

BOOKS / LITERATURE

Dastan-e-Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

The literary life of a translator

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Shamsur Rahman Faruqi with his dog Sunehri at their home in Delhi. SHAHID TANTRAY FOR THE CARAVAN

IN 1966, when the writer Shamsur Rahman Faruqi was thinking of names for his new Urdu literary magazine, *Teesha*—axe, or adze—was the one that stood out first. A teesha is associated with Farhad, the stonemason in the Persian romance *Khusraw and Shirin*, who had to cut through a mountain and release a river of milk to prove his love for the princess Shirin.

Faruqi wanted to attempt something ambitious with his magazine too—he hoped to free Urdu literature from the domination of imperial narratives. At that time, the Urdu literati had begun to recognise a sense of lethargy and the possibility of an imminent decline in Urdu literature. Indian intellectuals and writers had created the Progressive Writers’

Association, in 1935, in response to fascist and imperialist regimes. Conceived, in London, by writers such as Sajjad Zaheer, Mulk Raj Anand and Jyotirmaya Ghosh, the PWA's leading lights included Ahmed Ali, Prem Chand, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and others. These figures articulated the belief that Indian literature ought to deal with societal issues, such as hunger, poverty and political subjugation. Other ways of seeing were not considered literature and not encouraged, and the PWA steadily lost momentum.

Faruqi finally decided on another name, *Shabkhoon*—a surprise attack by night. It alluded to the act of shaking the world of literature out of stasis. Until he retired, he worked on the magazine at nights, after his day job as a civil servant. The magazine ran successfully for 40 years. It would be an understatement to say that Faruqi cultivated other interests over this period too: he studied the development and history of the Urdu language and its subtleties, explored the conventions of Urdu poetry and revived the lost tradition of the *dastan*—oral storytelling. He also established himself as a writer and translator of fiction, drama and poetry; compiled a dictionary; and wrote literary criticism, in which he often expressed unpopular views.

Faruqi was born on 30 September 1935, in Pratapgarh, in what would later become Uttar Pradesh. His paternal grandfather was a headmaster, at Normal School Gorakhpur where Premchand had also studied. His paternal family, Faruqi recalled to me when I visited him in Allahabad, in early January, was religious, “did not shoot very high” and mostly worked clerical jobs. His grandfather was close friends with prominent sufis and theologians of the time. The maternal side, more scholarly, traced its lineage to Nasiruddin Mahmud Chiragh Dehlavi, a disciple of the renowned sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya. One of Faruqi's great grandfather's cousin was the ustad of Mohammad Badshah, who compiled a seven-volume dictionary of Persian called *Fahrang-e-Anand Raj*—the dictionary of Anand Raj—and named after the maharaja of

Vijaynagar, Anand Gajapati Raj, where he was serving as the chief secretary.

Faruqi's father worked as a school inspector, and was transferred to Azamgarh when Faruqi was four years old. Faruqi started school there, in 1943. Although he was eight years old, he began in the fifth standard, and gauged, from the furtive whispers of other students, that he was too young for the class. Before then, he had studied at home with his father, and had a tutor whom he hated, but his family's financial situation changed after India began to feel the repercussions of the Second World War. "My father—since we were not a lot of people—could pay more attention to us," he told me. "He used to give us books to read, teach us poetry, especially Iqbal's poems. Then the time of scarcity arrived—the war began. I remember my father used to have a camel to go for inspection of schools and used to load his luggage on it. He also had a tonga for office. By 1941, there was neither the tonga, nor the camel."

At Faruqi's home, writing poetry was not especially encouraged, as it was not seen as a practical livelihood. Nonetheless, his family's association with prominent sufis fostered an environment of reading at both his paternal and maternal homes. Faruqi began writing poetry at the age of six. He recalled that his father, who had nicknamed him "philosopher," once came across his poetry and called it "bogus, metre-less writing," and remembered writing an anguished metrical line about his parents being too strict on him: "*Maloom kya kisi ko mera haal-e zaar hai?*"—Does anyone understand the state of my grief? And yet, Faruqi later developed a preoccupation with metre: in *Tanqidi Afqar*, his 1982 book that reflected on modern literary and critical theories of poetry—and won him the Sahitya Akademi award, in 1986—Faruqi's first proposition was that "metrical is superior to unmetrical," and that "because poems are metrical they are superior to prose." But this sense of metre came to him only after years of writing poetry. He attributed this to having grown up in a household that did not practise music or singing: since

they were Deobandi Muslims, even the *milad sharif*—songs sung in the praise of the prophet Muhammad, common in many Muslim households—were not sung.

Faruqi's obsessive reading habit was crucial to his development as a writer. His cousins recalled in a documentary made by Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad that he would read while walking to school, as his friends or brothers flanked him for his safety. His elder daughter, Mehr Afshan Farooqi, an associate professor of South Asian literatures at the University of Virginia, told me that he was always “deeply engrossed in reading. He had a book open while eating dinner or drinking tea.”

“In the beginning, I used to read novels in hiding, like my father,” Faruqi told me. The first novel he read was *Shamim*, followed by *Anwar*, both by Munshi Fayyaz Ali, an early-twentieth-century writer of romance. “By the time we came to Gorakhpur, in 1949, I was reading voraciously: serious, historical, or crime fiction, or horror and thriller novels, thanks to Munshi Tirathram Firozपुरi—may god grant him place in heaven—he translated a lot from English to Urdu, especially thrillers. It was like halwa to us, *jitna mil jaye utna kha jao*”—eat as much as you get. By the time he was in high school, he recalled, he also read British authors, and was particularly enthralled by Thomas Hardy. His later stories betray his adolescent reading tastes as well. In his 2014 novel *Qabz-e Zaman*—Time Compression—the narrator reminisces, “When I grew up, my taste for terror or horror or ghost stories also grew, to the dimensions of almost irresistible habit. This weakness for thrilling books remains to this day.”

Faruqi studied the sciences, arithmetic, English, Urdu and Persian until high school, after which he was admitted to the Maharana Pratap College, in Gorakhpur, in the first batch of its bachelor of arts programme. During his undergraduate years, Faruqi expanded his

reading to psychology and philosophy, and eventually joined Allahabad University for a master's degree in English, in 1953. While there, he recalled, he encountered the elitism of the university's English department. Although he topped the university, he did not receive a first class. He said this could have been because "my tongue was fast" and he asked too many questions, or because he did not dress well, choosing to don colourful kurta pyjamas rather than the three-piece suits preferred by the students and professors. Despite his dressing sense, Faruqi told me that he managed to fall in love with the best-dressed woman in the university, Jamila Hashmi. Like Macbeth, he said with a laugh, he felt "cabin'd, cribb'd, confined" at home, but love rescued him. On 26 December 1955, almost immediately after completing his master's degree, Faruqi and Jamila married.



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“Without Jamila, there would have been no Shabkhoon and without Shabkhoon, my struggle to become a writer of my kind would never have ended,” Faruqi told me. Their daughter Mehr Afshan also remembered that Jamila wholeheartedly supported the magazine, and financed it for many years. COURTESY SHAMSUR RAHMAN FARUQI

Faruqi had intended to teach, and pursue further studies, at Allahabad University, but despite four teaching vacancies and his top marks, he could not get through. He chose to work on a doctorate in English symbolism and the influence of French literature. Harivansh Rai Bachchan, who had recently returned from Cambridge, after working on WB Yeats, was assigned as his supervisor. “I was, as I was before, careless,” Faruqi recalled. “He asked me to come meet him one day in

the department to discuss the topic. I couldn't go as it was pouring. The following day when I went, he came down heavily on me. So, I left. I did not know how to get scolded."

His experience of reading literature and criticism in Allahabad University had, however, led him to develop different reading interests. "I had started to read a lot of Urdu. I realised if I had to do anything, I must do it in Urdu," he told me, adding that this was because of the underwhelming Urdu literary criticism at the time. "The critics said Mir is Mir, and Ghalib, Ghalib. They should have instead clarified what the fundamentals of writing and Urdu were." Faruqi probed deeper and began to write criticism.



Shabkhood presented Faruqi with an opportunity to run a magazine that was modern and could stand its own despite the onslaught of Progressive writing.

In 1955, Faruqi began teaching at the Satish Chandra College, in Ballia, where he taught for a little less than a year, before moving to teaching English literature at the Shibli College, in Azamgarh, for two years. While there, his friend and colleague Hafiz Siddiqi recommended that he apply for the civil services. He joined the postal services in 1958. Faruqi's younger brother, Naimur Rahman Farooqi, a former vice-chancellor at Allahabad University, told me that "when he got into the civil service, he was the first in my family to do so. I was very young at that time, but I distinctly remember how proud and pleased we all were." While working in the postal services, Faruqi began learning French, for a Universal Postal Union conference that was to be held in Delhi. Although his classes were aborted once the Chinese war of 1962 started, he did not stop, learning the language at home later. It came in

handy when he read Baudelaire, or translated poems for *Shabkhood*.

SEVERAL YEARS BEFORE SHABKHOON, Faruqi tried his hand at running another magazine. This one circulated within his household, and he began compiling it from pages of old notebooks, in 1944, while in the eighth standard. Faruqi and his elder sister, Zohra, would contribute poems, essays and stories. “I was very interested in coming up with stories, and narrating those to younger siblings and cousins,” he told me. “My sister had a great penchant for reading and writing, and she contributed to the compilation.” Laughing heartily—he rarely misses an opportunity to laugh at himself—he added, “The magazine had a very original name—*Gulistan*, which means a rose garden. I had ideas about Hitler and wrote in the magazine that ‘He is a bad and cruel guy, although Subhash Chandra Bose keeps meeting him occasionally. I had cut out a picture of Hitler from some newspaper and pasted it in the magazine, and gave it a caption—‘Hitler, *duniya ki khaufnaktareen hasti*’—the world’s most horrific personality.



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The magazine ran intermittently, until the family moved to Gorakhpur, but it kindled Faruqi’s interest in writing. He began with short stories, the first of which was published in 1949. He recalled that he used to wait for rejection slips from editors, even though magazines of the time

rarely bothered to answer letters. The first time Faruqi realised his story had been published was when his mother sent him to buy something at a store and, fortuitously, the shopkeeper gave the item wrapped in a paper that had his story printed on it.

In the early 1950s, Faruqi managed to get his first novel, *Daldal se Bahar*—Out of the Quagmire—serialised, in *Meyar*, a magazine published from Meerut. It was a first-person account of a protagonist who falls in love, only to realise he is meant for greater things. Today, it is out of print and Faruqi disowns it, embarrassed by its puerility and all-knowing smugness.

He then published articles on literary theory in *Saba*, a Hyderabad-based magazine, brought out by the poet Salman Adib. Like most Urdu magazines at the time, Faruqi remembered, *Saba* was perennially short of money, and was only published when a couple of ads came in. The publishing industry was also disappointing, he said, since most publications were callous with submissions. Around 1963, while posted in Allahabad, Faruqi used to attend a Thursday Club gathering organised by Ejaz Husain—former head of department of Urdu at Allahabad University, a Progressive, and a prominent personality in Urdu circles—where aspiring writers would read and discuss new works. Once, during an argument, Faruqi held forth, and was encouraged to write, but his long essay on fiction was misplaced by the magazine he sent it to. Faruqi encountered similar experiences with popular magazines, such as the government-run *Ajkal*, but he had begun thinking about starting his own magazine by then. “Salman Adib was promoting a number of Hyderabad writers,” Faruqi told me. “Allahabad did not have any less.” He wanted a modern magazine, which could stand its own despite the onslaught of Progressive writing.

The Progressives did not encourage new authors to choose their own themes, and the insistence on writing about what Faruqi called an

“image of hope, of the revolution to come” was losing relevance a decade after Independence. Faruqi felt that “experimentation is the key of progress for literature.” With *Shabkhood*, he told me, he tried to give space to writers who did not fit the Progressive mould of writing, which, he thought, had become monotonous and compartmentalised. “These writers were neither talked about nor published in their magazines. Some were published in Pakistan. Literature has many houses, many mansions and everyone has a right to live there.”

Faruqi told me that *Shabkhood* was started with the “moral and monetary support” of his wife, Jamila, who came from a well-to-do family and was the principal of the Kidwai Memorial Girls’ Inter College, an institution she and her father had set up, in 1954. “Without Jamila, there would have been no *Shabkhood* and without *Shabkhood*, my struggle to become a writer of my kind would never have ended,” he said. Their daughter Mehr Afshan also remembered that Jamila wholeheartedly supported the magazine, and financed it for many years, despite having to support her in-laws and parents, as well as overseeing the children’s education.



Shabkhood assumed the position that modern poets who are conscious of, and make creative use of, classical writers, are the truly original poets of their time.



The first issue came out in April 1966. Ejaz Husain was the first editor, but Faruqi removed his name from the masthead after a few months—claiming that the association with *Shabkhood* was embarrassing for Husain as a Progressive writer—and replaced it with Jamila’s.

Shabkhood was a sensation from the very beginning, and caused an uproar among the Progressives. “I was criticised a lot,” Faruqi recalled. “They also called me an agent of the CIA and American-minded, and a person with borrowed ideas. But it became so popular that many who

were on the fence, or even the Progressives, were later published in my magazine—sometimes through their own submission, and sometimes at my request. For example, Ali Sardar Jafri sent his poem or Ismat Chughtai sent something or Rajinder Singh Bedi sent some story. It became a kind of revolution and a rebellion at the same time.”

CM Naim, a professor at the University of Chicago, told me over email that *Shabkhood* was the single most important literary event in Urdu after 1947. “People forget that even before 1947 it was Lahore that had most Urdu presses and journals and newspapers,” he said, adding that although Delhi became more active in this regard after 1947, Urdu declined over the years as it began to die out among the non-Muslims in Punjab and Bihar, and the exchange of publications stopped completely after the 1965 war. “*Shabkhood* met a very urgent need. Its pages were open to everyone, and it was not tied to any organised literary movement as was the case with its important contemporary, *Kitab*, published from Lucknow.”



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He remembered that *Shabkhood* was edited with great care, and that it introduced several compelling writers. “Being a monthly, it continued the great tradition of letters from the readers,” he told me. “In its case, it was often those pages that people first turned to. Though in its later

decades, those pages became infested with personal feuds. But these exchanges were often very informative and inspiring to younger readers. *Shabkhood* put before its readers not only the finest products of the new writers but also helped that audience appreciate the same in an informed manner.”

By the time it folded up, the magazine had become truly “internationalist,” publishing some of the most important poets of the post-Partition era, such as Zafar Iqbal, Mohammed Alwi, Ameer Hanfi, Adil Mansuri and Saleem Ahmad. Intizar Hussain and Anwar Sajjad, two prominent writers from Pakistan, later said that they came to be known in India because of *Shabkhood*. When Faruqi wrote to Balraj Komal, a great poet of his time, asking for his poems, Komal was taken by surprise, as he had never been published in India before. Asif Farrukhi, a Pakistan-based physician, writer and a long-time reader of the magazine told me that although he had followed the progressives and Faiz in particular, Faruqi’s arguments appeared hard-hitting but very well-built. “They were very logical. It brings out the fact that Noon Meem Rashid is as important a poet, as perhaps Faiz is.”

Shabkhood also presented Faruqi with an opportunity to write bold reviews that criticised the Progressives for their poetry and rigid teachings. Learning from, and expanding on, TS Eliot’s thoughts, *Shabkhood* assumed the position that modern poets who are conscious of, and make creative use of, classical writers, are the truly original poets of their time. Faruqi argued, in a preface to his book *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History*, that “in the Indo-Muslim literary tradition, of which Urdu is the exemplar par excellence, literature was viewed as synchronic: nothing ever went truly out of date, hence nothing ever was truly new.”



By the time it folded up, *Shabkhone* had become truly "internationalist," publishing some of the most important poets of the post Partition era, such as Zafar Iqbal, Mohammed Alwi, Ameer Hanf, Adil Mansuri and Saleem Ahmad.

But Faruqi had also decided that *Shabkhone* would not be solely a highbrow literary magazine, and ensured that there were articles, stories and poems of interest to the general public. Faruqi had come across Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a well-known study of sex, sexual diseases and human psychology. Faruqi translated and published it in a few installments. He also translated poetry, drama and prose, including writers such as Ted Hughes, George Macbeth and

poems in languages including French, Chinese, Persian, and Sanskrit. The fiction that *Shabkhood* carried at the time was mostly thrillers or ghost stories. “I used different names to publish them—Javed Jabil for fiction; Jamila, my wife’s name, for poems; criticism, reviews and some poetry under my own name. I did not want to give the impression that the only person who writes in *Shabkhood* is Faruqi, and also to give some variety to the list of contents.”

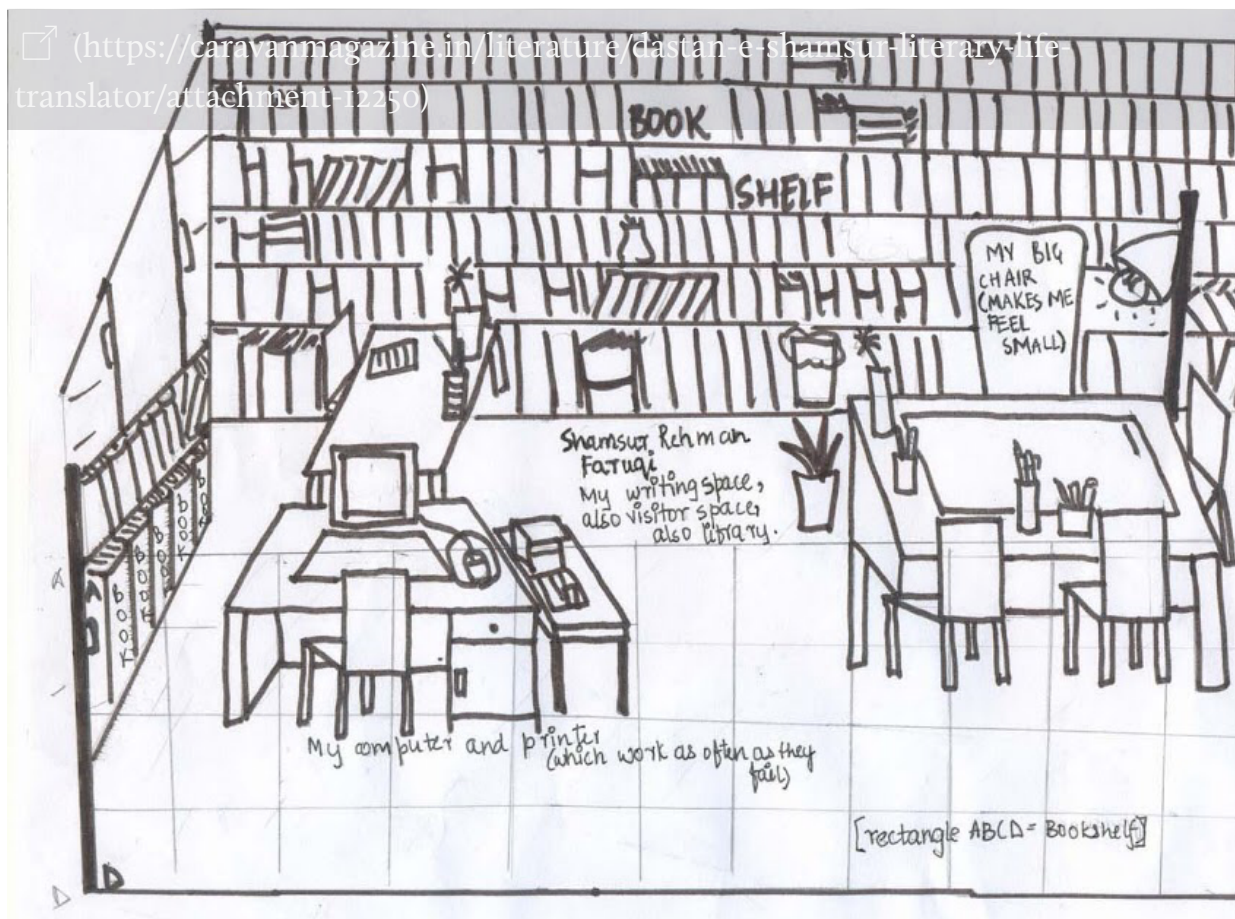
In 2006, a year before Jamila passed away, *Shabkhood* ceased publication. The reasons Faruqi gave the readers was his declining health and pressing commitment to his other work. Devoted readers sent him letters, and even monetary contributions, in the hope that the magazine would continue, but Faruqi and Jamila had made their decision.

Our conversation about *Shabkhood* meandered from Faruqi’s inquisitiveness to English enlightenment to the Hindu philosophy of Charvaka, who did not believe in god, to the Persian polymath Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi, who had questioned the divinity of the Quran. As Faruqi remarked on the idea of challenging everything, he remembered *Shabkhood*, and said calmly, “I did all of this. If you call it an accomplishment, call it so. I did nothing in one way. If I had not challenged the way Mir and Ghalib were being read, I wouldn’t have reached where I have—in my learning, in my understanding and in my writing.”

IN THE 1980S, the academic Frances Pritchett, now a professor of South Asian literature at Columbia University, was working on the oral tradition of *qissa* and *kahani* in Urdu and Hindi, and had become interested in translating the *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*. She encouraged Faruqi to read the dastan, which until then Faruqi believed was meant only to be seen and heard. It was a form of oral storytelling in medieval Persia that later arrived in India and remained in existence till the beginning of the twentieth century. The narrative, according to

Pritchett, involved the *dastango*—the narrator telling tales of heroic romance and adventure.

Dastan-e-Amir Hamza, which chronicles the life of Amir Hamza, was widely popular in India, particularly in the nineteenth century. The publisher Munshi Naval Kishore, who ran one of the most prominent presses in nineteenth-century India, sat down the *dastangos*, writers and calligraphers, and printed 46 volumes of it between 1883 and 1905. After Naval Kishore, the second-most critical figure for the *dastan* to still be in existence is Faruqi, who found, collected, and read all the forty-six thousand pages, containing twenty million words, of these long-out-of-print books. Faruqi has written four volumes of analysis on the *dastan*, titled *Sahiri, Shahi, Sahibqirani*—Warlockship, Kingship and Lordship of the Auspicious Conjunction—and he assumes it will take at least twelve volumes of analysis, the fifth of which is nearly finished.



A sketch of Faruqi's work space made by his grand-daughter Tazmeen. COURTESY TAZMEEN AMNA / FRANCES W PRITCHETT'S COLLECTION

His extensive study of the dastan also revived the fiction writer in Faruqi, who had been waylaid by his work on the magazine. For Ghalib's bicentennial anniversary in 1997, Faruqi wrote a story modelled after Malik Ram's *Mirza Ghalib Se Ek Mulaqat*—A Meeting with Mirza Ghalib—and Mirza Farhatullah Beg's *Dihli ki Akhri Shama*—The Last Mushaira of Delhi. Both these stories had first-person narrators, and Faruqi's story *Ghalib Afsana* had an old Rajput man narrating his meeting with Ghalib late in life. In this story, as well as his others on Mir and Mushafi, he deployed the technique of providing a descriptive background to the characters. Faruqi told me that this was instigated by his reading of the dastan, and that he realised that the technique (which he later used in his novel *Kayi Chand the Sar-e Asman*—The Mirror of Beauty) provides “distance, depth and body to the characters as well the events that befall them later.” “He writes as if he is transcribing from a film he is seeing on Mushafi or Mir,” the writer Ahmad Mahfooz told me, appreciating Faruqi's incredible power of imagination.

Faruqi translated his collection of short stories, *Savaar Aur Doosre Afsane*—The Sun That Rose From the Earth—and *Kayi Chand the Sar-e Asman*, his novel, into English. Though when I asked if it was possible for the novel to have first been conceived in the English language, he claimed



to represent doesn't exist in the English culture. The sensibility of the language, the sensibility of the people who spoke that language, the people who populate this novel, their mores, their style of living and believing, their worldview, belief system—those cannot be described in English at all.”

Faruqi told me that it could either be viewed as a triumph or a disastrous failure that he could do things in Urdu that he could not in English. “For example, high literary Urdu has a certain flavour, which is impossible to translate into English. At times, I was able to find a word that was more or less suitable. Like the word *hazrat* or respected *huzoor* has been

translated into ‘presence,’ which, outside the domain of the book, would not have meant anything.” As the author of the novel, he was able to take certain liberties, though, and chose to sacrifice certain high Urdu and archaic words, but he said that he compensated by deploying nineteenth-century English that is considered archaic today. “It took away a certain flavour of the language. What came was another flavour: the feeling of antiquity. It was a substitute which had to be accepted.” The novel was nominated for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2015, but the jury rejected it on the grounds that it was too archaic.

Faruqi’s challenges of translating between the two languages was far from over. Faruqi’s first major work of translation, in 1950, was an essay by John McMurray, titled “Dialectical materialism as a philosophy.” Over the years, he translated poems from several languages to Urdu and Urdu poems into English, besides translating his own poems into English. For *Shabkhood*, Faruqi translated short stories and criticism written in English and French. He has also translated Plato, Bharatirhari, Kalidas, Hafiz and Mir, and a few years ago, four books of the widely read Ibn-e Safi detective series. The range and volume of his translation work is staggering.

Faruqi suggests that it is vital to have two translators working on a text: one, an expert in the input language and the other, in the output language. He added that the nature and temperament of the language matters—how close or how far it is from the language’s culture.





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“The activity of translation always fascinated me, but I was not sure what its theory was,” he told me. “Only much later, I began to understand the complexities and complications of translation. The nature and temperament of the language matters—how close or how far it is from the language’s culture. Poems of Hafiz, for example, translated in different times are so different that one cannot believe that they are the same poem. The modern sense of translation is that one should try to bring out the spirit of the text.” One of Faruqi’s influences was AK Ramanujan, whose main contribution to translation, he believes, “was to break up the lines and spaces. He created geometrical designs in his poems through indentation, following early modern Russian writers like Mayakovsky and Mikhail Tsetlin.”

Faruqi always asks himself, he said, how the spirit of the input language can be infused in the output language, especially when they are so different; even finding satisfactory translations from Persian to Urdu is difficult for him. He suggests that it is vital to have two translators working on a text: one, an expert in the input language and the other, in the output language. “I have done that with Muhammad Husain Azad’s *Ab-e-Hayat*, which was translated with Frances Pritchett. She brought her imperfect Urdu and perfect English, and I brought what I thought

was my perfect Urdu and imperfect English.”

In the early 1990s, while recovering from a heart surgery, Faruqi translated some of his favourite Persian verses, which were eventually compiled and titled *The Shadow of a Bird in Flight*. It contains 107 works from 60 poets. He hopes to expand on the number of verses if time permits. Most recently, Faruqi has translated his selection of Mir’s poetry—published by the Murthy Classical Library, Harvard University Press—and yet believes Mir is untranslatable. “Mir is a difficult poet to translate in English. Sheldon Pollock, who is the editor, a friend, and a very learned man, insisted, in the interest of modern American English to change some of my translations. ... It taught me more about the impossibility of translations than anything else.” And this is after a lifetime of studying Mir that resulted in *Sher-e Shor Angez*—Lion of Tumult-arousing Poetry—a four-volume book on the poet, for which Faruqi earned the Saraswati Samman, in 1996. Nevertheless, translation has always fascinated Faruqi and although he accepts defeat, he is ever ready to do it.

“It may not be a fashionable way to say it but I view Faruqi Sahib as the greatest ‘facilitator’ that Urdu had the good fortune to have,” CM Naim told me. “He makes some difficult tasks easier for others. He expands possibilities for others. In this case, for serious readers of pre-modern Urdu literature. What began as old-fashioned *sharh*, or explanation, of the ‘harder’ verses of Ghalib eventually turned into an extraordinary project of revealing to us the literary presuppositions, linguistic and rhetorical rules and conventions, as well as the poets’ ambitions to change or break the same that made the classical ghazal and the Urdu dastan so fascinating and effective. In other words, he showed us what made that body of literature ‘great.’”

Besides translations and criticism, Faruqi wrote poetry in his spare time. His first collection, *Ganj-e Sokhta*, came out, in 1969, to much acclaim.

Over the years, he explored all forms of Urdu poetry—nazms, ghazals and ruba’iyat, among others. “The tint of his ruba’i is so different that it can be recognised from afar,” Mahfooz told me. “In his collection of ruba’iyat, he has used all the 24 metres. His ghazals have a profusion of meaning rendered by ambiguity, which can be said to be in the tradition of Ghalib.”

In the MANUU documentary, the writer SA Ashraf called Faruqi a *dimag ka shayar*—a poet of the mind, as opposed to a *dil ka shayar*, or poet of emotion—a formulation that Faruqi does not agree with. Faruqi said, “two kinds of poetry have been written in the last four hundred years of Persian, of which Urdu is a direct descendant. One can be described loosely as poetry of emotions, one that evokes bare emotions. The other is that which stimulates you intellectually.” Faruqi believes he is a *khyalbandi* poet—one with abstract themes, ideas and a tendency for wordplay.

For the past fifteen years or so, Faruqi has been compiling a dictionary of about fifteen thousand rare words in Urdu. The words being collected are not used by modern writers, or their meanings have changed over time.



Faruqi does not think great poetry is being written in Urdu today. “I have not seen any new talent that has held my breath,” he told me. “You can view this as an answer of a cantankerous old man, who feels that old times were great and the newcomers are *gadhe*”—asses. “Although, I think I should be absolved of that crime, because I have encouraged young people all my life.” He suggested that people are no longer

reading creatively, and that the main contributor to this tendency is the bad quality of teaching at our universities. While the number of people reading Urdu has increased, the language itself is not growing, because of bad teaching. Urdu is being read by people conversant in other languages such as Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali and Hindi, as people enjoy Urdu poetry and because they believe that Urdu is something valuable. “The way it was nearly uprooted from our midst after Partition, that we have been able to recover. What I am not happy about is that people are not being led to understand the real literary world of Urdu. ... Even in families where children are reading it in school, they are not speaking it. Urdu needs to be brought back home.” At home, although he realised the increasing acceptance of English as the lingua franca, he discouraged his children from using it. Baran Farooqi, his younger daughter and a professor of English at Jamia Millia Islamia University, wrote in *The Punch* that “such was his sense of what I much later understood to be a post-colonial identity that he refused to be called ‘Daddy’ or ‘Papa’ by us. All of us called him ‘Bhai.’”

Most people agree that the focus of Faruqi’s work has been to recover the literary and cultural past from the discontinuity rendered by colonial rule. Faruqi himself agreed, and explained, quoting Iqbal: “*Meri tamam sar-guzasht khoye huon ki justaju*” —the story of my life, seeking those lost ones. “The difference is, I have done more than *justaju*” —seek. For the past fifteen years or so, Faruqi has been compiling a dictionary of about fifteen thousand rare words in Urdu that were used by the poets. The words being collected are not used by modern writers, or their meanings have changed over time. The available texts, from where these words are being collected, are unreliable, or badly printed. Ahmad Mahfooz has helped him with four hundred words from Mushafi’s collection. Faruqi told me the work is nowhere near finished, but “I am trying to do what I can. If I am able to collect those fifteen thousand words, I think I will have done something substantial.”

IN 1968, Faruqi started building his house near what is now called the Bahuguna market, in Allahabad. Despite a joke he is fond of cracking—“Houses are built by fools, and the wise live in them”—he designed the house himself. It has a large outer courtyard, with roses and a variety of chrysanthemums, where Changez Khan Bahadur and Bholi, his dogs, loll about in the winter sun. Faruqi’s favourite de-stressing activity is filling the many food and water bowls in the house, and cleaning out the large birdhouse in his courtyard. Like his favourite poet Mir, he adores animals and birds.

Inside, a large room has been converted into his library, which doubles up as his meeting and writing room. One of the walls has a photograph of his wife during her time at Allahabad University, and others feature his brothers, sisters and cousins. There is also one of Ghalib and another, surprisingly, of Syed Ahmad Khan. On his computer desk, where he checks his emails and writes, sits his father’s photograph. Books, in both English and Urdu, spill over shelves that stretch from the floor to ceiling. There are a number of fat dictionaries, and editions of Shakespeare’s complete works. Parrots and sparrows can often be heard creating a hullabaloo outside.

As I left the house and Faruqi came to see me off, he told me I should have stopped him from holding forth. “If my wife were here, she would have asked me to shut up, as she had once when in Lahore I went on and on. She knew that I spoke too much. *Ab kahan kuch reh gaya hai?*”—What is left now?

Yet, he is still to write those chapters of the novel, those volumes on the dastan and those rare words for the dictionary remain to be found.

KEYWORDS: [Urdu poetry\(/tag/urdu-poetry\)](#)