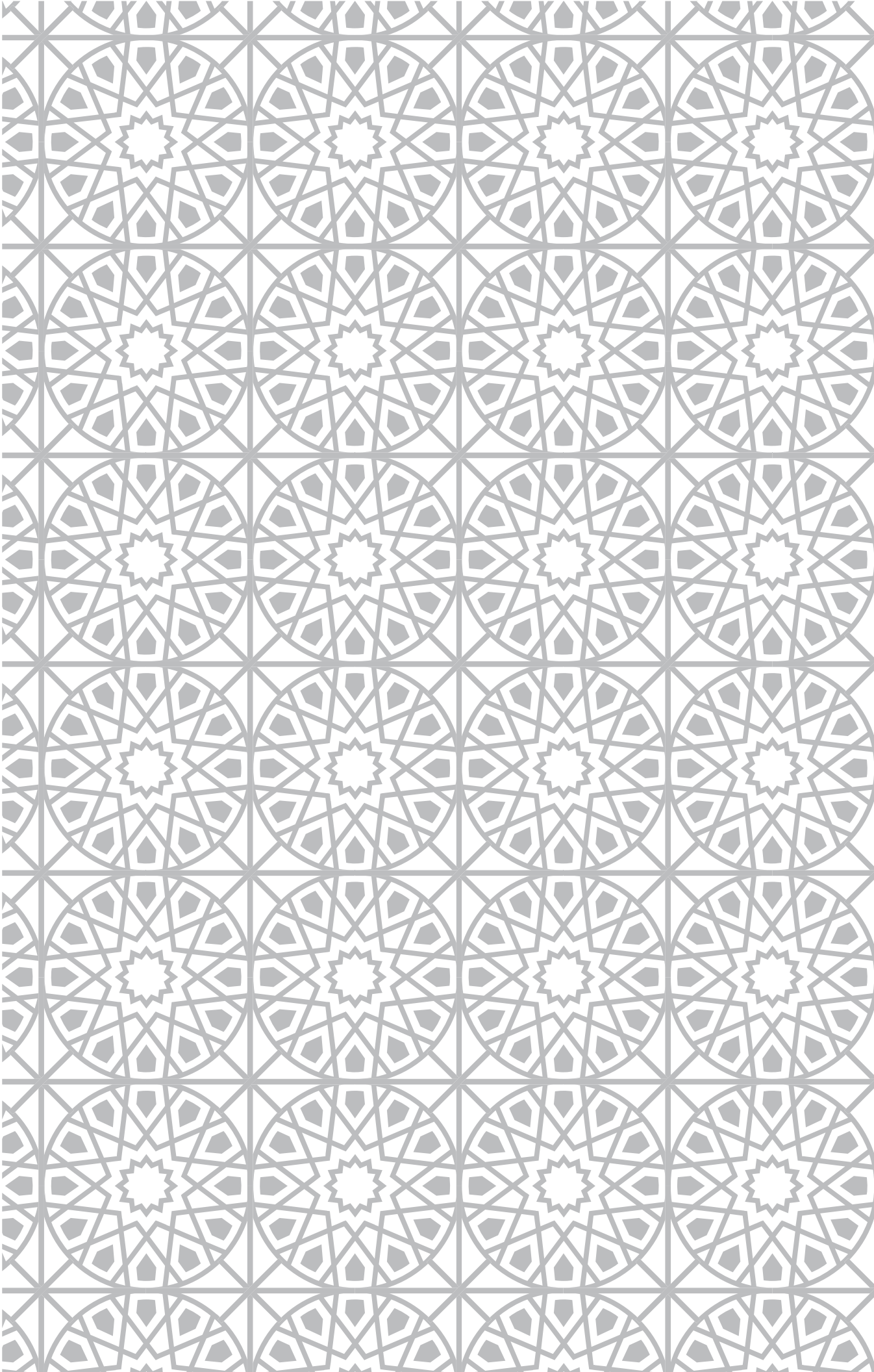
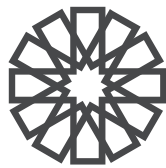


The LOST
FRAGRANCE
of INFINITY





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M O I N M I R



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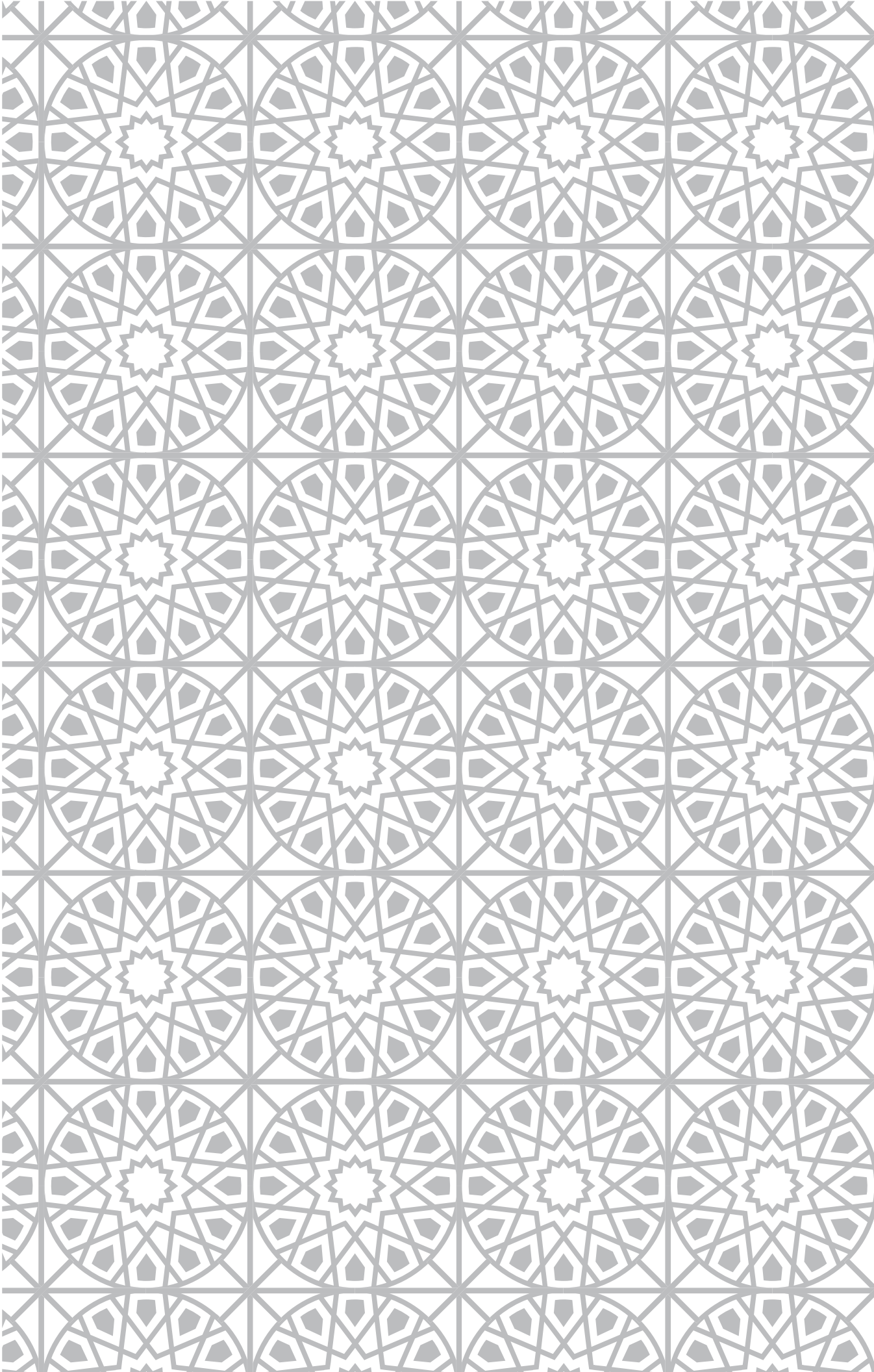
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FOR LEONIE







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DRAMATIS PERSONAE AND HISTORICAL REFERENCES



MAIN HISTORICAL CHARACTERS

Muhammad Shah Rangeela: Mughal Emperor of Hindustan (r.1719–1748). A connoisseur and patron of the arts, he ruled a weakening empire, but one which had the wealthiest treasury in the world.

Nadir Shah: King of Persia (r.1736–1747). A ruthless military genius who waged war with the Mughals and the Ottomans. He had a chilling reputation for enjoying cruelty.

Sauda: (1713–1781). One of the most dazzling Urdu poets in eighteenth-century Hindustan.

Dard: (1721–1785). Considered a poet given to Sufi mysticism, Dard, which means pain, wrote verses steeped in spirituality.

Mir Taqi Mir: (1722–1810). Arguably the greatest Urdu poet ever.

Grand Vazier Nizam Asaf Jah: (1671–1748). The ‘Prime Minister’ to Emperor Muhammad Shah Rangeela.

Saadat Khan: (1680–1739). The Subedar of Awadh who fought on the side of the Mughals and against Nadir Shah at the battle of Karnal.

Khan Dowran: (d.1739). Mughal statesman and General who fought against Nadir Shah at the battle of Karnal.

Sayyid Niaz Khan: (d.1739). Mughal aristocrat who led the resistance in Delhi against Nadir Shah’s Afsharid soldiers.

Khan of Bokhara: A ruler in Central Asia who was eventually subjugated by Nadir Shah.

Khan of Khiva: Like the Khan of Bokhara, this Khan – after brief resistance – was defeated by Nadir Shah at the end of 1740.

Mahmud I: Sultan of the Ottoman Empire (r.1730–1754). He felt deep sorrow for the Ottoman losses of Vienna, Buda and Belgrade.

Ferdinand VI: King of Spain (r.1746–1759). Also known as ‘The Learned’ and ‘The Just’.

MAIN FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

Qaraar Ali: The craftsman from Delhi with a cherished lineage of being among the chosen artisans at the Mughal Court for generations. Inclined towards Sufism, Qaraar Ali is not a practising Sufi.

Faiz Ali: Qaraar’s father.

Zainab Begum: Mother to Qaraar.

Abeerah Khan: A Mughal beauty and Qaraar’s lover.

Shahbaz Khan: Abeerah’s father and a general in the Mughal army.

Askari Begum: Shahbaz Khan’s sister and Abeerah’s aunt.

Natiya: Abeerah’s personal maid.

Janbaz Bakht: A leading figure in the Mughal army and the one who wants to possess Abeerah.

Hari Das: Qaraar’s dearest friend.

Shah Rezaan: The Sufi from Isfahan.

Aalf Olsson: The slave trader of Viking descent.

Hova: An Armenian woman who becomes one of Qaraar’s closest friends.

Izzet: The acrobat.

Hikmet: Izzet’s brother, who is also an acrobat.

Gul Khatun: The fiery Ottoman princess.

Saad: The drummer.

Juan: The simple village farmer of Andalusia, Spain.

Catalina: The village beauty and Juan’s daughter.

Almudena: Juan’s wife and Catalina’s mother.

MAIN HISTORICAL EVENTS

1492: Fall of Granada, the last stronghold of the Moors in Andalusia, Southern Spain, to Isabella and Ferdinand of Castile and Aragon.

1492: Christopher Columbus's expedition headed towards India and China ends up with the discovery of the New World.

1609–1614: Expulsion of the Moors from Spain.

1659: Assassination of Dara Shikoh, the Sufi Crown Prince of Hindustan.

1666: Death of Shah Abbas II, Safavid King of Persia.

1683: Ottoman defeat at the walls of Vienna.

1728: Last recorded persecution of a Moor in Spain.

1739: Battle of Karnal, 110 miles from Delhi; the Mughals against the invading Nadir Shah.

1739: Local resistance in Delhi against Nadir's Afsharid soldiers.

1739: Massacre of Delhi's inhabitants by Nadir's Afsharid soldiers.

1740: Nadir Shah's attack on the Khans of Central Asia.

1746: Treaty of Kerden, signed between the Ottomans and Nadir Shah.

1746: King Ferdinand VI of Spain ascends the Spanish throne.

FICTIONAL BUILDINGS

Hunar-Abaad: Qaraar's ancestral house in Ballimaran, Shahjahanabad, Delhi.

Basalat-Gah: Abeerah's ancestral house next to the Red Fort, Shahjahanabad, Delhi.

Husn-e-Jahaan: 'The beauty of the world' – the Pavilion in the mango orchard.

Gazebo: The wooden refuge near Zahara de la Sierra, Andalusia, Spain.



INTRODUCTION



In the latter half of the seventeenth century, a lost battle and two deaths would be the three events that signalled the beginning of the end of three great empires that spanned from Budapest in Europe to Bengal in India. Over time, not only would their territories shrink, but the radiance of their cultural realms would diminish in lustre. The Ottoman defeat at the gates of Vienna in 1683, the death of Shah Abbas II, the Safavid king of Persia, in 1666 and the assassination of Dara Shikoh, the crown prince of Mughal India, in 1659 would sow the seeds for declining Sufi influence in the intellectual theatres of these empires. Sufism represented the inward, esoteric and mystical side of Islam.¹ The philosophy of self-examination, compassion and immersion in 'Divine Love' made the Sufi, curious, scientifically innovative and spiritually magnetic. The khanqaahs of the Sufis were bastions of knowledge where the study of philosophy, mathematics, mysticism, art, craft and science flourished. In these khanqaahs young Sufis were guided by their murshids about their role in this world, worship of the Divine and the concept of Khidmat-e-Khalq – The selfless service to mankind.

For years, I strived to find a way of demonstrating the importance of Sufism and its voice that stands lost today. An entirely academic body of work would not reach out to the vast audiences that have an interest in Sufism. I did not want this book to be a study of the different orders or *tariqas* of Sufism, but I wanted to write about

the fertility of the Sufi mind that permeates across all *tariqas*. How does one communicate the multi-splendored spiritual love (*Ishq*) that Zulekha had for Yusuf that was so brilliantly captured by the fifteenth-century artist Kamaleddin Behzad in his miniature painting? Or the philosophy of Ibn Sina and Rumi's compassion for mankind? Or for that matter, how does one write about Omar Khayyam's mind in which mathematics and mysticism mingled seamlessly? Questions like these kept me awake at night. In order to show the effulgence of the Sufi mind, I came to the conclusion that the most effective way of doing this would be the building of a fictional character and telling his story against the backdrop of thoroughly researched philosophy and historical events. Occupying centre stage of my work would have to be a character that would be relatable. As a result, the character Qaraar Ali was born. Against the dust clouds of declining empires and a violent carnage led by Nadir Shah, Qaraar Ali, who is not a practising Sufi but a craftsman with an inclination towards Sufism would be forced to undertake a journey. Qaraar would become a travelling prism through which a fading cultural realm could be witnessed. His own story of passionate love, violent losses, wandering, creative pursuits and spiritual quest would be synonymous with the turbulent times in which he lived. Through the progression and evolution of Qaraar's human story and through his extractions and interpretations of Sufi philosophies, I have strived to show the reader the magnificence of Sufism. From the bustling bazaars of Delhi into the deathly solitude of a lost desert city in Central Asia, through Ottoman lands and across the blue Mediterranean, Qaraar's would be a life glazed in the rich colours of Sufism. But before the reader engages with the story of Qaraar Ali, I believe it is vital to gain a historical understanding of the three events that occurred in the second half of the seventeenth century which led to the alienation of the Sufi.



OTTOMANS ARE DEFEATED AT THE GATES OF VIENNA –
A PRICE FOR OVERAMBITION

On 12 September 1683, the defeated army of the Ottoman sultan, Mehmed IV, began its slow retreat from the outskirts of Vienna. Kara Mustafa, the grand vazier of the Ottoman Empire, on his mount cast a despondent look at the remains of his tent. The sumptuous designs of cypress trees on Turkish carpets that had once kissed his feet in obeisance were in shreds. Torn maps of Vienna that he had pored over, strategizing the city's siege, now flew aimlessly in the wind as if the tent itself, dismayed at the turn of events, had dismissed them from its ravaged environs. Kara Mustafa's tent was now in the hands of the princes of Baden-Baden, Habsburg and Bavarian troops and the Polish king who had united to shatter his plans of taking Vienna for Sultan Mehmed IV.²

For hours, Kara Mustafa dejectedly relived the moments with the sultan and the sultan's initial reluctance to acquiesce to the Vienna campaign. The majestic Topkapi Palace in Istanbul is where it had all brewed, particularly within the confines of the Baghdad Pavilion. The Europeans were not united, and the fall of Vienna would annihilate the Habsburg Empire. It would open the floodgates for the Ottoman armies all the way to Andalusia, Spain – the lost jewel. For Kara Mustafa, Andalusia, which the Muslim Moors had lost when Granada had fallen in 1492 to the Spanish armies driven by the fervour of the Reconquista, was now within the grasp of his sultan. But only if he first took Vienna. The scent from the olive groves and orange orchards in Andalusia still blew across the Aegean Sea and into Turkey; almost beckoning the sultan. It was a passionate argument that Kara Mustafa made. At times, bored and unconvinced, the sultan would dismiss Kara Mustafa. Then opening a window of the Baghdad Pavilion, the sultan would peer into the vistas. The glorious Bosphorus with its deep blue waters seemed an extension of the tiled mosaic surroundings of the Pavilion. Seagulls glided over its waters and then flew over the Baghdad Pavilion as the sultan's eyes followed their skyward ascent.

Finding himself alone, Sultan Mehmed IV inhaled deeply and took in the spectacular sights of his Istanbul. He admired his city and its cosmopolitan fabric. The multicultural Galata area caught his eye. Its narrow lanes were home to the Jewish quarter housing merchants and traders. A large number of Jews had chosen to migrate to Ottoman lands fearing persecution in Europe. Advised by the Sufis, the sultans had welcomed them and under the Ottomans the Jews thrived economically.

Not far from the Jewish quarter were the seventy churches of Istanbul, some restored recently on the insistence of the Sufis they represented Ottoman tolerance. Lying next to the sultan was a spyglass. Focusing south he saw the mosaic of girih tiles glistening in the sun on the Mosque of Bursa.³ Varying shapes of stars, hexagons and polygons were repeated to form a seemingly never-ending pattern of infinity symbolizing the Sufi's constant mystical quest.

Through the spyglass, the soft light blue hues of a mosque's dome dedicated to Hazrat Jalaluddin Rumi caressed the sultan's eyes. He reflected on how he had sought out their counsel regarding the Vienna campaign. Knowing well that Mevlavi Sufis did not visit court, the sultan had gone to see them in their music rooms.

Here a sultan was not the ruler. He left his titles at the door. That evening, Mehmed sat on the floor with his legs folded under him. As the lights were dimmed and only a few candles flickered, five dervishes entered the sama khana. A sweet sound of a flute then slowly filled the faintly lit music room. Besides the flute and the waves of the Bosphorus as they rushed to embrace Istanbul's shores, nothing else was heard. After a few moments an elderly Sufi recited Rumi's verse:

Hearken to this reed forlorn
Breathing ever since was torn
From its rushy bed a strain
Of impassioned love and pain
...The reed flute is fire.⁴

Rumi's restless and passionate desire for union with the parted lover, like a rising wave, engulfed everyone. Gently drawn into a trance by the sound of the flute, the dervishes began a slow whirl. As rhythm, whirl and melody merged seamlessly, the dervishes languidly lowered their arms from their chests. One arm lifted and its open palm faced skywards. The other arm was lowered and its palm faced towards the earth. The head tilted slightly. In their white flowing robes, the whirling dervishes resembled doves taking flight. But there was more to admiring beauty that evening. The sultan wanted to know about his prospects if he undertook the Vienna campaign. And so he put the question to the Sufi masters. The sultan was asked to continue watching the whirling. 'Life was all about balance,' a Sufi explained. The open palm of the whirling dervish that faced heavenwards received and the open palm facing downwards gave. The Ottoman Empire was well balanced. The Sufis advised against empire expansion. They warned the sultan not to succumb to greed. Instead, they advised him to invest in scientific innovation and wider ocean exploration.

After listening to them the sultan left their sama khana and proceeded to the khanqaahs of two other Sufi orders. They were the Bektashi order and the Seh Bedreddin order. The Bektashi order with its eclectic nature made it exceptionally liberal. This order looked acceptably on all religions, attaching importance to the esoteric and not the strict rules and rituals. It did not compel the observance of Islamic rites such as ritual prayer and fasting, allowing women to go unveiled in public and to mix socially with men.⁵ Their influence had spread all across Bulgaria and the Balkans. When they heard about the Vienna campaign, like Rumi's Mevlavi order, they advised the sultan against it. The last and final stop of that spiritual evening was at the khanqaah of the Seh Bedreddin order. Seh Bedreddin's disciple, the fifteenth-century Börklüce Mustafa had ignored differences between Muslims and Christians and had encouraged his disciples to treat Christians as 'though they were angels'.⁶ Here too, at the Seh Bedreddin

khanqaah, the sultan was advised against wild ambition.

Having reflected on that mystical evening, the sultan saw the dogged Kara Mustafa return yet again with an even more determined plan to conquer Vienna. It worked. The sultan succumbed to over ambition and gave his approval for the conquest. But disaster awaited. After months of desperate fighting at the walls of Vienna, Kara Mustafa tasted bitter defeat. The balance that the Sufis had spoken about to the sultan had been lost and the defeat at the walls of Vienna triggered the long and steady decline of the Ottoman Empire and Sufi influence.



PERSIA'S LAST INTELLECTUAL GASP

In October 1666, seventeen years before the defeat of the Ottomans at the walls of Vienna, Shah Abbas II of Persia died. Shah Abbas II had come to see himself as the custodian of the Great Persian Cultural Realm which had a magnetic quality unlike any other and at the heart of which was the imaginative Sufi mind. The Seljuks, a Turkic tribe; the Mongols; and even the Arabs at some time in history entered Persia as conquerors. But Persia with its language, music, poetry, philosophy, art and architecture would galvanize itself into Venus and transform the sword-in-hand invader into its wine-cup-bearing lover. While they would conquer Persian land, Persia conquered their hearts. The 'foreigners' would eventually adopt the Persian way of life, speak the language, understand the land's ancient history and become custodians of it rather than try and expunge it. The Great Persian Cultural Realm would sparkle in Central Asia under a branch of the Seljuks. Cities like Merv, Samarkand and Bokhara would become epicentres of learning. Merv in particular would glitter with libraries, observatories and universities, attracting thousands of students from all over the world. The Persianised Turks, became for many years the most enlightened champions of the Great Persian Cultural Realm. In

India, the Persian Cultural Realm would sparkle through the twelfth-century Delhi Sultanate right until the end of the Mughals in the mid-nineteenth century. In Anatolia it would flourish under the Seljuks of Rum. Such was the influence of the Persian language that Rumi, the thirteenth-century mystic born in Vaksh-Balkh (near the modern Afghan-Tajik borderlands, earlier also known as Khorasan), would eventually make Konya in Anatolia his home under the Seljuks but would write only in Persian. Poetry would be Persia's most glittering gift to world literature.

The first visible colours of a Persian autumn in 1666 emerged in the garden of the Chehel Souten Palace, Isfahan. Shah Abbas II was just thirty-five. He lay down on the porch slowly, resting his head on a cushion which had the Persian mythical bird, a simurgh, embroidered on it. Surrounded by forty pillars and overlooking a cobalt pool the shah witnessed how the autumn breeze's gentle nudge broke a yellow leaf from its branch and sent it into a descent to its end. He saw himself in that leaf. Shah Abbas II was ailing. Rumours had it that he had developed an incurable lump in his throat. But he craved a last dash of colour in his fast-fading life and a festival of literature and philosophy is what he had organized. For centuries the illuminated Persian Sufi mind had broken the barriers of conventional thought and had become an explorer of philosophy and science.

To the Persian intellectuals, it did not matter if the works of non-Muslims became catalysts to new discoveries. In fact, they embraced them. Inspired by Indian and Greek forays into mathematics and literature, they became innovators. Here the Persian champions were the ninth-century Al-Khwarizmi, the tenth-century astronomer Abdal Rahman Al-Sufi and the creative genius of the twelfth-century, Omar Khayyam. Al-Khwarizmi forged pathways with logarithms and algebra, all the while acknowledging his debt to the Indian mathematician Brahmgupta (598-688)⁷. Abdal Rahman Al-Sufi, who as the name suggests was from a practising Sufi family, wrote the seminal *Book of Fixed Stars* also known as *The Book of Constellations*. (The impact of Al-Sufi's work would be

felt for centuries. Inspired by him, Ulugh Beg would establish the finest observatory in fifteenth-century Samarkand and more than a thousand years later, the western world having exhausted naming planets after Roman Gods, would name a crater on the moon and a newly discovered asteroid Azophi and Alsufi, after the Persian astronomer). Omar Khayyam scaled new heights writing mystical poems in his *Rubaiyyat*, simultaneously writing his landmark work *Treatise on Demonstration of Problems of Algebra*, which was the greatest work in that field before modern times, creating new theories for modern cubic equations, computing the solar year to the eleventh decimal point: 365.24219858156 and while in Merv he set down an algebraic method of using known weight of silver and gold to determine their ratio in alloys.⁸ Besides his *Rubaiyyat*, Khayyam's strong Sufi leanings were evident when consumed by mathematics he forayed deeper within himself asking questions of 'how and where did the orderly phenomena of mathematics and geometry come from and how it corresponded with the natural world. As a result, he went onto further acknowledge the role of prophesy in one's search for certainty and the possibility of direct knowledge of God's world that Sufis seek to attain. In an astonishing summary that would shock his peers in mathematics, he urged his readers to 'tell the reasoners that for lovers of God, intuition is the guide, not discursive thought'. He made it clear that he accepted revelation and sympathized with the basic quest of the Sufi.⁹ It was this mind that Khayyam possessed that attracted other Sufis like Ayn-al Qudat-al Hamdani to study mathematics and spirituality at Merv.¹⁰

To exhibit the achievements of the Persian Sufi mind, Shah Abbas II had chosen his court poet, Saib Tabrizi to be the master of ceremonies at the festival. The first of the week-long evenings began. Saib Tabrizi stood in front of his audience that consisted of Russian dignitaries, European diplomats and Persian aristocracy holding aloft *Diwan-e-Hafez*. From the book Saib Tabrizi read one of Hafez's most intense verse:

Of this fierce glow which Love and you within my breast inspire
The Sun is but a spark that flew and set the heavens afire!¹¹

The audience sighed. The power of Hafez's words seemed to set the evening ablaze. For Hafez, love's flames could inspire man to great heights; such that even the sun could be a mere spark. As Saib Tabrizi read, rubaab and santoor players gently struck their chords to the composition 'Flight of the Lark' which illustrated the flight of the Sufi mind. The musical notes were soothing, like a flowing freshwater mountain spring which mingled with Hafez's verses filled the hearts of the listeners with a serenity never experienced before. Then Saib Tabrizi held aloft two other books. *The Book of the Map of the World*, a *magnum opus* compilation by Al-Khwarizmi, it had accurately mapped out 2,402 localities and places. The second book was the works on astronomy of Omar Khayyam and his solar calendar, also known as the *Jalali* calendar.¹² After a few moments, on Saib Tabrizi's signal, two silk screens dropped down on either side of the palace, each approximately 30 metres (100 feet) long. The screens were covered with graphic illustrations of the mathematical achievements of Al-Khwarizmi and Omar Khayyam, particularly those made for algebra and cubic equations. As a hundred candles flickered under the screens, the audience roared in appreciation.

Distributing miniatures of the *Shahnameh* in which Ferdowsi the tenth-century scholar had praised pre-Islamic Persian Kings, Saib Tabrizi recited a message for mankind. A message of unity and for nurturing the heart by Sanai, another Persian Sufi of the past.

Once one is one, no more, no less: error begins with duality;
unity knows no error. The road yourself must journey on lies
in polishing the mirror of your heart... The body is dark – the
heart is shining bright; the body mere compost – the heart a
blooming garden.¹³

Amidst huge applause, the first of the festival evenings ended on this note.

The following five evenings were each a spectacle in their own right. On the last day the shah decided to give his guests a short tour of Isfahan. Foreign dignitaries gasped at the honeycomb muqarnas at the Shah Abbas Mosque. At the Darb-e-Imam Shrine, where Sufi artists lay buried, the shah and the delegates inspected the façade in detail. Girih in Persian meant ‘knot’ and girih tile patterns with repeating geometric shapes demonstrated symphonic beauty in complexity as each tile shimmered in the mellow orange light of a Persian sunset.

At Chehel Souten, Saib Tabrizi was dressed in a black robe as if in mourning for the future. Both he and the shah knew that Sufism was under threat from the orthodox clergy. Saib Tabrizi looked at a flag that fluttered in the distance. It had ‘Iqra’ written on it. The first revelation of the Quran, it meant ‘Read’. The Sufis had taken a deeper dive into its interpretation believing it meant ‘read’ not just the Quran, but seek knowledge. Saib Tabrizi clutched two books close to his heart. They were masterpieces by Ibn Sina who had lived and taught in Isfahan in the tenth century.¹⁴ Holding aloft with both hands Ibn Sina’s groundbreaking *Kitab-al-Shifa (The Book of Healing)*, Saib Tabrizi lowered his head and explained.

Ibn Sina developed new theories on existence. He unflinchingly believed in One God and was driven to understand Islam as a philosophy. His stupendous philosophical achievement was the painstakingly articulated distinction between essence and existence.¹⁵ Essence could be present but not necessarily bring about existence. He created the concept of ‘the necessary existent’ that did not need a cause. This necessary existent had to exist.¹⁶ In his analysis of the body and soul, he innovated a new theory: according to Ibn Sina, the soul in all animals was full of desire and closely bound to the body. In the human soul though, there was the extra powerful dimension of understanding and knowledge. The knowledgeable and understanding part of the human soul was

the intellect and it was indestructible even after death.¹⁷

This living dimension did not feel anything. It was pure existence. Ibn Sina's elevation of the soul to an intellectual existence was superbly innovative. The theory took away the main weapon the clergy had to create fear in the minds of followers of faith.¹⁸ They could not threaten with the fear of tormented souls as a price for their sins. Ibn Sina had lifted the bar of philosophy so high that small-minded clerics could not understand his thinking. He faced immense ridicule and was targeted by the orthodoxy for heresy and his drinking habits.¹⁹ In order to demonstrate how completely adequate rationale thought is, Ibn Sina invented a character who lived in complete isolation but nevertheless came to full intellectual cognition through an 'awakened mind'.²⁰ Such was the glow in the ink that dropped from Ibn Sina's pen in Persia that in faraway Andalusia, Ibn Tufayl, a century after Ibn Sina, would write *Hayy ibn Yaqzan (Alive, Son of Awake)*, one of the first philosophical novels.²¹ It was inspired by the concept of Ibn Sina's 'The Awake' as a general intellect that fills and connects all people. Centuries later Ibn Tufayl's novel served as a model for Robinson Crusoe and all Robinson-esque tales.²² Ibn Tufayl praised Ibn Sina alongside the Sufis as a master of mystic ecstasy and cited Ibn Sina:²³ Some had doubted if Ibn Sina had been a Sufi, but when he came out with words like these explaining enlightenment and mystic experiences in quest of the Divine, all doubts were laid to rest.

Then, when his training and will power reach a certain point, glimmerings of the light of Truth will flicker before him, thrilling him like lightening... If he is diligent in his ascetic practise, these spells grow frequent... Thus he begins to see the Truth in everything... He has gained an understanding as unshakable as that of an old friendship,... his inmost being becomes a polished mirror facing towards the Truth... at this point communion is achieved.²⁴

Such was the flight of Ibn Sina's genius that he could navigate it in any direction, nest on the branches of an undiscovered science and after being nourished by its fruit could fly back and give the world the base for modern medicine, *The Canon of Medicine*. This book served in the East and West alike for many centuries as the standard work of medical practice.²⁵ When Saib Tabrizi held it aloft and began an explanation, a sigh which seemed like a deafening roar left the breasts of each one seated in the audience. Then the bass-laden slow beats of a daf drum resounded signalling the end of the festival. A few days after the festival Shah Abbas II died in bed. Saib Tabrizi too died a few years later. From the chaos that followed, one man rose to seize power in Persia – Nadir Shah, a man who would plunge it into savage warfare with its neighbours – the Ottomans and the Mughals. Nadir Shah was not given to Sufism but instead his obsession with Sunni jurisprudence would widen the Sunni-Shia schism in an already deeply Shia Persia.²⁶ Driven by this obsession Persia would become a myopic place with study being focused on micro-religious jurisprudence rather than innovation, science, art and philosophy.



ASSASSINATION OF INDIA'S SUFI CROWN PRINCE

Dara Shikoh was the crown prince of Mughal India. He had been chosen by his father, Emperor Shah Jahan, to lead India into the future. Shah Jahan's reign had been long and generally peaceful. India was fabulously rich and stable. It was multicultural, vibrant and an economic giant. The Mughal Empire stretched from Kabul in the west bordering Safavid Persia to Bengal in the east. And from Kashmir in the north to the Deccan. The wealth of this empire was astounding – an envy of the West. The Taj Mahal was the epitome of architectural splendour. The Peacock Throne, the pinnacle of opulence. The red sandstone city of Fatehpur Sikri

that was built for the love of the Sufi mystic Hazrat Salim Chishti enveloped his pearl white marble mausoleum and was the empire's symbol of spirituality. The imperial Red Fort in Delhi personified sheer might. Right opposite the Red Fort, the Jama Masjid was the largest mosque in India. The courts in Kabul, Delhi, Agra and Lahore attracted Persian poets such as Saib Tabrizi, and the imperial patronage of arts ensured that a gifted musician such as Tansen could rise with his skills to unprecedented heights.

But on 30 August 1659, seven years before the death of Shah Abbas II of Persia, Dara Shikoh the crown prince of the Mughal Empire lay on the damp floor of a dark dungeon. Dara rose, held the iron bars of a small window and looked outside. It was a thunderous monsoon night. A few drops splashed on his face. The wind whistled, sharp. There was a sense of impending danger. From the crevice in the door he saw an approaching candlelight. The light was soon eclipsed by shadows. The door flung open. Men hustled in – the henchmen sent by his brother Aurangzeb.

Dara's life flashed before him. The vast and diverse landscape of India was the ideal pasture grounds for this deep-thinking crown prince. Dara thought of the days he sat legs folded under him listening attentively to Mian Mir, his Sufi master in his khanqah retreat at Lahore. Surrounded by wild deer that bounded around the khanqah the Sufi spoke to the prince. The master's words moulded the prince's character. He thought of how Mian Mir's teachings of universal love for all faiths had made him interested in the great religion of Hinduism. Dara developed a thirst to know more about the Upanishads. On the banks of the shimmering waters of the Ganges in 1640, Dara assembled the greatest Hindu intellectuals and sanyasi ascetics to translate the Upanishads into Persian.²⁷ He did not want the Upanishads concealed from the Muslims of India, which was another reason for him undertaking the translation.²⁸ He titled the translation of Upanishads, *Sirri-e-Akbar* (The Greatest Secret). Furthermore, he boldly went on to state that the work referred to in the Quran as the *Kitab al-Maknun*

(The Hidden Book) is none other than the Upanishads itself.²⁹ Not satisfied, Dara would go on to translate *The Yoga Vashisht* and the Bhagwad Gita into Persian.³⁰

Dara read and re-read the works of Sufis like Miyan Mir and Hazrat Bari both urging him to look after the cultivators whose taxes had swelled the Mughal treasury.³¹ This made the Sufi crown prince of India an even more compassionate man. What Dara had worked on for years shone back at him. His book *Majma-ul-Bahrain (The Mingling of the Two Oceans)* was a comparative study of Islam and Hinduism. Dara had flung himself into deep study while writing it. He wrote about the similarity of the concept of the soul in Hinduism and in Sufism. In Hinduism it was atma (individual soul) and parmatma (soul of souls). In Sufism it was ruh and abul arwah (also known as ru-e-azam) respectively.³² Dara emphasised the concept was the same in both faiths. Such was the desire of Dara's enlightened and cross-pollinated mind to learn from varied influences that many days had been spent with a wandering Armenian poet – Sarmad and a Hindu mystic – Baba Lal Das Bairagi. Dara reflected on those days. Sarmad was a dervish poet of Jewish and Armenian descent who had made India his home. He embraced Sufi philosophy and the teachings of Hindu Yogis. Originally a merchant, he gave up business to write. Wandering from court to court reciting poetry, he was scathing of the Christian, Jewish and Islamic clergy. Dara found him interesting and a friendship developed. Dara also received an education on yoga and meditation from Baba Lal Das Bairagi.

Dara thought of how the illness of his father Shah Jahan opened up a succession war for the Mughal throne of India as the Islamic clergy aligned with his rival brother Aurangzeb. In a final showdown between the two brothers, Dara was beaten in battle and taken prisoner. Now in the damp dungeon, Aurangzeb's men homed in on Dara. Looking at his assassins in the eye he recited a verse he had once written:

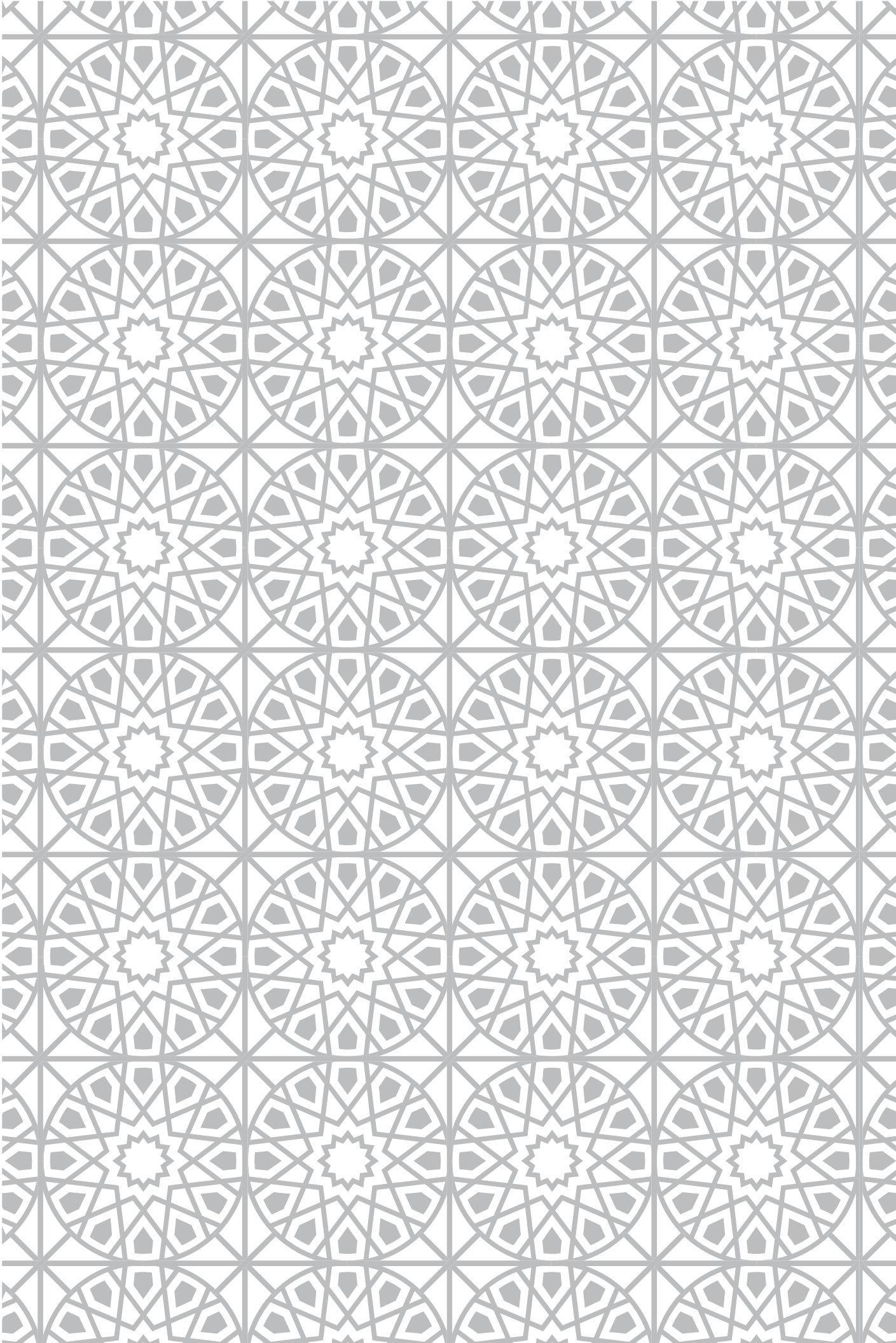
The true mystic will enlighten your heart and your soul
 Make a garden from thorns pulled from your foot's sole
 One burning candle will a thousand light... make whole.³³

A studded Mughal dagger entered his abdomen. Another punctured his liver as the two assassins twisted their blades within the prince's body. With Dara's death, Aurangzeb was the undisputed emperor of India. Under his reign the empire expanded territorially, while at the same time his court shrunk in intellect. Meanwhile in 1671, twelve years after Dara's death, Francis Bernier, a French traveller took the slain Sufi prince's translation of the Upanishads to France awakening an interest in Indian Philosophy in the West.³⁴ On Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the Mughal Empire cracked wide open and hurtled towards its end.



These three events set into motion the irreversible process of the collapse of three empires inextricably entwined with the diminishing influence of the Sufis. By the 1730s, intellectuals from Istanbul to Delhi were filled with an ominous feeling of impending anarchy. A flame of cultural renaissance though was flickering in Delhi under Mughal Emperor Muhammad Shah. An effervescence of philosophers and artists were coming together to create new expressions. A desire to discover new shores was on the rise. But in 1739 it would be extinguished by a barbaric massacre of Delhi's populace by Nadir Shah, the invading Persian king driven by greed and an obsession to plunder.⁵¹

Qaraar Ali would witness this. His skill fired in kilns would fuel a passion for a lost craft and his intellect would take him into the depths of Sufi thought where mathematics, mysticism and art merged. Traversing the lands where the Sufi call still had a faint echo, his journey would completely change his life and the lives he touched.





PART 1