

Ibne Safi's stories the stuff movies are made of



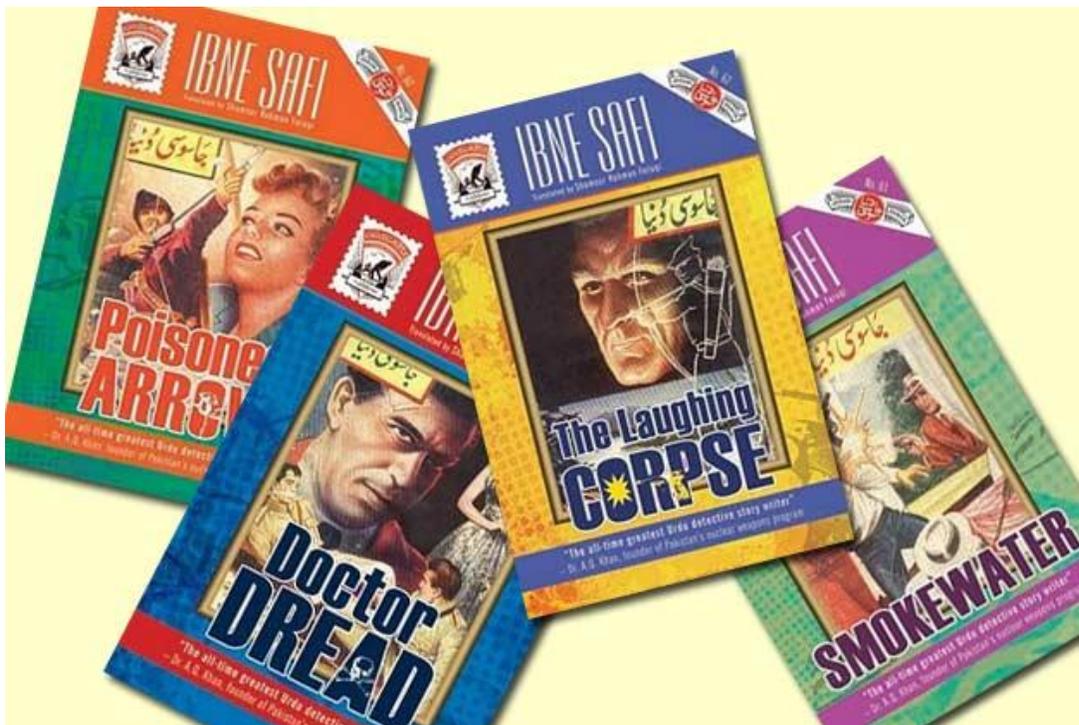
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Smokewater. Poisoned Arrow. The Laughing Corpse. Doctor Dread.

They're the sort of books you'd see on street corners. Nestled next to a cobbler's shop or *Paan wale ki dukan*. Perhaps on a push cart, parked alongside another one offering pirated CDs of the latest *jhankaar* beats.

The sort of books your apartment's guards and lift operators might. Or perhaps your driver, to kill time, while you finish off brunch at the club. Usually printed in Hindi, with loud covers that look like tacky movie posters from the sixties and seventies.



Safi's perfect style of writing doesn't let you rest till you rest the last page.

They're the sort of books you'd never read. Unfortunately.

Because when translated into English, they give you the sort of roller coaster ride that most high-falutin authors today, simply can't. They have plots as unpredictable as an auto-rickshaw careening through Chandni Chowk. And dialogues as spicy, as piping hot, as kachoris in Old Delhi.

I'm not sure why, but they reminded me of the way people used to talk and act in Delhi suburbs like Janakpuri and Tilak Nagar, about thirty years ago. Maybe it was the razor sharp wit, used often by Captain Hameed. He's supposed to be a bumbling side kick for the more urbane, suave Colonel Faridi - an Indian version of Sherlock Holmes if you will.

But Hameed has this desperate, half-weird, road-side Romeo air of all sadak chaaps. He's got a glad eye for women but none of today's metro-sexual namby-pambying about him. He gets straight to the point, often with lines most people would get slapped for. But he doesn't.

Then there's the occasional character like Inspector Rekha, whom Hameed baits endlessly, mercilessly. She's nothing like the intimidating, tough-as-nails policewomen you see grappling with protestors on live news TV, or patrolling the streets in central Delhi.

She's modeled on the sort of woman most Indian men probably want. Sexy, but with a mind of her own. Feminine, but one who'd cut you up with her tongue if you try anything fresh. She's got a thing for Colonel Faridi but can't get him. Hameed's got half a thing for her, but can't get her either. It's complicated. But such is life.

Then there's this fascinating criminal called Finch. He's supposedly from Goa and he's terribly-height challenged - a dwarf, in plain speak. He used to work in a circus and apparently used to be a decent man. But something happens that makes him scream for revenge and turns him into one of the most cunning, most surprising villains of all time.

There's another villain in the piece - a master con called Doctor Dread. He's supposedly American and he's got his tentacles in every criminal pie. There's one entire book dedicated to him but I didn't like him too much. He was probably invented to reflect the politics of the time these books were written in - when the USA and its allies were seen as evil - plotting the downfall of indigenous governments in the Middle East and South East Asia.

A word about the author. Ibne Safi was born in Uttar Pradesh in 1928. But he migrated to Karachi around 1952 and died there in 1980. Unknown to most of us convent educated types, he penned over 240 hugely popular detective novels, writing in Urdu and publishing both in Pakistan and India.

I got the impression he was this part of the world's Arthur Conan Doyle. One who perfected a style, a verve, a lilt to his writing that sucks you in and doesn't let you rest till you reach the last page. Pulp

fiction they might be but boy - it would be fun to see these stories made into a movie. Something on the lines of Saif Ali Khan's Agent Vinod perhaps?

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