

Dear Shamsur Rahman Faruqi Sahab,

Hope you had a pleasant trip and stay at Delhi. It is entirely our loss that we could not come and interview you in person.

Kindly also excuse the delay on our part in sending the questions to you. It took us some time to get the questionnaire ready. The list of questions is given below. If you find any to be irrelevant, please feel free to ignore.

Eagerly looking forward to your responses.

Many thanks once again, best wishes and warm regards

**Albeena Shakil and Promodini Varma**

1. Congratulations on the success of both *Ka'i Chand the Sar-e Asman* in Urdu and *The Mirror of Beauty* in English, and thank you for bringing to life a persona and character like Wazir Khanam for your readers. Your Urdu novel was translated into Hindi. What prompted and persuaded you to translate your voluminous Urdu novel, which is also about the Urdu speaking culture of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Delhi, into English? And what were the challenges as writer and translator?

Thanks for your kind remarks. Yes, I'm happy my vision and delineation of Wazir Khanam clicked with the readers (especially in English and Hindi). Urdu readers were rather thrown by what they saw as 'erotic' descriptions of her beauty and of some other situations. Still, Urdu readers also acknowledged that she was a powerful personality and very few could believe that she was a historical figure and but for a few details, I had portrayed her life faithfully as she lived it.

As for the genealogy of the Eng. translation, the matter is rather mundane, in the sense that I'd no intention of doing it but Penguin's many attempts to find a translator hadn't met with success. So the matter rested there. Enter my two daughters: they said that 'only you' can do this job. And they kept at me until I succumbed. Fortunately, the work went faster than I'd hoped and I was able to finish it in just about 13 months.

Challenges? They were many. But as a longtime translator of poetry and prose from and into English I knew it is just a matter of managing to lose the minimum: sacrifice only as much as you must. Or substitute one impossible thing with something doable and at least half as acceptable. I'll give you some examples:

I let go all the high Urdu and Persian.

I let go all the archaisms, but I wrote the whole novel in 19<sup>th</sup> century English so I could recreate at least the essence of the ambience of the whole novel.

I let go all phrases and word specific to women's speech, all colloquialisms, all dialect words and phrases.

Instead, I translated as accurately as possible the rhythm and power of the original, sometimes translating almost literally. I lost the power and colorfulness of the original phrase or idiom, but I could inject a bit of ginger and piquancy in the sedate 19<sup>th</sup> century English that I was using.

2. The titles of your Urdu and English novels invoke very different metaphors and symbols. What were your considerations while changing the title?

Here again, the matter is more of expediency than anything else. Numerous attempts were made by friends to find a suitable translation of the original Urdu but to no avail. My younger daughter found a line from Hafiz which I'd translated long ago: *My eyes are the mirror of her beauty*. The phrase *the mirror of beauty* was felt by all to be most suitable: Short, memorable and somehow having the resonance of the original. So be it, I said.

3. English novelists from India, particularly over the past few decades, have enjoyed considerable international success. But similar success seems to have evaded contemporary works in translation, even while most internationally known contemporary writers are read in translation. In this sense, your novel is unique. It may have just broken a long-standing jinx in India and given food for thought to those who have pondered over this question for years. What do you think has made this possible? Has your familiarity with English literary traditions, both as a writer and a translator played a role in this?

I think both have played a part here: My long (and I hope creative) acquaintance with English language and literature, and my (perhaps deeper) acquaintance with Indo-Muslim poetry and culture. Also, perhaps, my knowledge of details helped recreate (or at least recapture fleetingly) the life as it was lived then, at least by the educated and the well to do.

4. How has Dastangoi, the art of story-telling that you have done so much to revive impacted your novel?

Well, the Dastan itself has gone into the making of this novel, albeit unconsciously—which, I think, is the best way to do such things. I think the plenitude of the novel, the love for the human body that it displays, certainly came from the Dastan of Amir Hamza in its Naval Kishor edition. I am perhaps the only person in the world to have read all its 46 volumes which run into more than 42000 pages and more than twenty million words. (These

figures are reasonably accurate though based on estimates made by me taking all necessary factors into account.)

5. How do you reconcile your two roles as critic and creative writer? Do the two interfere in each other's work, especially when you are operating in two different linguistic and literary traditions?

Well, actually, I see no conflict. I found that writing criticism is also a creative activity, though it imposes certain limits which don't exist in writing a fully creative text. First of all, a critic has to have some idea, some interesting or fruitful idea about his subject before he can start writing. Then he has to produce suitable words to express satisfactorily and efficiently what he needs to say. Almost every day I get a request or two for writing a preface (or even 'a few lines' as they say) on a certain book. I recall a poignant phrase of Ghalib's who was also plagued by requests for writing prefaces. He wrote: 'It's not easy to write a preface. One has to scratch and gash one's liver [=heart]. Writing prose is no less difficult than writing poetry.'

As regards operating in two or more linguistic traditions, I honestly never felt any opposition or discrepancy. English, Urdu, and to a certain extent Persian have been my boon companions almost since I learnt to read. They are now in my blood. For instance, I can identify a Persian verse without knowing its author whether it was composed by an Iranian or an Indian or by an Iranian who lived and worked in India. Similarly, I can tell without knowing the author if an Urdu poem is original or translation. In English, I intuitively know an archaic word or non archaic word. I have often surprised my editors by telling them that the word or phrase that they are uncomfortable with is good English and is supported by the OED.

6. In India language is a sensitive issue. Exceptional writers have become casualties of language based animosities. For instance, Kiran Nagarkar, a Marathi writer who, when he started writing novels in English, had to face the brunt of the English-*bhasha* divide and was estranged from Marathi literary establishment and not quite embraced by the English one either. But your novel seems to have been embraced by both the English and Urdu literary circles. How, in your opinion, has the relationship between English and other Indian languages evolved in the era of globalization?

As a critic, I was often described as an outsider because I had no degree in Urdu and was not a teacher of Urdu. But since English has been so pervasive in our culture (and is often deferred to) there was no real animosity on this account.

What I fear and dislike most is that due to the invasion of English into our household life (for example, in my home everyone says 'kitchen'; no one knows *bawarchi khana*. I of course never say 'kitchen'. But I do say 'bath

room' because it is a nice euphemism. Everyone else says 'toilet.' So all of us are guilty. But the result of the invasion of workaday English words is that even senior Urdu writers now freely use English words like *job, promotion, transfer, boss, financial, exams, late, top, class/classes, favour, injury, in continuation, common, result,* and so on. That's what I fear most: Urdu will lose useful words whose place will be given to English. Gradually these words will become standard Urdu and the Urdu words will be lost.

Globalization has given nothing to Urdu but a fillip to hybridization and a blind tendency to use foreign vocabulary. I am sure this is true of other Indian languages too. Hindi, certainly is another victim here.

7. Given the multi-lingual nature of our society, one stream of opinion has strongly practiced and argued for '*chutnification*' of English or Hinglish for conveying the spoken milieu in fiction. However, your novel is written entirely in English, though in different English lexicons of the nineteenth century. In fact, some reviewers have commented that they would have preferred the use of some words in the original in your novel. Was this a deliberate choice on your part? Why?

I don't believe in the chutnification of English. It's not our language and we have no right to mutilate it. I think Hinglish or Indlish are unfair impositions on English. As for the choice to use the original Urdu in preference to English in some cases, I believe it's unfair to the reader who has no Urdu or Persian. Maybe those who have these languages would prefer a liberal sprinkling of the original Urdu. But you can see that the process (if process it is) is unending. Someone wanted a few, *just a few* Urdu/Persian words retained. But what is *just a few* for God's sake? Another reader wants *just a few more*, another says, 'Use Urdu/Persian in your English translation *selectively*.' Taken to their logical end, these admonitions will end up with half the book being in Urdu.

8. As a literary critic and scholar you have never quite maintained a strict bifurcation between Urdu and English. Why?

Sorry, I don't quite understand this. English has its own strengths, Urdu has its own. I could never imagine that Urdu would do where English was needed, and vice versa. English poetry is utterly different from Urdu poetry, even modern Urdu poetry. You have to span an almost unbridgeable gulf to be able to appreciate both languages as they should. I certainly believe that Urdu literature can and does learn much from foreign, especially English models in both creative writing and in criticism. But I always used these trans-lingual forays after I'd internalized the content of what I brought. And I never let a foreign concept or idea trump a native idea, however archaic. Most of us, unfortunately, use foreign knowledge without digesting it. Some do it in the fond belief that they are 'enriching' Urdu literature. But that's not the way a literature learns from another.

9. Have you found any difference in the reception of your novel by Urdu and English readers and critics?

Yes. The English readers have been utterly enchanted. So also the Hindi readers. Ashok Vajpeyi wrote that it is the best *Indian* novel over the last 30 years. Some Urdu readers have praised the novel as the best Urdu novel ever, or at least in the previous half century. A few have been full of unstinted praise for parts of it, but much left them uncomfortable. There have been a couple of attacks on it for pornography (soft, sinking down to hard in same places) or for historical inaccuracy. Everybody, even the hostile readers, praise its language as unique—in creativity and also vocabulary.

10. Is there also a difference in its reception in India and abroad?

The novel hasn't yet been formally published in the West. Thus there hasn't been much from the West except a very favourable review by Jeff Tompkins, literary editor of Asia Society. He even went on to say that the historical novel in English will never be the same after this novel. Stray readers from the USA and UK (I mean those who are native speakers of English) have admired it hugely.

11. It has been observed by many that the short story is a more preferred genre of fiction in Urdu than the novel. Why is this so and was this a matter of concern for you when you wrote your novel?

I wrote about the phenomenon of the dominance of the short story over the novel in Urdu. That was more than forty years ago. There have been quite a few novels since then. Some modern writers in fact are now known more as novelists than story writers. There isn't enough space here to discuss why the short story was so predominant in Urdu from the thirties to the sixties. But the main reason seems to be that the Progressives had urgently to convey a message and they needed a 'quick service' model for it. Hence the plethora of short stories during that period.

12. What are your observations about the enduring fascination in India with historical novels?

It's not something that I have given much thought to. In the Urdu of the seventies and eighties there were a few successful historical novels from the literary point of view. There have been many popular historical novel writers beginning with Nasim Hejazi in the fifties who became a small cult figure. But that's about all. I have always believed that the heyday of historical novels in Urdu ended in the forties.

13. How many languages are you well versed with? Most people in India can understand more than one language and maybe even read and write in multiple languages. Writers are certainly capable of writing in two or more language. Even till the nineteenth century, Urdu poets

composed poetry in more than one language. Why do you think we do not have more bilingual or multilingual writers in India today?

Yes, that's a point that I have made frequently. Urdu writers were often bi-or tri-lingual. Most educated Urdu speakers knew more than two languages. And this was the situation until the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the last century. This was one of our greatest assets which we have lost over the years, particularly after Partition. One of the reasons of the richness of our literature was the linguistic skills of our writers.

Being well-versed in a language is a term that can admit of various interpretations. Anyway, I am very 'well-versed' in Urdu and English. I know Hindi well but don't read or write it with ease. I am comfortable in Persian, especially classical Persian, but that my familiarity with modern Persian literature and spoken Persian is rather sketchy. I have elementary level Arabic and the same level French. The language spoken in the rural and semi urban areas of my native place is Bhojpuri. I cannot speak it but I can understand it quite well even now and would love to see it given its natural place in the pantheon of Indian languages.

14. Some scholars have argued that given the multilingual nature of our society, it is impossible to study the literature of one language without involving some degree of comparative analysis with other language traditions. In English literature courses across several universities, studying literature in translation, both from India and abroad, has become the norm. Yet, comparative literature departments or scholarship have not really taken off. Your novel has certainly made English readers aware of the milieu of Urdu. Do you believe that comparative studies can help the cause of Urdu in India? Or, what is the way forward?

These things are certainly helpful at the middle or advanced level of language and literature studies. But what we need for Urdu is elementary but fundamental support. For example all Urdu speaking children in U.P. read Hindi and don't acquire any worth while Urdu. This is because of the almost universal prevalence of Hindi in the social, political and commercial environment in UP. The govt. helps and promotes this by banning the opening of Urdu medium schools. So we have to begin with such fundamental matters. The situation is better in Bihar and Maharashtra, but not much better elsewhere.

15. Would you consider writing some fiction straight in English language in the coming days?

I certainly could. But right now I'm trying to bring out my next novel which has been lying dormant in my stomach for some years. It's not coming out, partly

because it fears (or I fear) that it'll be a 'more of the same' type of creation. And I don't want to regurgitate it. I want it to come out through my heart. Still, I believe that I must write at least one more novel. In Urdu. English will take care of itself. Hopefully, the novel will find a competent translator.

*Shamsur Rahman Faruqi*  
*Allahabad, April 2014*