

The Madman in the Garden

Or, Achmat Dangor's Search for the Common Literary Origins of the Distinct Muslim Communities of South Africa in Kafka's Curse (1997)

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We spring our heroes on you when you least expect it, conjure them up from dusty townships, make them walk across shark-infested waters, bring them old and wizened to your doorstep in order to defeat you with their wisdom.¹



The title of this chapter is a reference to one of the verses in *Leyla and Mejnun* and a follow-up on the concluding lines of *Regarding Muslims* (2014). In fact, it is precisely in the concluding lines of *Regarding Muslims* that Gabeba Baderoom affirms that South Africa “allows us to consider the ways in which Islam, slavery, sexuality and race are imbricated, as well as the place of Muslims as a minority in a secular democracy.”² In other words, in *Regarding Muslims*, Baderoom analyzes how Islam can be rendered ordinary and, at the same time, be made exotic in a number of cultural manifestations of the South African nation. To complement Baderoom’s research, I first refer to Fuzuli, the great Muslim poet of the Orient and the author of *Leyla and Mejnun*. I then analyze *Kafka's Curse*, written in the late-twentieth century by the South African author Achmat Dangor. To conclude, I link *Leyla and Mejnun* to *Kafka's Curse* because these two narratives use a genuinely Eastern tale that moves away from the picturesque and that approaches true Islamic tradition as a way to describe nations and captivate audiences:

As jewels are gathered throughout the land
And, one by one, into pearls are wrought,

¹ Achmat Dangor, *Kafka's Curse* (New York: Vintage, 2000): 22.

² Gabeba Baderoom, *Regarding Muslims* (Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2014): 160.

So let the words of the Gardener fall
From the Garden of Speech in a tale to enthrall.³

Fuzuli's famous work, written in 1536 in the Muslim regions of the Indian Ocean, is the story of a man maddened by love for a woman who represents all that he desires but who is also, de facto, unattainable for him. The problem with Fuzuli's madman is that his beloved cannot be read as a real person but only as an abstract rendering of his religious ideals. Beyond this, the problem with Fuzuli's madman is that idealizations are often unreachable for human beings as well as for the social groups they represent. In *Leyla and Mejnun*, in other words, Fuzuli describes the love of a Muslim man for—and his pilgrimage toward—a woman who represents sixteenth-century Islam in the Orient. Interesting for us here is that, by doing so, Fuzuli is also constructing the story with which Dangor explores the conditions of the Muslims of South Africa four hundred years later.

The structure of my essay is thus: I commence by dealing with Fuzuli's long poem as part of the shared roots of the distinct Islamic communities of South Africa. Secondly, I argue that Dangor's novel can read as a postcolonial 'reply' to Fuzuli's narrative; thirdly, I maintain that Dangor's version of Mejnun's love for Leyla unifies the distinct Muslim groups of the South Africa of the 1990s. Further, I argue that the shared 'Muslim space' that Dangor re-creates in *Kafka's Curse* enriches the literature of the South African nation at large.

My idea is that the distinct Islamic communities of South Africa can recognize—and identify with—Dangor's version of *Leyla and Mejnun* because they have all inherited this tale from their ancestors: as Dangor writes "what are the real origins of the legend?" Dangor's answer is simultaneously vague and clear: Mejnun's legend, which Dangor defines in psychological terms as "a coping mechanism," may have originated after "a trivial incident, sentimentalised and exaggerated to heroic proportions by slaves from India or Java or Malaysia." Yet—Dangor suggests—this legend could also be African, for this continent "is fecund [...] with the kind of foliage which gives birth to the secret lives that are the [...] substance of magical parable."⁴ Other passages in *Kafka's Curse*, however, offer other explanations of the genesis of Mejnun's tale: "*In Arabia, I think—where else would he set his beginnings?*"⁵ Dangor's imprecise guesses point to the fact that his version of Fuzuli's romance belongs to none

3 Fuzuli, *Leyla and Mejnun*, tr. Sofi Huri, intro. & notes Alessio Bombaci (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970): 151.

4 Dangor, *Kafka's Curse* (New York: Vintage, 2000): 30.

5 Dangor, *Kafka's Curse* (New York: Vintage, 2000): 22; emphasis in the original.