the time when Sa`adi wrote and the moment when the British encroached on India was noted by another poet, Sirajuddin Khan Arzu who picked up the Gulistan and wrote acommentaryon the work thatexplainedobscure phrases and meanings from the original Persian and made it relevant to the age of the waning Mughal dynasty. Arzu did not publish the work of commentary (Khayaban-i-Gulistan) when he wrote it. Instead, it remained hidden away somewhere for a number of years when Arzu discovered it again. He revised it and finally published it; underscoring that the text was meant for everyone and could be the basis of a moral revival.  
  
That revival never happened as Muslim elites lost power. It is sad that one of the elements that was held responsible was presumed to be the inability to discard this form of learning, this moral universe centred on the unison of aesthetics and ethics. Muslim South Asia has never been able to recover that aspect of its moral understanding or its relevance to continuing generations of children and grownups. The indictment of these particular Persianate ideas and ways of being and doing and behaving has meant a general disdain for their revival.  
  
The consequenceisnotthe ascendancy of alternative form of moral and social habits but rather a general absence of them. The elites of our moment are in turn particularly uncouth, unable to comport themselves with any elegance and remain committed only to a lusty hunger for power grabs and crass political theatre. Not only is literature in the doldrums but so is any consciousness of the tremendous price that the absence of refinement and intellectual acuity plays on the development of culture itself.  
  
It is no surprise then that culture is reduced to a mass-market hodge-podge with bad television dramas, remixed pop songs and ghastly celebrations of wealth. In his wisdom Shaikh Sa`adi had a premonition of just this when he wrote how the availability of all the good instruction of the world is a waste on those who cannot learn. `The whelp of a wolf must prove a wolf at last,` Sa`adi wrote `notwithstanding he may be brought up by a man.` The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.  
  
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