

THE ART OF LIVING AND THE LIFE OF ART: SOUL SEARCHING IN RIFFAT ABBAS'S CITY OF SALT



Waqas Manzoor

"لون دا جيون گهر" is the debut novel of acclaimed Saraiki poet, Riffat Abbas. However, it's anything but coy and cautious in its stance. Therefore, the novel opens with the disappearance of an inhabitant named "Lunarka" and with it, the initial impression that dawns on the reader is the loss of an important figure for the city and its people. Wading further into this bleak opening, it's uncertain whether Lunarka has been abducted, killed, or both. Later, it appears that for the inhabitants of Lunari – the city made of salt – this plot point does not indicate a loss or lamentation, but an awakening for the search of Lunarka which deepens over the course of the novel's 16 chapters. It also feels like the incident of the disappearance of Lunarka, who is one of the founders of Lunari, exposed the inhabitants to the outer world while the novel also gives an impression of a travelogue as the search for Lunarka makes them visit other places. This is curiously akin to the world of the Dastan, where one's search takes them as far as the moon, and as close as their own heart.

Therefore, every chapter begins with a small note from the writer note that might be understood as a glimpse of his heart, or a window to the author's soul while he penned down the novel. The reader is likely to find this a unique way of commencing a new chapter. The novel was first published three years ago in its native Saraiki language, and later it was translated by Munawar Akash into Urdu in January of 2022, with the second edition out in December, 2022. The translator shared in the Epilogue that the novel is not a translation only, but it is a novel written in Urdu with the help of the author. It seems that the novel is a surrealistic collage of a civilisation that emerges from the element of salt, and they are involved in the trade of salt lamps, mirrors, and clouds. Most of the objects are made of these 3-4 elements in the whole city. It also appears that Mr. Abbas's way of writing is visual in its approach as he draws incidents in such a way that the reader experiences the incidents as if they are taking place before their own eyes or being played on a curtain. The expression is evident in his poetic imagination which is reflected in his prose. For

example, one of the characters called Darsha – who is in love with giving life to birds, animals, and trees – creates a tree. The tree was shaped by Preet, Love, forming many leaves like the shape of hearts and these hearts vacillated on the branches of the tree. It was a Peepal tree by natural injunction, and a sacred fig by the order of human civilisation. Therefore, a tree takes on multiple meanings, while its multiple branches evoke both the natural and the artificial, the secular and the spiritual, the human and the Godly. This way, the novel also has all the elements of magical realism as the people of Lunari are free of death and the writer beautifully describes:

اس موت سے مبرا شہر میں لوگ جنم لیتے اور سماتے چلے گئے

The residents of Lunari sell clouds – they bind them and load them on Gargada, i.e. an old chariot, and they also use these clouds to make objects such as chairs. The journey of the city of Dastan is a world of magical reality. The journey of moon-land on the Gargada is also an excellent example of magical reality not only on the moon but visits of other stars and planets. The novel also seems to take place in a magical parallel world called the Dastan – a city of mirrors, moon-land, and the author's present world.

Meanwhile, the city of Lunari is a city of liveliness where you can find all the people engaged in creative pursuits of visual as well as performing art. You will find every local involved in some kind of creative activity related to painting, sculpting, calligraphy, poetry, and acting in theatre. The novel is also an admirable example of Art for Life's Sake, as whatever they create is meant to live on and express itself freely. The Lunaris are inclined towards creative inventions like page and play opposing to weapons and war. The inhabitants of Lunari are not hunters of birds or animals, but they give them life. For instance, Darsha, son of Lunarka creates birds and animals not to domesticate or cage but to let them be free, express themselves fully. For Darsha, this is him performing his life fully, by transforming his art into life and vice versa.

Likewise, Performing Art seems like the centre of the whole novel – the Theatre is at the core of Lunari both symbolically as well as literally. The theatre is where every street of Lunari leads to. Natak Ghar is a place that can be called an assembly where all the problems are brought to, these issues are discussed and resolved there. Theatre is also presented as Art for life's sake as it is proposed as a way of conflict resolution in the novel.

The beauty of Lunari in its way of living that is godless, warless and deathless. The outer world is battling for control over the others by snatching others' identity and culture. The novel also discusses this when colonisers tried to occupy Lunari. The author declaimed that the colonisers' (Arab and British) terms and conditions are similar in their objective of control and conquer. The diplomacies and times are different, but the objective of the coloniser remains constant. The terms and conditions also reflect that the colonisers also brought deadly weapons into the city as their final solution. The Arab coloniser broke in through religion, and it ended up with weapons and war. The tools changed but the objective remained the same. Similarly, the British coloniser came and brought forceful development that also brought weapons, war, and divisions to India. Lunari is a world within a world that curates reference points for the modern man who is living along with weapons and wars in the contemporary world. On the other hand, the city of Lunari where no weapon is produced, there is no war, there is no death.

Another interesting thing that the reader might notice is what we have been facing in the post-colony – the local has begun to see himself as dumb, illiterate, and unintelligent. On the other hand, the Lunaris are proud of their indigeneity and it is reflected through their ownership of names as indigenous and unique. Lunaris' names of months and days are based on the names of local people, local flora, and fauna. They are not embarrassed, nor do they come under pressure when someone from the outer world interacts with them. They are welcoming and confident and they are not blind to the fact of modernisation or globalisation. This is served by the example of young people like Chandarjaya, a poet who is adept in many languages. The novel is a superb example of the love of and for locality. Furthermore, the invention of the first Sun dial clock is evidence of the Lunaris' scientific thinking. Mr. Abbas is artistically focused on the learning activities of the Lunaris, for instance, they are involved in learning through classical texts like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagwat Geeta, Chhana Shastra, Yoga Sutras, Ashtadyayi and Natyashastra. They have a collective way of reading these texts and after reading the texts, they analyse it through dialogic pedagogy while creating art forms of theatre through these texts. An understanding that develops through this practice of curating a theatrical presentation is sharing the knowledge with each inhabitant of Lunari. The beauty of these presentations is that they are presented through the local idiom of Lunari so the viewers have a conceptual understanding of knowledge. Along with

this art, they were also developing philosophical, linguistic, political, mathematical, and scientific understanding as all the texts they consulted exposed them to whole worlds of knowledge. Even the dominant art form in the novel, theatre, is also a vivid example of dialogical pedagogy that the locals have adopted for learning about concepts coming out of Lunari.

There are two elements that are significant throughout the novel, one is Namak (salt) and the other is Natak (theatre). It seems to me that Salt signifies indigeneity, local-hood, and its importance as a foundational ingredient in each recipe. On the other hand, theatre signifies the importance of art for social and communal growth as peaceful action. It's emphasised that the Natak is a way of resolving conflicts. The author proposes that the world is safer in the hands of artists than soldiers. The novel concludes through a contestation of theatre as a primeval artform, one that supersedes weapons brought on by British to Lunari. Therefore, the novel's theatrical event plays out like a grand festival hosted by Lunari, espousing a message of peaceful conflict resolution through art. This clash of plays is indeed a crowning achievement. Both actors within this event presented plays that might be understood as a reflection of the natives' and the colonisers' conflicting philosophies of life through the plays. For instance, the British coloniser's renditions are louder, domineering, and controlling as evidenced by their use of the trumpet, and later through a noise of train that they proposed as "development." On the other hand, the Lunaris' plays are weaved through the fabric of nature like glowing lotus flowers, chirping blue birds, and flowing water streams. I believe the novel "Namak ka Jeewan Ghar" having local authenticity has the potential to gain global attention due to its originality and use of art forms as the emissaries of peace. As the author beautifully sums it up:

جنگ میں مرنے والا ہمیشہ کے لئے مر جاتا ہے لیکن ناک میں مرنے والا دوبارہ جی اٹھتا ہے۔ وہ اپنے گھر لوٹ سکتا ہے۔ محبوبہ سے بار دگر مل سکتا ہے۔ کبوتروں کو دانہ ڈال سکتا ہے۔ کشتی کو روغن کر سکتا ہے۔

The author is a photographer and visual/performing artist – and his works may be accessed at <https://visura.co/waqasmanzoor/about>.