

# Remade in Urdu

*When thrillers are adapted with local flavour*



FOR THOSE WHO live, eat and breathe crime fiction, CM Naim's *Urdu Crime Fiction (1890-1950): An Informal History* (Orient Blackswan; 308 pages; ₹ 875) is a gem of a book. Naim writes it like a page-turner of a mystery, making us avidly curious as to which authors from the West influenced the birth of

Urdu crime fiction, and what the impact of skilled translators was on its popularity with Urdu readers in the subcontinent.

Crime fiction—a mystery tale about who did it, how and why “certainly came only with the Sahibs.” There was no precedent for them in India, he says. And it was George William MacArthur Reynolds (1814-79)—a muckraking journalist and radical politician—who had the greatest impact on the birth of Urdu crime fiction. Reynolds was the most read and admired author among Urdu readers. His first work—*The Mysteries of the Court of London*—appeared in Urdu in 1893, translated by Ghulam Qadir Fasih. Premchand, the great Hindi-Urdu novelist and short story writer, said that when he was a teenager “everyone talked of Reynolds’ novels. Urdu translations of his books were coming out one after another and had a booming market. I too was in love with those books.”

The translators came from the emerging middle class: journalists, poets, novelists and junior officers who gave Reynolds’ stories an Indian touch, creating Indian characters in place of the British ones. They left out Reynolds’ polemical asides, socio-political analysis and harangues and much of the cultural nuances and allusions.

What was left then that appealed to Urdu readers? Plenty, it seems. Heroic and virtuous heroes and heroines, criminal activities of the high and the low, an abundance of coyly depicted romance and illicit sex, and realism depicted through natural dialogue and context—played out in the scenic grandeur of the Scottish Highlands, the exotica of Crimea and the Caucasus, and the romance of Istanbul and Paris. This wasn’t all. In their letters to the translators, readers praised the characters for their beauty, virtue and strength, and the story for dealing so well with moral matters.

Naim discusses the local variants spawned by the Reynolds mysteries: *Mistriz auf Peshawar*, *Rawalpindi*, *Nainital*, *Simla* etc. By 1900, these *mistriz* constituted almost a distinct

literary genre, Naim says, one that employed a mixture of fact and fiction to tell a suspenseful story and a moral lesson. For instance, the most prolific author, Sirdar Ghulam Haidar Khan built his narrative around three mysteries in *Mistriz of Kabul*: a fake Prince of Iran, an unnamed woman who goes to any lengths to satisfy her lust, and a romance between a young nobleman and noblewoman. Only 63 pages long, the three mysteries are alas resolved very easily, with very little effort taken to sustain the suspense. And this is true of the other *mistriz* in Urdu, Naim points out.

In *Mistriz of Delhi* by Muhammad Nisar Ali Shuhrat—another Reynolds story is told in Delhi’s setting: not the historical city but the more modern urban sprawl inside and outside the walled city. It has multiple stories about travellers who come to Delhi and encounter strange things after dark—mistresses are found and women often dupe the hero. Again, not much suspense.

Suspense, it seems, was not as prized by Urdu readers. This is different from the Western canon of Edgar Allan Poe, Conan Doyle, Wilkie Collins prevalent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that delighted in puzzles, suspense and murders. Crime fiction readers, it seems, have specific national or linguistic proclivities. Urdu readers craved for a happy resolution for the handsome heroes and heroines, and just desserts for the villain. The public preferred Haidar Khan’s formula: elements of love and passion in every chapter that would also produce an ethical effect.

Making a distinction between crime fiction and tales of detection, Naim puts the *mistriz* into crime fiction—about the violators of the moral and legal codes of society. Not tales of detection. Nor do these Urdu tales offer an economic and political critique (as Reynolds did), seldom challenging the prevailing social hierarchies.

Yet, that is not strictly true. Some do, I think. An interesting variant, which gives women more agency, comes through in Abdul Halim Sharar’s (1860-1926) novels. These expose the private devilry, the *asrar* of the rich and the powerful. *Husn ka Daku* (The Plunderer of Beauty) is about a dissolute nawab and a religious dignitary who prey on young beauties and are brought to justice by a young beauty and a good hearted courtesan. Influenced by Reynolds’ Eliza and the Vizier’s daughters in *Arabian Nights*, the strong role given to women is quite refreshing, given the patriarchal society of the 19th century. The young beauty, a bride-to-be, tells her fiancé that she wishes to “wage a terrible and subtle jihad on behalf of all terrorised women.” The irony is these mysteries are all written by men—there were no



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



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female crime fiction writers in Urdu in that period.

The Golden Age of Urdu crime fiction is between 1916-46, starting with *Nili Chhatri*, (The Blue Parasol), by Zafar Omar, a police officer and a graduate of Aligarh University. It was a translation of Maurice Leblanc's *The Hollow Needle* and featured Arsene Lupin (now a Netflix series *Lupin*) created by Frenchman Maurice Leblanc in 1905 to take advantage of the craze for Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle had refused to write any more Holmes stories, having killed him off in *The Final Problem* in 1893, sparking huge protests from angry readers. In 1901-2, Doyle wrote a flashback novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, but the public wanted Holmes alive. Doyle refused for a while, and in this vacuum, other authors jumped in, including Leblanc. His Lupin was a suave gentleman-thief, escape artist, master of disguises and a detective.

*Nili Chhatri* took the tale of burglary and abduction with imperial treasures, secret chambers and a little romance and made it Indian. Omar gave the name Bahram to Lupin—the

name sounded Parsi, and the female romantic interest, Firoza Bai was also a Parsi. It was socially credible to ordinary Urdu readers since Parsis were seen as advanced and western. In an introduction to the book, Omar says he dressed up Leblanc's book "with Indian history and Indian manners for the entertainment of my countrymen." The Bahram books spawned many imitators—all focusing on the thriller genre. The setting was well done—giving the reader a glimpse into their modern futures by describing the telephone, fast trains, luxurious hotels etc.

Why did the Urdu public go crazy about Bahram? Naim points out that Urdu readers preferred thrillers; Lupin's adventures conformed to the thriller genre rather than a pipe-smoking puzzle solving one. In the epilogue, Naim points out that a translation of Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (*Khaufnak Jazira*) was well received, but the Miss Marple *The Body in the Library* bombed so badly that the translator never attempted another Christie translation. Erle Stanley Gardner met with a similar fate. American pulp fiction authors such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M Cain along with Leslie Charteris' *The Saint* were too physically violent and cold blooded for the average Urdu reader.

*Nili Chhatri* also influenced another translator—Tirath Ram Firozपुरi—who in the next four decades produced superb and idiomatic translations of English language thrillers and mysteries. Young Saadat Hasan Manto was among his devoted readers. Tirath's favourites included Leblanc, Guy Boothby and

Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu novels.

Another author popular with the Urdu readers was Edgar Wallace, a thriller writer again. Omar published *Lal Kathor* based on Wallace's *The Three Just Men*, a story of ruthless vigilantes who brought justice to the weak, a tale high in suspense and violence but "notably low in mystery and clever ratiocination a la Holmes and Poirot."

In a well thought out epilogue, Naim explains the lure of thrillers for the Urdu reader. In a fundamental way, thrillers are "akin to Urdu *qissa* and *dastan* books...in essence quest narratives...open-ended...capable of being expanded into a loosely linked series of tales built around the main goal before the hero: to put an end to villainy in his society." Like *dastans*, thrillers thrive on chance and coincidence—not like tales of detection where nothing is left to chance.

This is a thoughtful, pacy and comprehensive account of Urdu crime fiction by a true devotee of the genre. A charming book to dip into on a rainy afternoon. ■