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All You Want to Know About Urdu Crime Fiction

By: C.K. Meena

Having grown up on mysteries and thrillers in both English and Urdu, Naim has produced a painstakingly researched volume that will also be of great interest to the reader of crime fiction.

Upstairs, in my childhood home, there was a metal rack stacked with pulp fiction owned by my uncles. My dad cautioned me against his younger brothers' "rubbishy" books that were not allowed to taint the "proper" bookcase downstairs.

How naïve of him to position the rack within arm's reach of my study table! I would grab the paperbacks every chance I got, endlessly re-reading the exploits of Berkeley Gray's Norman Conquest (the Gay Desperado) and Leslie Charteris' Simon Templar (The Saint), though I did not care much for Sapper's Bulldog Drummond or Hal Meredith's Sexton Blake.

These names are generally not mentioned in the same breath as Father Brown, Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and other celebrated immortals. Therefore I was tickled to find C.M. Naim referring to them in his book on Urdu crime fiction. The University of Chicago emeritus professor makes no bones about his having "devoured" mysteries and thrillers in both English and Urdu from an early age. His "labour of love" is painstakingly researched and heavily footnoted but accessible to the general reader.

I use the term "general reader" rather loosely for even an avid fan of crime fiction may balk at reading about crime fiction. With the tenacity of a bloodhound, Naim has tracked down every available scrap of material linked to Urdu crime fiction—books, catalogues, advertisements in journals and newspapers in India and Pakistan—and revealed it to us in meticulous detail.

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Unless you are a logophile like me you might skip the "short digression" where he elaborates on the etymological niceties of translating "detective" into Urdu. But true to his description of the book as "an informal history", the narration flows smoothly and holds your attention till the end.

Naim provides a condensed history of crime fiction in his prologue. When we watch true crime serials on cable TV we are going back full circle to the very origins of this genre—18th-century British publications that recounted actual crimes, purportedly "to guard young minds from the allurements of vice". (Incidentally, this moralistic and reformist aim, however thinly veiled, lingered for decades in Urdu crime fiction.)

Naim traces the legacies of the pioneers—Eugene Francois Vidocq, whose "memoirs" were the first ever "police procedurals"; Edgar Allen Poe, whose "ratiocinating" Auguste Dupin spawned Holmes and his analytical reasoning through observation and deduction; and Maurice Leblanc, whose gentleman burglar Arsene Lupin played a key role in the development of Urdu crime fiction.

Being proficient only in English, I was unaware of the immense popularity of Urdu *jasusi* novels—*jasusi* being the umbrella term in Urdu for every kind of thriller, mystery, detective and spy novel. Naim deliberately bookends the scope of his research between 1890, roughly when Urdu crime fiction first appeared, and 1950, shortly before Ibne Safi started writing a thriller every month in his magazine *Jasusi Duniya*. Naim focuses on the pre-Safi years since many books have been written about this widely read writer whose *jasusi* duo Colonel Faridi and Captain Hameed have crossed over into English as well.

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I must confess that I had never heard of George W.M. Reynolds, who was a household name among Urdu speakers of the early 20th century and whose teenaged fans included the esteemed Hindi novelist Premchand and the redoubtable Saadat Hasan Manto. Urdu translations of his abundant creations (duly attributed to him on the cover) sold like hot kebabs. *Mistriz* entered the Urdu lexicon

following the translation of Reynolds’s first book *Mysteries of the Court of London*, which inspired a slew of Urdu titles with *Mistrizaf* preceding the name of a city—Peshawar, Lucknow, Kabul, Nainital, Shimla, and so on. Similarly, in the 1930s, when the so-called edifying purpose of crime fiction was on the wane and “suspense” was the draw, *saspens* was adopted directly into Urdu.

Naim devotes much of his attention to Tirath Ram Ferozepuri from Lahore who produced more than 100 “superbly readable translations” of thrillers and mysteries by 30-odd writers such as Agatha Christie, Wilkie Collins, and Edgar Wallace, besides Leblanc and Reynolds. Other translators were not as accomplished as him or even faithful to the original—they blithely abridged and summarised the text, added their own flourishes, and changed the tone of the narrative when it suited them.

Western crime fiction was not only translated but also transcreated. The most notable example is Zafar Omar’s Bahram series. Omar fortuitously chose Leblanc’s novel, translated into English as *The Hollow Needle*, to render it in Urdu as *Nili Chhatri* (The Blue Parasol), which became a runaway commercial success. He ingeniously transplanted the novel’s cast of characters onto native soil.

Bahram as a desi Arsene Lupin became such a legend that numerous authors appropriated him and wrote their own Bahram novels to reap surefire profit. Omar, who proudly wrote B.A. (Alig) after his name, made sure that Bahram’s understudy Masood was from his alma mater, the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh, whose graduates were known to be “playful and witty, socially smart and intellectually bright”.

The most delightful sections of Naim’s book are the plot summaries, which he copiously provides, and the passages of purple prose that he translates into English, with examples such as this: “Wonder and amazement sent shivers through my body. Together with disbelief and fear a wave of anger and rage also raced through my blood stream. My teeth chattered and then clamped together as if they never hoped to open again.”

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There are chases, explosions, buried treasure and subterranean chambers. A car turns into a submarine and, in an emergency, can fly without fuel. Forget CPR—when a man drowns, just insert a medicine that drains the body of its water. Disguises can be donned and whipped off in seconds, and the latex masks would give Nicolas Cage in *Face/Off* a complex.

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Were there no women in this business? It is an obvious question, to which Naim provides the answer: “No”. He discovered a couple of women who wrote during this time frame—not crime but mystery and horror. And he provides convincing reasons why “the macabre and the supernatural held a strong appeal for female Urdu writers, while crime and detection apparently did not”. But he leaves us with an intriguing poser—why were Urdu readers so indifferent to ratiocination? Holmes never took off, and Miss Marple sank without a trace.

C.K. Meena’s latest book is *The Invisible Majority*. One of her three novels is a *whydunit*.