

Gopon Prem* (Secret Love)

You think 'Heer and Ranjha' is a Bollywood movie
or folk story: love like a hot iron on the skin,
forced marriage and double death
but here I am in Nabigonj, weeping into the pond
and my flute-player, my honey-gatherer,
weeps into another pond under a *boroi* tree.

Talk of my secret love makes my eyes flow more.

My long-haired one came to our village for Eid.
He played his Baul songs with Angur, the *dotara* player
and the way he sang of love was beyond sweet to hear!
I lost my heart to him, and became the *doel* bird
who comes to his room that he will never catch
because *Londoni* uncle's here, and I must leave.

Talk of my secret love makes my eyes flow more.

I cannot give my heart to another man, though uncle
says he has a desk job, and his big fish father
once threw a net to catch the fingerlings in this pond.
I meet my flute-player near the brickfields
and in the shadows of the graveyard he whispers
songs of Shah Jelal, and the beauty of my breasts.

Talk of my secret love makes my eyes flow more.

The ticket's booked and I will have a *shundor* house
with a samira rug and cinema screen TV.

I know my husband will give me many children
but that country is cold as a stone from Jaflong river
and I will want to burn that house down
because I shall never see my honey-gatherer again.

Talk of my secret love makes my eyes flow more.

Perhaps, after my third child, I will be reconciled
to that *desi* life and my flute-player will find
another girl who weeps tears into a pond.

But I fear I'll stand on that bridge with two towers
and sing my minstrel's song of sky full of clouds
before I meet the fish in the grey waters.

Talk of my secret love makes my eyes flow more.

You think it's a Bollywood movie, or folk story:

'Heer and Ranjha' – love like a hot iron on the skin –
but here I am in Nabigonj, weeping into the pond
with the ticket booked to the rest of my life.

I fear my flute-player will become a beggar's corpse.

Talk of my secret love makes my eyes flow more.

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*The poem imagines a woman in the Nabigonj region, Sylhet, Bangladesh who is forced into marriage with a UK Bangladeshi man in 2014. Though the story of 'Heer and Ranjha' is Punjabi, through Bollywood movies past and present it has become widely known throughout the sub-continent. The *dotara* is a two string plucked instrument used to accompany the songs of the Bauls or 'honey-gatherers', a *Londoni* is a Bangladeshi living in

the UK, Shah Jelal is the most famous Muslim 'saint' of Bangladesh, *shundor* is Bangla for 'beautiful', and the *doel* is a small black and white bird with an enchanting whistle that is the national bird of Bangladesh.