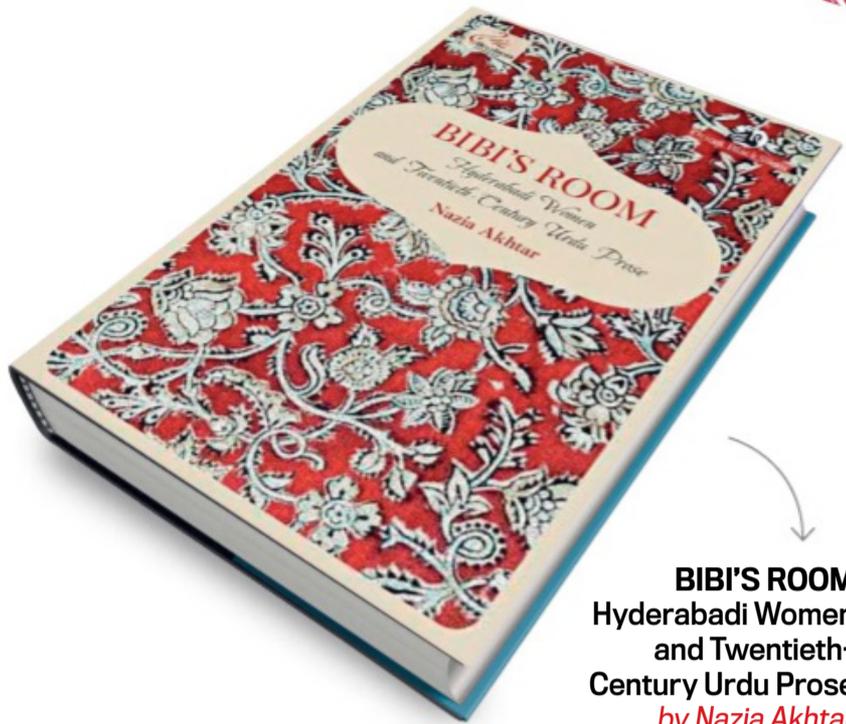


## BOOKS

# KEEPERS OF THE LOST CITY

*Nazia Akhtar's book acquaints us with women Urdu writers who brought alive 20th-century Hyderabad*



**BIBI'S ROOM**  
Hyderabadi Women  
and Twentieth-  
Century Urdu Prose  
by Nazia Akhtar  
ORIENT BLACKSWAN  
₹995; 432 pages

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Sometimes, things are so close to one's skin that one fails to see them. I soaked in the ambience of Lucknow but I took it for granted that it was also the city of, say, Rasheed Jahan, her second-floor clinic in Lal Bagh, the centre of leftist banter, not far from Nishat Talkies. But I only had to be pointedly asked, and Josh Malihabadi, Majaz Lucknowi, the Coffee House, Danish Mahal, Aminabad would float out of me like a procession of vivid images.

Since Lucknow was a centre of Urdu, other Urdu cities—Delhi, Lahore, Hyderabad—were not in our ken. The depth and durability of Lucknow, as a centre of culture, is clear from recent history: the metropolis began to get destroyed in 1856–57, but it retained some of its élan until, say, the 1880s. Delhi's predicament was similar.

Lahore was an Urdu centre of great vigour but its composite character was compromised because it lost its Lahori Hindu after Partition. The Urdu of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Hafeez

Jalandhari and Sahir Ludhianvi has a different lilt from the Urdu of Josh, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Ismat Chughtai and Rasheed Jahan. After all, the mother tongue of writers in Lahore's catchment area is Punjabi. Lakhnavi writers emerged from the womb to the sounds of floral Urdu. Hyderabadi Urdu had a Telugu lilt to it.

This brings me to Nazia Akhtar's *Bibi's Room*, a book that focuses on three 20th-century women writers from Hyderabad.

The city survived Partition but was laid low in the military action of September 1948. While during the destruction of Delhi, Ghalib's diary, written in Persian, gives us hints of the ghastly panorama, there is nothing comparable available in Lucknow, which, ironically, was packed with great writers. I may be forgiven if some masterpiece exists of which I am not aware.

This is where Nazia Akhtar's work is priceless. The writings of Zeenat Sajida, Najma Nikhat and Jeelani Bano acquaint us with historical episodes, like a gallery of miniatures in very dark shades interspersed with shafts of light. The book lifts scabs from old wounds and sheds light on events

one had missed out on. Providing snatches of the three writers, Akhtar, through her uncluttered scholarship, also provides the period as a sort of moving wallpaper, a backdrop.

In one story, Jeelani Bano conjures up a man who has convinced his wife that her ailments come from an open window. Both shut themselves out from life on the street below. Zeenat Sajida's 'Ajnabi' (Stranger) is about an incorrigible girl, who, after she lost her mother at birth, has her father doting on her, generating sibling rivalries. Najma Nikhat is under the spell of the progressive writers' movement.

Hyderabad lived through two tragedies that sometimes criss-crossed and often ran parallel to each other. The military action was against Razakars but its unstated target were Communists in the vanguard of the Telangana Uprising. Gen. J.N. Chaudhuri, who led "Operation Polo", as the action was called, stayed on as a Military Governor of Hyderabad. The much bigger target for him was to "finish" the Communists, who had surfaced just when Mao Tse-tung's revolution in China had succeeded, sending shivers down the spines of Whitehall and South Block simultaneously. ■

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