

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Call Me Sehba

Sehba Sarwar · Wednesday, April 19th, 2023

“Call Me Sehba”

(an excerpt from a work-in-progress)

“Tell me the meaning of my name,” my siblings, cousins, and I clamor in Urdu—a language we reserve for elders and domestic help—when we meet Maliha Masi and learn that she is fluent in Arabic. We were left in the nanny’s care at my eldest aunt’s house in Karachi’s Guru Mandir neighborhood, a neighborhood name that pre-dates Partition when Karachi was home to a majority of Hindus. All of us know that our names have Arabic or Persian roots, and we have never met someone who has fluency in Arabic.

Maliha Masi flashes crooked teeth as she rocks back and forth on the swinging divan. Ten of us crowd around her, and one by one, a cousin presents a name to her as though offering a delicacy to the goddess of truth. She picks up the word in her palm and holds it like a silver ball. After deciphering, she tosses it back to its owner: “Your name—Farah? It means Joy of the Universe.”

A smile breaks out in my cousin’s face.

Maliha Masi reaches for another. “Ah, yours? Aisha. Your name is that of the prophet’s wife. Yes, that’s right. You like that?”

I muster up courage to proffer mine, arms outstretched, palms open: The name *Sehba*. Reveal its meaning and help me be proud, so at age ten, I can be glad that I forced my family to discard my nickname, Guriya—*doll*. Perfect for a newborn, my nickname was transformed to *cow* by my one-year-old sister who could not shape her mouth to utter Guriya. She said Guyya—*cow*. In that moment, the first ten years of my life are decided for me. Instead of being *doll*, I become *cow*. My real name, Sehba, is shelved for later; the nickname Guyya-cow sticks.

When I turn ten, I stop responding to anyone who refers to me as either cow or doll. “Call me Sehba,” I tell my family. “That is my real name.” Even then, I know Sehba is a difficult name to own.

Maliha Masi hears me and falls silent. She looks upward to utter a prayer in Arabic and crosses her index fingers from one cheek to the other in a no-no motion. “I cannot say your name, child,” she responds. She knows that my name means alcohol, forbidden to those who practice conservative Islam. She brushes imaginary crumbs off her white kurta and heaves her body off the swinging divan. Through the wet glimmer that curtains my eyes, I see her step around the opposite side of

the circle and retreat, her stray hair waving around her head like a spider's antennae.

"My name...it means...it means Wine, Wine of the Heavens!" I call out to her. The meaning sounds good. I repeat: "Yes, wine of the heavens."

Maliha Masi turns the corner and can no longer hear me. Around me, my cousins retie shoelaces. Evening has begun. They are ready to go outside to play running-catching or Simon Says.

Alone, I rock back and forth on the divan. When naming me, my father was aware that *Sehba* meant *wine*. He trusted that I would learn to wear my name, no matter what path I chose. Much later, I learn that "Sehba" is a nongendered name that has been adopted as a pseudonym by poets but is rarely given to babies at birth. Today, I claim the name and thank my father who passed away in 2009. He selected the name for its higher meaning, poetic intoxicant and inspiration. From the onset, he taught me how to resist.

(Featured image from [Pixabay](#))

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