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Evocative make-believe world of Ibne Safi

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I remember my father having a stack of dog-eared Jasoosi Duniya novels on his bedside table; he was a doctor.

Several other older relatives too spoke of their addiction to these racy detective stories; they were university teachers, journalists, writers who normally read more sober and sedate stuff but confessed to an abiding passion for Ibne Safi's 'pulp' offerings. Reading them now in their English translation, I must confess to being somewhat bemused. I am struck more by the sociological import of Ibne Safi's creative cosmos than any intrinsic merit in the stories themselves, for, frankly speaking, the concerns per se appear a trifle dated and nowhere close to some of the great detective fiction in the league of PD James or Agatha Christie.

For me, these stories evoke a syncretic and pluralistic ethos which is all the more remarkable considering (a) they were originally written in Urdu, and (b) Ibne Safi himself migrated to Pakistan in 1952. Part-Bombay, part-Karachi and the rest an entirely fictional, marvellously cosmopolitan city, Jasoosi Duniya (literally meaning, 'the world of espionage') is located in a world of the imagination that, going by the phenomenal

popularity of these books and the near-cult following of their author, evidently held a strong appeal for their Urdu readers.

The setting and style hold more interest for me than the stories, for, I am mindful of the fact that they were written at a time when Urdu fiction dwelt compulsively on the horrors of the partition or waxed eloquent on the nation-building project – neither of which find any mention in these escapist fantasies.

THEY'RE ALL HERE: Voluptuous, often blonde-haired, women and gun-toting men in suits and hats graced the covers of these mass-produced, cheaply-priced paperbacks.
Inside was a wonderful world of cafes and bars with evocative names such as Rialto's, Sing Sing, Arlecchino, High Circle Nightclub, Shabistan, Chinese Corner; thrilling motor launches to island hideouts called Tar Jam; mysterious and beautiful women, some of whom were students or high-society ladies, others who worked for a living as typists and teachers; and masked villains who used lethal arrows and poisonous gases.

A whiff of internationalism pervaded the proceedings with stray references to foreign names and places, topical events from the global arena, ballroom dances attended by women of every possible nationality, and the recurring presence of a villain named Dr Dread, an American criminal with headquarters in San Antonio, New Mexico.

A policewoman called Rekha Larson, a diminutive crook called Finch, places named Arjun Pura and Gertrude Square, bartenders called Gasper, and the suave Oxonian Colonel Faridi assisted by the madcap Captain Hameed combine to create a wonderful world of make-believe that is neither fully India nor Pakistan, yet has a distinct Third-World feel.
SURVIVING TRANSLATION: The four books under review, translated by the eminent Urdu critic Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, showcase all this with great aplomb.

These sleekly produced books – published by Blaft in association with Tranquebar – use the luridly colourful covers from the Urdu originals as well as the trademark logos and numbers of the serialised books to recreate the old magic.

The Poisoned Arrow is a complicated tale of good-looking educated young women being employed as honey traps by a foreign embassy engaged in dubious espionage activities to ensnare politicians and civil servants.

The American criminal Dr Dread is behind the elaborate charade of drug-dealing, prostitution and spying to destabilise a country and its government.
Dr Dread reappears as Charles Brown in Smokewater which again sees Faridi and Hameed solving the mystery of the delusional industrialist, Sir Fayyaz Ahmad, who is being administered psychotropic drugs by a coterie involving his best friend and illegitimate son to seize control of his platinum mines.

The Laughing Corpse uses the staples of crime fiction – the beautiful Saeeda eking a living as a typist till one day she is left a large estate in Jamaica by a long-lost uncle and finds herself swamped by greedy suitors – to once again set the duo from the CID on a chase of Dr Dread and Finch.

And finally, in Doctor Dread, nemesis catches up with the arch villain but not before Faridi has displayed his astuteness and Hameed provided flashes of comic relief with his inveterate goofiness.

Interspersed with the suspense are moments of light-hearted banter, harmless flirtation between Hameed and the damsels in distress, snatches of Urdu poetry sprouted by various edgy and eccentric oddballs, and bizarre characters such as the 'gigantic blubbering fool Qasim'.

Being a series, several characters reappear and the narrative too refers to incidents and characters from previous stories.

That the Jasoosi Duniya books – the last being written in 1979 – continue to enjoy mass popularity is evident from the number of websites dedicated to Ibne Safi; tributes and accolades are piled up in virtual space to a man widely regarded as the greatest Urdu detective writer.

The 'official' Ibne Safi website is by far the most exhaustive compilation of views on the author whose real name was Asrar Ahmad, his two cult series (the Jasoosi Duniya which included 125 books and the Imran series with 120 titles), scanned images from the original Urdu paperbacks many of which were illustrated, as well as biographical details about the author who was treated for schizophrenia at the height of his popularity. Read these books not for any insights into the criminal mind or the human predicament that forever grapples with good and evil; read them, instead, for a glimpse into a world that transcends time and circumstance.

For, if Agatha Christie introduced us to the world of Miss Marple and murder mysteries set in rural England, Ibne Safi holds us by the hand and takes us into a sophisticated world of urban crime.

That the world existed solely in the writers' imagination makes it all the more intriguing.

From Allahabad to Karachi

Ibne Safi was born on July 26, 1928 in the Nara town of the Allahabad district in India. His father's name was Safiullah. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the Aligarh Muslim University. In 1948, he started his first job at Nikhat Publications as an editor in the poetry department. His initial works date back to the early '40s when he wrote from India. After the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, he began writing novels in the early '50s while working as a secondary school teacher and continuing part-time studies. After completing his education, having attracted official attention as being subversive in the independence and post-independence period, he migrated to Karachi in August 1952 and started his own company by the name of Israr Publications. Between 1960 and 1963, he suffered an episode of severe depression, but recovered and returned with the bestselling Imran series novel, 'DaiRh Matwaalay'. He penned 36 novels of the Jasoosi Duniya series and 79 of the Imran series after recovering from depression. In the '70s, he

informally advised the Inter-Services Intelligence on methods of detection. He died of pancreatic cancer on July 26, 1980, which was coincidentally his 52nd birthday.