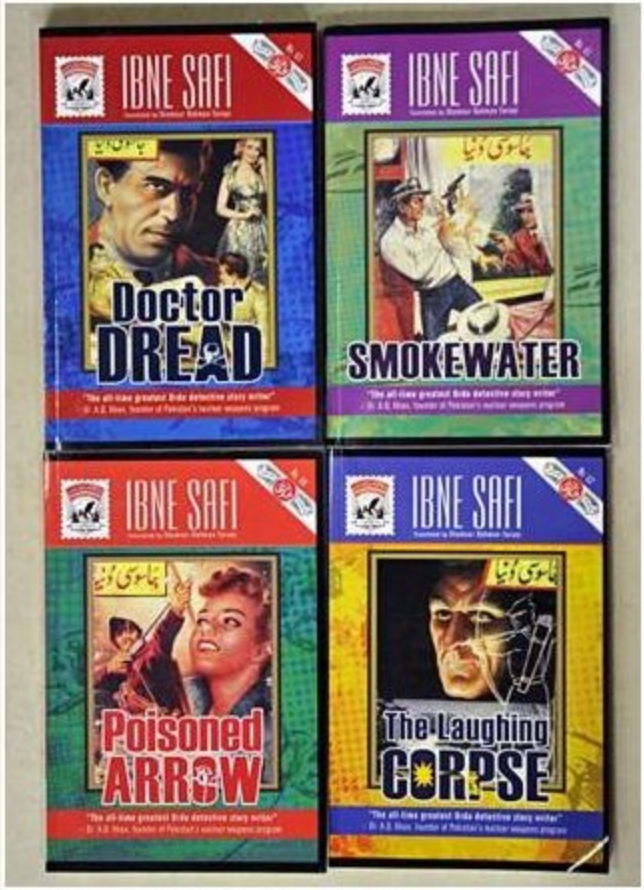
THE HINDU

LIFE & STYLE

July 14, 2011

Murder on their minds

DEEPIKA SARMA



The IBNE SAFI series of books. Photo: K. Bhagya Prakash

The four novels by Ibne Safi provide thrills, chills and solid entertainment

Poisoned Arrow (Rs. 200)

Smokewater (Rs. 200)

The Laughing Corpse (Rs. 200)

Doctor Dread (Rs. 250)

by Ibne Safi. Translated from the Urdu by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi. Published by Blaft Publications in association with Tranquebar Press 2011.

Grisly murders, pretty women, deadly international criminals, cunning disguises and an unbeatable crime-solving duo; the four novels by Ibne Safi's *Jasusi Dunya* series provide thrills, chills and solid entertainment.

In pursuit of the notorious Doctor Dread in novels 60 to 63 of the series, Colonel Faridi, a Sherlock Holmes figure, is nothing short of a miracle man. An aristocrat with a laboratory in his home and a "network of spies" at his disposal, Faridi is skilled in combat and a master of disguise, feared and respected by the criminals he hunts.

Captain Hameed, his oddball sidekick with a bizarre sense of humour, is a crack shot like Holmes' assistant Dr. Watson, a real shirker, and a dazzler on the skating rink. He is also prone to histrionics, fond of feigning madness, and keeps a pet Billy goat, dressed in a felt hat, tie and trousers.

A welcome addition to Blaft's much talked-about crime fiction, the novels are fun, short, and easy to get through, but be warned: Faridi and Hameed's adventures require the reader to suspend disbelief in generous dollops. Part of the enjoyment of the novels comes from their over-the-top, wacky nature, but they can also be exasperating, particularly when the story seems to follow an inane logic and Hameed's chatter grows tiresome. When Hameed quips, "Pardon me, but this whole recent adventure is like the plot of some bad movie," in Doctor Dread, you wish you'd said it first.

Oddly self-reflexive, (Hameed: "It sounds like the plot of a crime novel to me") one of the most intriguing things about the novels is their location. Faridi and Hameed live in a swinging city, with an exciting nightlife and multicultural inhabitants. However, the times in which the books were written manage to seep into the novels just enough to make the escapism of their location immensely poignant (they were first published in Urdu in 1957: the author began writing the series in India and moved to Pakistan a few years after Partition). For all its 'hep'ness, the city is "not [in] a civilized country", and the fear of nationalism hovers briefly when Inspector Rekha Larson teases Hameed for coming to work in "national dress". It may seem that the women of the city lead a liberated life — they ride motorbikes, go out dancing and even become MPs — but this façade is entirely at odds with the attitudes in the novel towards 'honour' and violence against women, which remain shockingly patriarchal. The covers with the original 1957 illustrations are eye-catching, and much of the attention commanded by the *Jasusi Dunya* novels' is probably due to their blast-from-the past appeal. Pick one up, and it's unlikely that you will be disappointed.