Dear All,

Back in 2005, I suddenly had the urge to write about Ibn-e-Safi's work.

During my school days, I was absolutely hooked on Ibn-e-Safi. He is one of those unique writers in Urdu whom you read compulsively. You pick up a book and just read -- I mean nothing can stop you once you have started on it. And that happens irrespective of how many times you have read that book already.

That alone speaks volumes for the genius of such a writer.

Unforunately, things came up and I never completed that writing venture. So, here is the text of that article that still stands incomplete. But whatever I had completed, I am presenting to our readers for their comments and criticsim.

I am sure this will light up memory bulbs in those people's minds who have read Ibn-e-Safi and the lightbulbs of curiosity in those people's minds who have not had the opportunity to read Ibn-e-Safi.

Read on and enjoy.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Syed-Mohsin Naquvi

ALL ABOUT IBN-E-SAFI

By: Syed-Mohsin Naquvi 24 December 2005
Revised January 2008

I have always loved detective stories and action thrillers. Since I was born and raised in an Urdu speaking environment, I started with Urdu. The very first of such stories that I remember from my early childhood were the translations of Arsene Lupin done by Munshi Teerath Ram Ferozpuri. Arsene Lupin is a character (a gentleman thief) created by the French writer Maurice Leblanc. The next set of books I read in that genre were written by an author named Khan Mehboob Tarzi. His Urdu was absolutely immaculate language of the Ratan-Nath-Sarshar school that we read in Fasana-e-Azad. The three books that I read by Tarzi were:

(1) TURPA'EEتُرپائی

(2) PAYGHAAM-E-AJAL پیغامِ اجل , and

(3) AWADH KE BAANKAY. اودھ کے بانکے

This last one was an action-packed thriller of the 18th century Lucknow full of palace intrigues that took the reader from Lucknow all the way to Iran and back, while the first two were detective stories with intricate plots in which an arm-chair detective solves murder cases with great intelligence.

When I grew up and learned English, I got hooked on Agatha Christie and Earl Stanley Gardner, and of course, Sherlock Homes. That helped me learn to do speed-reading. And then came the James Bond stories of Sir Ian Fleming.

Let us now come to our favourite writer.

There was a person named Abbas Husaini who lived in Allahabad , U.P.

I am talking about late 1940's and early 1950's. Allahabad had a good Urdu speaking circle. The university at Allahabad had been there for a while as a center of learning and as a center of culture and civilization.

Just to give you an idea of what that circle was like, let me add that the family of the late Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had been in Allahabad for several generations. Their palatial residence known as ANAND BHAWAN was donated by Jawaharlal for the public good and it now houses a public hospital. The family of Akbar Allahabadi, the famous Urdu poet, had been there for several generations.

Akbar Allahabadi also had a mansion built for his family and it was named for his son as ISHRAT MANZIL. MotiLal Nehru (Jawharlal's father) had named his palace by translating the Arabic/Urdu name ISHRAT MANZIL into Hindi as ANAND BHAWAN. Akbar's son, Khan Bahadur Ishrat Husain, had married the youngest daughter of Nawab Ahmad Husain Khan of Paryanwan, another small state lying on the railway line between Lucknow and Allahabad . The Nawab himself was an author and a poet. My late grandmother used to tell me that the railway service between Lucknow and Allahabd was inaugurated in 1914. Ten miles from Paryanawan is the Unchahar station. If a train was standing at Paryanawan with the engine headlamp on, we would be able to see it from Unchahar. Two miles down the road from Unchahar station lies the village of Mustafabad , where my grandfather, Mir Syed Diyanat Husain, lived on his lands. Mustafabad is also the hometown of another Urdu scholar and educationist named Syed Zamin Ali. It was actually Syed Zamin Ali who had established the department of Urdu at Allahabad University and he had actually retired from there. The famous girls college of Lucknow named Karamat Husain Girls college had begun in 1912 in Allahabad as a girls school.

Abbas Husaini had a circle of friends which included writers, thinkers and poets. Abbas Husaini himself was a man of some consequence. He had lands in and around Allahabad . That circle of friends, which also was joined later by the late Syed Ehtesham Husain, when he had joined the University of Allahabad as the professor of Urdu in the late 1950's, was active as a discussion group. During those discussions, one day the topic was "WHAT IS

THE FUTURE OF URDU PUBLICATIONS?" The general line that was emerging in that discussion was that the only viable (Urdu) literature that was going to sell in the near future was pornographic literature. There indeed was a market for such books. They were sold and circulated by a black-market kind of book-sellers and private libraries. The most famous name in that line was that of WAHI WAHAANAVI.

وہی وہانوی

This was a pen-name for obvious reasons and nobody knew the true identity of that person.

A person named Asraar Ahmad intervened in that discussion and said that there was a market for yet unexplored literature in Urdu and that was for Detective Stories and Crime Thrillers. Others disagreed with that line of reasoning. Asraar Ahmad took it upon himself to produce a prototype. Abbas Hussaini vowed to support that publication. He had also owned a printing press. As a side effect, three other members of that group volunteered to produce the so-called Roomanavi novels. The only names I remember now in that group are those of Shakil Jamali (I think he passed away a couple of years ago --- I met him in Karachi in the 1970's) and Ibn Saeed. C.M. Naim has mentioned Shakil Jamali's name in one of his Annuals of Urdu Studies articles. Anyway, Asraar Ahmad produced his first prototype under the banner of Jasoosi Dunya (The World of Espionage) in 1952. He had chosen his pen-name as Ibn-e-Safi. The name of that novel was DILAIR MJRIM. After reading a lot of Ibn-e-Safi and after meeting him in 1972, I came to the conclusion that Ibn-e-Safi was a very widely read man. I will not be surprised if he got that name for his maiden novel from Hafiz, the famous Farsi Ghazal poet, from his famous line:

CHEH DILAWAR AST DUZDEH KI BAKAF CHARAAG DARAD

چہ دلاور است دُزدہ کہ بکف چراغ دارد

I was a student of seventh grade in Lucknow in those days. The book was produced in the shape of the penny-books of England and the Beadle's Dime Books of America. Let me just give you an idea about the Dime Books by a quote:

"BEADLE'S DIME BOOKS (from *North American Review*, July 1864, pp. 303-309)
Beadle's Dime Books.--Novels and Library of Fiction; Biographies; Song-Books; School Series; Hand-Books for Popular Use; Hand-Books of Games, &c.; &c., &c. New York . 1859- 1864. 12mo.

A young friend of ours was recently suffering from that most harassing of complaints, *convalescence*, of which the remedy consists in copious draughts of amusement, prescribed by the patient. Literature was imperatively called for, and administered in the shape of Sir Walter Scott's novels. These did very well for a day or two,--when, the convalescence running into satiety of the most malignant type, a new remedy was demanded, and the *clamor de profundis* arose. "I wish I had *a Dime Novel*." The coveted medicament was obtained, and at once took vigorous hold of the system. The rapidity of cure effected by it induced us to investigate

somewhat more deeply into the attractions and character of the "Dime Books" of all kinds, and a pile of forty-five volumes--all, with the exception of a few double numbers, sold at ten cents each--lies before us, being merely a selection from among them.
These works are issued by Messrs. Beadle & Co., of New York , in virtue of an enterprise started in the year 1859. They already amount to several hundred separate publications, and circulate to the extent of many hundred thousands. This need hardly be stated to any one who is in the way of casting his eye on the counter of any railway book-stall or newsdealer's shop. But the statistical statement, from authority, may excite some interest,--that, up to April 1st, an aggregate of five millions of Beadle's Dime Books had been put in circulation, of which half at least were novels, nearly a third songs, and the remainder hand-books, biographies, &c. After this we are prepared for colossal statements as to the millions of reams of paper employed, &c. The sales"
(End Quote from: http://www.merrycoz.org/books/BEADLE.HTM)
This turned out to be a master marketing ploy. The price of the first proto-type of Jasoosi Dunya was kept at ten annas (An Indian Rupee had sixteen annas). In its buying power, a Rupee was stronger than the Dollar but much weaker than a sterling pound – just to give you a comparison. The first mass-market Urdu paper-back was an overnight success. That in the 1950's of India , where the government policy was to shun Urdu and propagate Hindi was going ahead with full steam.
Let me first give you an overview of the series that became a best seller in a few months time.
Asraar Ahmad wrote with the pen-name IBN-E-SAFI. He wrote absolutely fluent Urdu. He translated the most common English expressions in simple Urdu and expressed his ideas, thoughts, feelings and events with such simplicity and great graphic details that he created a new world of fantasy for his readers. But for the readers, it was a real world where people moved, lived and died. It was a remarkable world.
In that process, Ibn-e-Safi introduced some of the most common English phrases known only to English speaking world such as: "COVER ME." He would translate that only to the extent of: MUJHE COVER KARO.

مجھے کَوَر کرو

At the same time he introduced some new phrases in pure Urdu such as: "IS SARDI MAIN TO MAYN MARNE SE BHI EHTERAAZ KARUNGA

اس سردی میں تو میں مرنے سے بھی احتراز کرونگا

(I would even avoid dying in this cold weather.)
The interesting word here is EHTERAAZ (to avoid) is a purely Arabic word from the Arabic root H-R-Z. However, the fluency of the narration that Ibn-e-Safi had achieved did not allow any hindrance in comprehension for an Urdu-reader who was being introduced to such deep Arabic the very first time. This was not your common every-day Urdu of the Lucknow streets.
The two main characters of the series were Detective Inspector Ahmad Kamal Fareedi, later promoted to honourary Colonel in one of the episodes and Detective Seargent Sajid Hameed later promoted to honourary Captain in the

same episode. Fareedi came from a very wealthy family of land-owners (Nawab) who were independently wealthy and did not have to care for money. That was the pretext for Fareedi and Hameed being above and beyond any corruption which was and still is the hallmark of both Indian and Pakistani police – a "glorious" heritage that the British left with us.

Fareedi was over six foot tall, very strong, muscular and virile handsome young man, who could move mountains with his bare hands. Fareedi is a very disciplined person. For that, Ibn-e-Safi created him out of an Afridi Pathan heritage who had been Urdu-ized over years. Actually that character is based on some facts. A town named Malih Abad, close to Lucknow , is inhabited by the ex-Pathans from the Frontier Province . Most of them own mango groves. The SAFAYDA of Malihbad is famous for its unique fragrance and taste. Most of the men in that population are very good-looking, fair, well-built and true to that portrayal of chivalry shown in Inspector/Colonel Fareedi. Most of the Afridi tribe living in Lucknow and the surrounds have changed their surname to Fareedi by dropping the initial 'A.' They are Pathans in looks but culturally they are true UPites. The famous Urdu poet Josh Malihabadi was one of them.

Fareedi is a graduate of Cambridge University where he has done original research in criminology. So he fights crime as a professional, not just as a government servant. He is always in full command of his self and knows exactly what he is doing. He has curbed his sexual instincts and diverted all his energies wholeheartedly to catch the criminals of the world. In one of his weakest moments, Ibn-e-Safi portrays Fareedi facing Ghazala, a beautiful girl, who is the daughter of another Nawab and an old friend of Fareedi's father. All he can say to Ghazla was: AAP BAHUT ACHHI LAGTI HAYN. As Ghazala looks to him in anticipation, he holds his own instincts back and does not do any more. That was in number 6, the title being PUR ASRAAR KUNWAN.

I did not meet Ibn-e-Safi until 1972, when I had moved to England and he to Pakistan . I met him in 1972 during one of my visits back home from England. So, I asked him about this particular trait that he had created in his hero. He explained to me. The reckless disregard of danger for fighting crime and the daring that he had envisaged for his hero was not possible in any man without curbing his sexual instincts and desires.

Seargent Hameed, on the other hand, is a playful young man, with an eye for beautiful girls. He also drank occasionally and even got drunk. Fareedi, eventhough, had always kept all kinds of wines and even hard liqueurs in his closet, he himself never drank. He hated the habit but felt that it was necessary for his work. In one of the episodes, he finds Hameed drinking with some men and girls. He picks up Hameed by grabbing him by the neck. Drives him home and then takes him to the bathroom. He holds Hameed under a cold shower until he is completely exhausted and then throws him in the bed for him to get out of the stupor and the hangover.

Another distinct characteristic of Ibn-e-Safi is the creation of woman characters. He never shows those women as objects of sex. Those women are

shown as respectable and seem to have their own will. As a writer he shows a lot of respect for the fair sex.
Ibn-e-Safi produced one such novel every month. Not only did the series become a money-maker for both Ibn-e-Safi as well as for Abbas Husaini, Asraar Ahmad proved his point that he had raised years ago in that private meeting with his friends.
Most of his readers were middle-class Urdu-speaking crowd all over India and later in Pakistan , but the series was popular in a very diverse readership. I still remember during my school days in my old neighbourhood in Lucknow , there was a rikshaw stand. All the rickshaw drivers would come and rest there after-hours. Many of them who were single and had come to Lucknow to earn a living as labourers had nowhere to go after dark. They would stand their rickshaws by the road side and sleep in their rickshaws. Many of them had got hooked on to Ibn-e-Safi. But they were all stone-illiterate. They were farmers from places like Gonda, Barabanki and other surrounding areas of Lucknow . Every month they would find a young man who would be able to read Urdu – but only just. They would rent the new Ibn-e-Safi book from the corner-library for two-annas (that was an average fair for the Rickshaw in those days – but the rickshaw drivers used to share that money among four or five of them) and the one literate person would read the book out loud to them under the street light – that was the extent of the popularity Ibn-e-Safi had acquired in a very short period of time.
Ibn-e-Safi introduced his readers to such western ideas as night-clubs, luxury hotels, Cadillac and Lincoln (air-conditioned) cars, 38 bore service revolvers (one of which was always carried by Inspector/Colonel Fareedi), and many other names of places and objects which I myself learned only after I traveled around the world. I came to live in Princeton only in 1985 after we moved to the United States . But I came across the name ' Princeton' thirty years before that in Ibn-e-Safi's novels.
Ibn-e-Safi got his material from his wide reading of both local as well as western works. He seems to have borrowed from Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming, Earl Stanley Gardner, Mickey Spillane, Arthur Connan Dyle and many others.
A year passed very quickly, Ibn-e-Safi produced eleven novels, one every month. Each one of those used to be 120 pages and priced at ten annas. It was only after I had published one of my own books in 1992 that I realized the significance of the number 128. For Urdu (as well as Farsi and Arabic) books have to be transcribed by hand on special paper (in Urdu it is called a MISTAR, in English it is butter paper.) That then is transferred onto brass-plates. The large amount of printing is done from those brass-plates. This is your standard photo-offset process (there is also a camera involved in the middle). Previously, it was done from stone-blocks and that process is called litho-graphic printing. Anyway, the brass plate can either take eight, sixteen or thirty-two pages of a standard book. Because of the process of the folding of the pages, the total number of pages in a bound book has to be a power of two. Because it will be most efficient cost-wise to print both sides of the paper at the same time, 128

is the optimum number of pages in a book to print exactly in two brass-plates. So Ibn-e-Safi's work was not only brilliant writing, it was done under the most pressing marketing and pricing structures.

NOTE: The advent of computers and software which can take Urdu typing to disk, has facilitated the desk-top printing of Urdu works.

The twelfth issue of Jasoosi Dunya was a special number. It was some two-and-half times thicker than the standard issue. It was a thriller-cum-adventure story. Ibn-e-Safi had set the main plot in Egypt and it was named "*Mawt ki Aandhi*" (The Tornado of Death). The story is brilliant and Ibn-e-Safi's narrative touched new heights of excellence in that story. He draws such a picturesque image in that story that the reader finds himself a part of the great adventure. It is one of the most interesting mystery stories of Ibn-e-Safi.

Ibn-e-Safi was a prolific writer. His art improved with every new story. It looked like he had an unlimited amount of material stored in his 1200 c.c. brain.

The 25th issue of Jasoosi Dunya was the Silver Jubilee Number. It was titled "*Khawfnaak Hangaama*." This was another crime thriller cum adventure story. One of the main characters in that story is borrowed from Connan Doyle's THE LOST WORLD.

Ibn-e-Safi also wrote a series of continuous novels – *Pahla Shola, Doosra Shola, Teesra Shola, and Jahannum ka Shola*, numbers 56, 57, 58 and 59.

Ibn-e-Safi introduces new characters frequently. In number 87 we are introduced to Qasim, a seven foot tall, fat, half-wit who was raised by a very strict father, forcibly married to a beautiful young woman, actually his first cousin, who is also a petit beauty. Qasim cannot satisfy his sexual urges by her so he is always out looking at big sized healthy women – in that process he gets into really precarious situations and provides the reader with hilarious moments.

That is an indication how Ibn-e-Safi has handled delicate psychological issues in our society. Perhaps, one of his masterpieces in that line is number 29, LASHON KA AABSHAAR. The villain/hero of that story is an illegitimate son of his parents. In his early childhood he is taunted for being a bastard. But he works hard, educates himself and becomes a powerful and wealthy man in the society but he carries that stigma of an illegitimate birth all along. As a consequence he develops a dual personality. Outwardly he is a philanthropist, secretly he is a mass-murderer. Inspector Fareedi, being and honest and realistic police officer, catches him in the act and he is prosecuted for the mass-murder. As he is being lead to the gallows, he looks at the crowd and asks: Is there anyone who would say just once that I am NOT a bastard? No one. The crowd watches him silently, he has a big laugh and walks up to the gallows.

As if that was not enough, very soon, Ibn-e-Safi leaves that series of Fareedi and Hameed and introduces a new duo of private detectives. The main character in that series is Anwar, an investigative journalist who enjoys solving crimes and making fun of the corrupt police offices at the same time blackmailing them. His helper is Rasheeda, who works for the same

newspaper, but actually she is a long-lost princess of an island kingdom which is rich in minerals and other natural resources. In one of the main numbers, Rasheeda is taken to her kingdom, but refuses to become the ruler and forsakes her kingdom for Anwar (we see the traces of Edward VIII renouncing his kingdom for a divorcee named Mrs. Simpson!!!) After producing 5-6 numbers on those lines, Ibn-e-Safi returns to his Fareedi Hameed series and from then on, both Anwar and Rasheeda are seen as Fareedi's unofficial helpers.

But, once again, Ibn-e-Safi's talent oozes out in a new series and he begins the famous Imran Series. The main character in that is Ali Imran, the son of a very successful civil servant who has no inkling as to what his son is upto. Imran works closely with the secretary of National Security and runs a secret anti-crime and anti-spy ring as its head who never shows his face, not even to his own assistants, under the codename X-2. Imran's mother is a typical Muslim lady raised indoors. She prays to Allah for the safety of her son while the son is out and about catching all kinds of bad guys or just killing them off with his bare hands. In the Imran series we are also introduced to one of the most hilarious, and artfully created characters known as Joseph. Joseph is an African who believes in witchcraft and he is a drunkard but a very powerful and strong man, who has the instincts of a Cheetah. Most of the time, he acts as Imran's body-guard and watches his back. Also interesting is Imran's assistants named HUDHUD (the word means a hoopoe) who stammers and always quotes Farsi proverbs profusely, and Juliana Fitzwater a Swiss young woman (Angelina Jolie was born on that model, one wonders if Allah created someone on a model created by Ibn-e-Safi).

In the characters of Imran's mother and Juliana Fitzwater, Ibn-e-Safi has juxtaposed two extremes of female characters in our own times. One is a deeply religious and traditional Indian Muslim lady, another a thoroughly European young woman highly trained in fighting all kinds of crime.

Ibn both portrayals Ibn-e-Safi has worked as an expert artist, painting a large canvas with all the colours but never forgetting the finer details and underlying shades.

Ibn-e-Safi works like an expert painter. He paints his pictures fully, expertly, using his brush as well as paint in such a manner that the painting comes alive in the eye of the beholder – he does not make any mistakes of fact or fiction.

He tried his hand on all kinds of stories. The stories in the Jasoosi Dunya series concentrate on expert and brilliant detective work and those in the Imran series are mainly centered on action and adventure. In both arenas he appears equally comfortable – the comparison that comes to mind is that of Earl Stanley Gardner, who wrote his court room dramas with Perry Mason character and at the same time produced the Bertha Cool-Donald Lamb stories of adventure under the pen name of A.A. Fair.

In the late 1950's, Ibn-e-Safi moved to Pakistan . He continued writing in the Jasoosi Dunya series and Abbas Husaini kept publishing it from Allahabad. In

total there were 125 novels written by Ibn-e-Safi in that series. In Pakistan he did his own publishing under the banner of Asraar Publications. A similar number he produced in Imran Series. In one of the episodes, he makes Fareedi and Imran come together and meet. But, apparently he thought better of it and gave up the idea.

During one of my return visits to Karachi from England , in 1972, I went to see Ibn-E-Safi. He lived in a house in Nazimabad number 3.

If Ibn-e-Safi was born in an English speaking country, he would have become a millionaire. Film companies would have produced big block-busters on his stories. But unfortunately for him, (and fortunately for us) he was born in an Urdu-speaking environment and that is where he produced his brilliant work.

At one time, his novels were re-written and published in Devangari. However, due to the political and social pressures the name of the principal character was changed from Fareedi to Vinod. But that was a very short-lived phenomenon. It did not catch on. I wonder why?

Urdu language, writing and story-telling has lost a gem in Ibn-e-Safi.

While in India, Ibn-e-Safi wrote as a faceless writer. He never tried to come any closer to his readers. He kept away from recognition. In Pakistan he changed his style. He would receive letters from his readers and he would respond to one or two of them in every number of Imran Series. He would do that in the introduction of the number. That was yet another modification of his style in India. In the Jasoosi Duniya series he never wrote any introductions.

In those preface pieces Ibn-e-Safi showed his puckish humour. In one such letters, one of his readers had written from a city named Tando Adam and had suggested a different ending to one of his stories. To that, Ibn-e-Safi had responded:

miaN Tando Adami, khud hi likh kar paRh liya karo.

میاں ٹنڈو آدمی! خود ہی لکھ کر پڑھ لیا کرو۔