

Experiencing the past through archaeological fiction: a novel on Mohenjodaro by Ali Baba

Sirat Gohar¹ | Ifqut Shaheen*²

1. National Institute of Folk and Traditional Heritage (Lok Virsa), Islamabad, Pakistan.

2. Department of Archaeology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

*Corresponding Author Emails: ifqut.arch@pu.edu.pk | ifqatmahr@gmail.com

Abstract

This study focuses on the book entitled “Mohan Jo Daro”, a fictional account (Novel) of the Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization. In Sindhi literature, the novel titled “Mohan Jo Daro” is a literary work representing the ancient Sindhi culture and civilisation. It has been playing a key role in understanding and experiencing the past of Sindh. The Novel was written by a famous Sindhi novelist and short-story writer, Ali Muhammad, popularly known as Ali Baba. It is one of the reasons for the popularity of the Mohenjodaro and Ali Baba among Sindhi-speaking audiences. Being an archaeology fiction book, the Novel plays a key role in making the people experience the past of Sindh (through Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization) in a stylised way. In this research, the Novel has been studied in the framework of science (archaeology) popularisation and “experiencing the past”. The study explores, identifies and brings out the information included in the Novel about Mohenjodaro. The aesthetic context of Ali Baba’s Novel has also been highlighted in this research.

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1. Introduction

[Transl.] And, the way I wanted to write this novel due to unpleasant circumstances, maybe, I could not make justice with it. As I had been writing this novel for myself since primary school days, merely for personal satisfaction, whether the writers and readers would like it or not, for this I am not worried at all (Baba, 2008, p. 10).

The ancient city of Mohenjodaro is known for its rich archaeological background in the Indus Civilisation. It has been thoroughly studied by scholars from all around the world. Ample attempts have been made to expose and publicise the scientific and traditional knowledge about Mohenjodaro. The Pakistani scholars and authors have greatly participated in this field and in this regard, however, negligible literature has been produced by historians and archaeologists in Sindhi, Urdu and other vernaculars on the archaeology of Mohenjodaro (the authors of this paper are working on the vernacularisation and popularisation of archaeology in Pakistan). The literature written on the archaeology and history of Mohenjodaro is very popular among Pakistani people.

In this article, the authors have discussed Ali Muhammad aka Ali Baba's novel *Mohan Jo Daro (Part-I)* in the framework of archaeology (science) popularization, and they have also viewed it from the post-processualist point of view. The Sindhi novel, *Mohan Jo Daro*, gives a sense of the past life and environment of the Indus valley. It is about the journey of a nobleman on the bull on a path that begins from Harappa in the valley of five rivers and ends up at Mohenjodaro. It covers the protohistoric and early Vedic periods. Actually, the novel is the representation of the culture of Sindh and the author's own perceptions and interpretations of Indus/Harappan material culture in the light of present Sindhi culture are interesting, something that can excite the readers. The aim of this study is to underline the role of archaeological fiction in experiencing the past. In this article, the authors have argued that the novel is an alternative way of experiencing and making sense of the past, giving an example of a Sindhi novel: *Mohan Jo Daro*.

This article is organized into different parts: headings and subheadings. It first gives an overview of the study and a description of relevant archaeological publications and presents the theoretical framework. Then it discusses the research methodology which is followed by the study of the novel and a discussion on the subject, and lastly the conclusion.

2. Literature review

The representation of heritage or archaeological material is very common in popular literature. The literary genre that can best define such works is archaeology fiction (the authors use it in place of science fiction), detective stories and historical novels. Indiana Jones is one example of an archaeological thriller. Apart from detective stories, archaeological novels have been

written especially for non-archaeologists as a popular – “anything goes” – way of knowing the past. For the archaeological and historical novels, two famous are Michael Redhills’s novel *Consolation*, written on Toronto (Vesala, 2018) and Maha Khan Philips’ *The Curse of Mohenjodaro*. The latter is called by Asma Mansoor (2018) the fantasy fiction that “offers ways of rereading a city’s spatial contours in terms of its material constituents and their movement through time”.

In South Asia, culture and archaeology are often presented through fiction to experience the past – “post-processualists often emphasize the significance of alternative approaches to knowing the past, they welcome them as something to be taken seriously” (Marila, 2011, p. 41).¹ There are some famous novels concerning South Asian history and archaeology, e.g. *Kim* (1902) by Rudyard Kipling,² *The Sacred Sword* (2017) by Hindol Senugupta,³ *Delhi* (1990) by Khushwant Singh⁴ and *Mussafir* (1993) by Shaikh Abdul Razaq “Raaz”.⁵

3. “Experiencing the past” – archaeological fiction

In Sindhi literature, archaeology and heritage are distinctively depicted and represented by employing different literary genres. Amongst them, archaeology novel is one such important form in which writers have endeavoured to reach the public. This paper highlights the importance of the novel as an alternative way of experiencing and making sense of the past in “metaphorical terms”. To Shanks (1992) and Holtorf (2005; 2007) (as cited in Marila, 2011) metaphorical notions for “doing archaeology” and “experiencing the past ... include such notions as the *detective* (clues, puzzles, mystery), *the law court* (rules, logic, reason), *adventure* (exotic places, danger, romance), *tourism* (escapism), *discovery*, and *excavation* (finding, roots, truth, layers, Freud’s psychoanalysis as excavation, striptease).” It is argued that, along with tourism, theatre and time travel, popular literature is also an alternative way of experiencing the past.

This work fits to be seen in the framework of archaeology popularization; although we do not know if the author was conscious of this or not. ‘Popularization is to be defined as the process and activity of disseminating scientific knowledge to the non-specialists and lay men and women in their own languages’ (Khan & Shaheen, 2015). The knowledge and information about the historical events and activities have been disseminated and transformed in many ways. The folklore, books, novels, exhibitions, languages, media, institutions, and writings all are the means of popularisation. Therefore, this activity can be seen throughout the study of the history of Indo-Pakistani archaeology (Gohar, 2017). The primary purpose behind the popularising archaeology among lay people has been to make them aware of the importance of the remains of the past to bridge the gap between people and heritage, sometimes to create national or local history narratives (Gohar, 2017, p. 34-59). The idea of popularising heritage is central to public archaeology or Culture Resource Management (CRM). As, Holtorf (as cited in Marila, 2011, p. 48) argues that “archaeological material is valued because it is protected, not because it is valuable”.

4. Research methodology

This study highlights the importance of an archaeological novel titled “Mohan Jo Daro” in experiencing past of the Indus valley, with a focus on Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization. The novel is one of the reasons for the popularity of Mohenjodaro site among Sindhis. So far, three editions of the novel *Mohan Jo Daro (Part-I)* have been published by Roshni Publications, Kandiaro. Whereas in 2017, almost a year after Ali Baba’s death, Sindh Archives, Government of Sindh reprinted the novel which contains two parts. However, doubts have been expressed about this edition of the novel, which is published by Sindh Archives, as Ali Baba himself in his last interview on a question about the second part of the novel replied that ‘I tried but could not complete it because no one was supporting me, not a single person from Sindhi literati ... I was locked, historical background of Mohenjodaro made me exhausted’ (Solangi & Lashari, 2017).

In another interview, on a question about the incompleteness of the novel, he said, ‘he did not make it due to livelihood and search for subsistence. Also, television drama [writing] made him tired. About what one should write more?’ (Samejo, 2016, p. 16). Therefore, for this study, it is decided to focus on the novel’s third edition which was published by Roshni Publications in the year 2008. The novel was studied and reviewed so as to understand the story and the information given in it. Through a careful analysis of the text, archaeological themes and ideas has been underlined to determine what archaeological information is provided in the novel and how the author has reinterpreted and represented archaeology.

5. Ali Baba and his novel “Mohan Jo Daro”

5.1. Ali Baba

Ali Baba is one of the modern Sindhi authors.⁶ He wrote many short stories that were published in Sindhi newspapers, magazines and literary journals, for instance, *Pinjry Ja Pakhi* (Birds of Cage), *Dhubbin* (Hardship), *Na Ta Saan Halan Seer-a Me* (Why not accompany to enter deep water), *Zindagi* (Life), *Mujasimo* (Sculpture) and many more (for the names of his books see Baba, 2017, p. 160). Ali Baba was born in 1940 and he passed away in 2016. His father died when Ali Baba was a child and he had to live with his paternal uncle. In his school days, he read many books owing to his proximity to his maternal uncle, the then headmaster of High School Kotri. He regularly used the library of school. In an interview, Ali Baba, while talking about his childhood and primary school days, said that ‘he was a very intelligent and brilliant student; he always got the first position in English’ (Solangi & Lashari, 2017).

He read English and Sindhi books including Sidhartha, Dharti Maata, Good Earth, Old Man and the Sea, Outsider and War and Peace. In the foreword of the novel, he (2008, p. 6) writes, ‘at that time there were no books of the Urdu language in the libraries of Sindh, only English and Sindhi literature was preferred for reading’.⁷ Other books he read included Dragon Book

of Verse, Tales from Shakespeare and Verses of Shah Abdul Latif (Shah Jo Risalo). He further states that he started thinking and writing on *Mohan Jo Daro (Novel)* at the age of 11 or 12 years. ‘At that time,’ he said in an interview, ‘he did not know how to write a novel, but he was aware of short-story’ (Solangi & Lashari, 2017).⁸ Then, how the author started the *Mohan Jo Daro* novel at the first stage? As a short story, one can say without any doubt, and afterward, it ended up as a novel.

For the belated completion of the novel, Ali Baba has referred to his working on some assignments of writing dramas and stories for Radio Pakistan, and that work was assigned to him by Shamsheerul Haidri (famous Sindhi writer and publisher of that time) and Abdul Karim Baloch (Baba, 2008, pp. 5-10; 2017, pp. 9-13). Apart from this, it is also intriguing to know that Ali Baba was offered a job at The University of Sindh, Jamshoro, by Shaikh Ayaz, the then Vice Chancellor of the university and the most revered poet of Sindh after Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai. On a question about this offer, Ali Baba talked about his personal problem. He said, ‘Yes, Shaikh Ayaz offered me a job and said that if I like I can write the *Mohan Jo Daro* novel in the university and the university will provide me with a house and salary. Ayaz was so kind, but I could not make myself ready for that’ (Samejo, 2016, p. 16).

5.2. Publication of the Novel

For the first time, eight chapters of the novel were published in *Rooh-a Rihaan* magazine, Hyderabad. After the ban on the magazine by the government, the novel again started to appear in series in the *Nai Zindagi* magazine from Hyderabad. Meanwhile, while traveling the author’s bag was stolen which contained some parts of that novel, so he lost some of the most important parts of his creation. In 1985, for the first time, after 16 years of its publication in *Nai Zindagi*, the first part of the novel was published in a book form by the New Fields Publications, Hyderabad. In the last years of the 1980s, an unknown publisher also printed out the novel without the author’s permission. It was full of errors and for that Ali Baba may not be held responsible (Baba, 2008, p. 10). Apart from the New Field Publications, the novel was also published by the Roshni Publication and Sindh Archives, Government of Sindh. Roshni Publication has published three editions of the novel’s first part, whereas the Sindh Archives has brought out two editions of the novel which has been considered complete as it contains the two parts of the novel.

5.3. Overview of the Novel

The *Mohan Jo Daro* novel is written in Sindhi – the official language of the Sindh province of Pakistan. Sindhi is also common in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan states of India. The details of the novel are given below.

Title: Mohan Jo Daro (Novel) (Part-I)
Author: Ali Baba

Composer: Shafique Hussain Kolachi
Publisher: Roshni Publication, Kandiaro
Edition: Third
Year: 2008
Book number: 446
Pages: 131
Price: Rs.120

The content of the novel is divided into eleven parts; three asterisks in the centre of the line separate the various parts. Each part provides the plots and scenes through which the reader experience and explores the ancient city of Mohenjodaro. The novel starts on page number eleven, after the author's note. The author defines the plot of the story in the first part:

[Transl.] Long before, thousands of years ago, when gods held sway over the earth, when sun, moon, fire, water, snakes, plants and figures were worshiped, when the world was a miserable jungle, when human beings were animals. That was a strange time. In that time, there was light, there was darkness. In that time, there was laughter [happiness], there was sadness. There were uncountable gods, there was no god . . . this is the story of that time. (Baba, 2008, p. 11)

It is the story of the travel of *Atam Taara Sambara*⁹ (hero) – great priest of *Tamo Nagar* (Harappa) – to his birthplace *Sonmiani* (Mohenjodaro). He left *Tamo Nagar* to inform his father, the king of *Sonmiani*, that *Devdasa*, the king of *Tamo Nagar*, has allowed Aryans to settle along the Jhelum and Ravi rivers. Because the mother of *Devdasa* is Aryan and she is a worshiper of *Agni* and *Indira*, Aryans' gods or goddesses. On the way to *Sonmiani*, he stayed one night in a village called *Wahoondi Basti* where he fell in love with *Shiva Deji*, daughter of *Mukhi Bhandari* (great businessman). Their love story is full of emotions, sophisticatedly expressed through dance, songs, and dialogues. The first two parts of the novel have scenes of two nights and one day. The third part is about *Atam's* arrival at *Sonmiani*. After one day and two nights, he finally reached there. Everyone in the city was happy to see him. But, his parents, king and queen, and brother were skeptical about *Atam's* sudden visit. In the assembly, the king said to *Atam*, 'what brings you here?' 'King *Devdasa* is supporting Aryans and he allowed them to occupy the lands along Jhelum and Ravi rivers,' he replied.

The author has shown Aryans as barbarians, the enemies of the people of the Indus Valley, and the king of *Tamo Nagar* as a traitor. It was decided in the meeting to stop Aryans' intrusions and to outcast *Tamo Nagar* from the *Sonmiani* kingdom. The author depicts in the fourth part the worship of *Dharti Mata* (the mother goddess or goddess of earth) and a play on the war between Aryans and Dravidians as a part of the ritual. At the same time, preparation for *Atam* and *Shiva Deji's* wedding. Invitations were sent to the kings of different areas i.e., Kot Diji, *Sibi*, *Paatal Bandar* and Aror. The bride with the king of Kot Diji and guests arrived at *Sonmiani*. The fifth part of the novel is full of rituals, romance, and suspense. The warriors of

the *Sonmiani* kingdom were at the border between *Sonmiani* and *Tamo Nagar*. On the other hand, the whole city was celebrating the marriage ceremony. Wedding rituals were performed at the temple of *Dharti Mata*.¹⁰ Girls sang matrimonial songs and performed dancing acts. Moreover, it shows some glimpses of the first night of the couple. The next morning, ten boats, seven of *Tamo Nagar* and three of Aryans, carrying the ailing *Agni Devi* for medical treatment came to *Sonmiani*.

The news shocked all people. Because *Agni* is the goddess of fire and destruction, and the people of the Indus Valley worship *Dharti Mata*. The presence of *Agni* in *Sonmiani* is a bad omen and it is a sign of destruction and famine. Despite all that, *Atam* agreed to cure the disease of *Agni Devi* on one condition that Aryan will not interfere in the treatment. His act showed that the people of *Sonmiani* are peaceful. The sixth and seventh parts have the story of the treatment of *Agni* and her dream in which she destroys all the settlements of non-Aryans. She was dreaming that Jupiter has created the earth (9 continents) for Aryans, only Aryans have the right to live on earth. The eighth and ninth parts mention that *Tilak Sindhu* and his fellows stood against the treatment of *Agni* at *Sonmiani*. Everyone, including *Atam* and *Shiva Deji*, was talking about *Tilak's* brevity and intelligence. The boys were raising slogans in the streets that '*Tilak* is our leader, not *Atam*'. On the other hand, priests identified the cause of *Agni's* ailment. She had neurosis. The priests decided to give her shocks of burning coal. The last two parts are about the attacks of Aryans in the lowland country, *Sainaami*, and the arrest of king *Devdasa* of *Tamo Nagar*.

6. Discussion

In fiction, the novel is the most significant mean of production of human history, individual relations and innovative ideas of creativity to look into the past and inquiry about the present and imagine the future regarding the events, matters and phenomena of a particular place and/or universe. In 1962, Ali Baba produced a fascinating novel *Mohan Jo Daro* and presented a story of Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization, using archaeological, historical and cultural information. It is an archaeological novel based on an admixture of legends, existing ancient structures, artifacts and so on. It prompts the reader so much that they could read the novel in one go. It leads to full and live involvement through scenes and dialogues. The author has quoted some significant paragraphs, dialogues, orders and matrimonial and religious songs in a sensational way so as to make the novel more enjoyable and interesting to the readers. Furthermore, the simple and scenic presentations of beliefs, ceremonies, marriages, hospitality, interaction, family relations and friendly treatment make the novel a good read.

Ali Baba has written the story on Mohenjodaro in eleven parts, in which he has succeeded to transfer and produce the knowledge that in the past the city had been the capital of Sindh. He has plotted themes on life in ancient times and also presented concepts of ancient religions and natural phenomena. He, thereafter, created plots and attempted well in introducing the historical Sindhi characters in the novel. It is most significant to mention some of the main

characters namely *Atam Taara Sambara* (hero), *Shiva Deji* (heroine), *Sushima Deji* (mother of heroine), *Roopa* (friend of Heroine), *Raja Devdasa* (king of *Tamo Nagar*), *Aariani* (mother of *Raja Devdasa*), *Parpati*, *Indra Devi* and *Agni Devi* (goddesses), *Jan'ni Devi*, *Mahapojari* (priest), *Mukhi Bhandari* (great businessman), *Maha Mantri* (chief minister), *Ratan* (minister), *Rana* and *Tilik Sindhu* (warriors). Moreover, some historical places have also been selected by *Ali Baba* while depicting the geographical setting of Mohenjodaro. Some of the names of places include *Hariyappa or Tamo Nagar*, *Kot Diji*, *Sonmiani*, *Pooja Ghar*, *Hamala*, *Pattan*, *Meero Parbat*, *Arya Desh*, *Sindh Mulk* and *Aror*.

Archaeologically, the author has associated precious artifacts and large structures of *Kot Diji*, *Harappa*, *Mohenjodaro* and other sites of the Indus Civilization with the elites of the society. For example, the appearance of *Atam Tara Sambara* is the same as the statue of King Priest (for the features of the statue of King Priest see Mackay, 2002, pp. 64-66 and Marshall, 1931/2012, pp. 356-357); the houses of the priests where he stayed are double-story; he was served in the gold, silver and copper household objects; and the men and women of rich families wear precious ornaments and silk cloth and live a lavish life. Contrary to this, the objects made of relatively cheaper materials are shown as the property of common people who live very simple life. The author has divided the characters into two groups: the priestly class and the working class. The priestly class is shown as the ruling class. They are revered by all people. This is the less ignored idea about the political and social structure of Mohenjodaro in particular and the Indus Civilization in general. Apart from the archaeological finds, *Ali Baba* has also taken insights from the contemporary culture of Sindh.

Here, it may be pointed out that this novel has got a special status in modern Sindhi literature. It is a best-selling book and garners special importance from the business point of view. *Ali Baba's* novel's popularity is obvious from the fact that a large list of retailers and booksellers, 24 in total, were attracted to get copies of the book and subscribed successfully. On the other hand, there are hundreds of unsubscribed bookstores in cities and towns of Sindh where *Ali Baba's* novel is available.

7. Conclusion

The local (traditional) knowledge about Mohenjodaro is one of the means through which one can establish new ideas about its mysterious status. The Sindhi literature has been playing an important role in understanding the ancient society of Sindh and in experiencing its past. Special mention must be made of *Ali Baba's* novel *Mohan Jo Daro*, which has got a name and fame as a classic. It represents the ancient history and culture and the social norms of ancient people that had been considered the elements of urban society. *Ali Baba's* novel has got a central place in the history of Sindhi literature. It has become the most significant and even popular means of transformation of the knowledge about Mohenjodaro in Sindhi. And the novel's role and importance have been appraised by national and international readers and critics in recent days.

Overall, the novel is a masterpiece and classic in its name, knowledge, content, format and style. The given knowledge, themes, scenes, names, places and articles reveal that author has created a tremendous novel about the history of Mohenjodaro. He has been successful in presenting and popularizing the socio-cultural and political life of Mohenjodaro and the ancient Sindhi society in the Sindhi language. Hence, the novel is a classic in Sindh literature in which the author seemed fully conversant in the facts and figures and information about the places. Ali Baba's novel is very important and helpful to experience and make a sense of the past of Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization. Therefore, keeping in view its importance, it is suggested that it should be translated into other local and foreign languages. Also, the elites and intellectuals should discuss and open dialogue on Ali Baba's innovative work on the life of the ancient Indus people.

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ORCID iD

1. Sirat Gohar <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2555-8724>
2. Ifqut Shaheen <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1891-1377>

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Notes:

¹ “Postprocessual archaeologies emphasize the role of the individual above all, and it (as an aggregate of archaeologies) became the archaeology of the individual level where the material culture is only used as an instrument rather than being studied as an essential element of social mediation. Postprocessual archaeology is a truly postmodern phenomenon as it emphasizes the subjective nature of knowing the truth about the past. That is one reason material culture was left out of the account and not given enough consideration. Postprocessual archaeology takes the notion of the past being only a part of the present too literally. According to this maxim of postprocessual archaeology past meanings can never be reached, and since no real past exists, the material culture should not be studied with the motive of finding objective meanings” (Marila, 2011, p. 53).

² “Kim is the story of Irish orphan Kimball O’Hara’s adventures throughout India with an old lama (a guru) from Tibet” (Kipling, 1901, p. 1).

³ The Sacred Sword is the story of Guru Gobind Singh, the last Guru of Sikhs.

⁴ “The novel records the major historical events that have endowed Delhi with a glorious past, a mystic and an aura in the annals of history over a period of six hundred years. The chapters of the novel contain the vibrant picturization of history dating from the Mughal period of Zahiruddin Babar till the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The novel sometimes appears to be a fine travelogue when Khushwant Singh presents impressive pen pictures of roads, lanes and historical places of Delhi in its real names, forms and features” (Jayshankar, 2009).

⁵ It is historical-cum-archaeological novel written in Sindhi language that presents the history of Sindh from Islamic point of view.

⁶ For the life and works of Ali Baba see Samejo, I. (Ed.). (2016). Sarangaa (Ali Baba number). Hyderabad, Sindh: Sindh Literary and Cultural Society.

⁷ In all editions of the novel the foreword is same.

⁸ From this statement, an inference can be made that at the first stage the author might be thinking of writing a short-story and then changed it into a novel.

⁹ Sambara is a clan of the Dravidians (see footnote 1 in Baba, 2008, p. 12).

¹⁰ The wedding rituals depicted in novel are not much different from contemporary Sindhi marriage traditions. For example, drinking milk, eating sweets, cord fastening, head connections and so on.