

BOOK REVIEWS

A Bombay Muslim's Iqbal

MUHAMMAD IQBAL. *Taking Issue & Allah's Answer*. Translated from the Urdu by MUSTANSIR DALVI. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2012. xxx, 153 pp. Rs. 299. \$5.50 Paperback. \$9.60 Kindle ed. ISBN 978-0-143-41685-2.

MUHAMMAD IQBAL—like Maṭṭō—is a highly contested territory. People with differing—even clashing—political, religious, literary, cultural, linguistic and social viewpoints are seen insisting on the supremacy of their own reading of Iqbāl to the exclusion of all others.

Can we say that this happens with all landmark literary figures? In my opinion, no. Take, for example, Ghālib, who immediately preceded Iqbāl in the not-so-long line of the greats of Urdu poetry—going by the canon defined by those self-appointed literary and cultural middlemen, the critics. Fortunately for Ghālib, the question of what he stands for is not as hotly debated as it is in the case of Iqbāl. The only thing the critics who were not happy with the modernization drive in Ghālib could do was to invent a false and utterly arbitrary binary. As common readers of Urdu poetry, we are often constrained to choose between Ghālib and Mīr—for no fathomable reason whatsoever.

One possible way of looking at Iqbāl is to view him in the context of the identity politics that began in British India in 1857, in the aftermath of the Company's rule, among what was to later reify as "Hindu/Muslim" social consciousness. The phenomenon called—in the view of some, erroneously—the Bengal Renaissance had a strong revivalist drive in it from the beginning. It imagined a lost "golden period" in an ancient Indian civilization that gradually declined and decayed during the period of "foreign rule" (the so-called "Muslim rule") and the "Hindus" (read Brahmins and other upper castes) had the task before them of reviving the past glory.

In a fascinatingly complex two-way process of defining the "self" in response to the "other," a matching mythological golden past was invented by the "*shurafā*" Muslims, who were then trying to come to terms with their loss of courtly power to the new colonial rulers. Not only did the Muslims' mythology glorify the immediate past, it sought to eulogize all the invaders and conquerors that bore Muslim names.

However, there were two problems. Like the "Renaissance Hindus," these "*nish'āt-e sāniā* Muslims" did not have the courage to hold the British responsible for their "downfall." So, on the "Muslim" side it was attributed to "Allah's Will," and the fault was sought (and found) in the fact that, since the Muslims had

abandoned the “True Path of Islam,” they were punished by Providence with the loss of political power.

As advances in communication technology made it possible by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for Muslim *shurafā* to be aware of the existence of other parts of the world, including those under the weakening domination of a “Muslim” Ottoman Empire, a convenient myth of the “Muslim *Ummat*” was invented (later this was Islamized or Arabized as the “*Ummah*”). The Turkish “*Khilāfat*,” which was on its last leg, came easily to the *shurafā* for their local project of promoting a sense of global victimhood among Indian Muslims.

The faults that were identified as being responsible for the general decline among the Indian Muslims included the features of the local, dargah-centered forms of lived Islam that had developed through the preceding centuries independent of the power play taking place among the invading, conquering and ruling *shurafā* at the top. Here the *nishʿāt-e sānia* mythmaking project encountered the second problem.

Not only did the local, converted, basically rural Muslims belong to lower castes, they were required to remain on the lower rungs of the social ladder in the revival scheme. Being a conquered and converted lot, they had never tasted power in the past, so it was difficult for them to feel the loss of it the way the *shurafā* felt it.

The Muslim revivalist project, being entirely North India centric, demanded that they shed all local color in their culture and religion in favor of a mythical “pristine” Islam—which was nowhere to be found, adopt the Urdu language as their “mother tongue” even though they could not converse with their mothers in it, and, in short, acquire a specific kind of “national spirit” based on a “supra-territorial” religious identity as defined by the North Indian *shurafā*.

The two famous poems by Iqbāl, translated anew in the volume under review, are located at this point in the formation of the “Muslim” identity in India. Read together, these poems seem to be a more dramatic, nuanced and sophisticated variation on the theme of Alḡāf Ḥusain Ḥālī’s 1879 *Musaddas Madd-o-Jazr-e Islam*. It is a little known fact in the Urdu literary world that Hālī’s poem inspired the famous Hindi poet Maithili Saran Gupt to compose a long poem titled *Bharat Bharati* (1912), on the decline and need for revival of the ancient Indian civilization.

The translator of the present volume is a “Bombay Muslim” as described by Nile Green in his book *Bombay Islam* (Cambridge, 2011). Bombay, being a busy port city, brought together such diverse Muslim and other migrants from its oceanic and continental hinterlands as could not have been experienced by North India. Enriched by living in this land of diversity, Mustansir Dalvi brings freshness to his approach towards Iqbāl.

Dalvi informs us that when “*Shikva*,” the first of the two Iqbāl poems translated in the volume, came out and was recited by the poet at a literary gathering in Lahore in 1909, it “enraged Hindus and Muslims alike. By isolating individual phrases or couplets, Iqbāl has been criticized as divisive of his fellow countrymen” (xviii). It even invited fatwas of blasphemy from the Muslim clergy. Iqbāl

wrote the sequel, “Javāb-e Shikva,” two years later and read it out in a proper public meeting near Mochi Gate in Lahore; it resulted in the collection of a lot of *čanda* (donations) for the Turkish cause. However, compared with Ḥālī’s *Mu-saddas*, a rich ambivalence can be found in Iqbāl’s twin-creations as, after all, Iqbāl came from a recently converted clan, though it was an upper-caste clan.

Dalvi has set out to make this new translation as a personal journey and found that “it would be worthwhile ... to place these poems in the context in which they were written, and be conscious *not* to attribute meanings in the light of later events” (xiv). I find it exciting that he did not allow his unfamiliarity with the Urdu script to get in his way and used the Devanagari version accompanying the earlier English translation done by Khushwant Singh (New Delhi, 1981). His is a daring attempt to render these important and evocative cultural texts into contemporary language. “Accepting the obvious, that English is *neither* Urdu nor Persian, there is also a paring down of language and vocabulary...” (xvi).

As someone who has read and reread the two poems in Urdu as well as in their English renderings, I find Dalvi’s attempt at living and translating them anew almost as insolent and heretical as, allegedly, was Iqbāl’s in “Shikva.” And as inspiring, since his attempt is conscious of being yet another, personal reading of the greatest poet Urdu produced during the twentieth century. □

—AJMAL KAMAL

Editor, Aaj (Karachi)

[Gratefully reproduced from *The News International* (Karachi) (Internet Edition, Literati Section) 10 June 2012. Edited for the *AUS*.]

Portrait of a Vanished Time

SHAMSUR RAHMAN FARUQI. *The Mirror of Beauty*. New Delhi: Penguin Books (Hamish Hamilton), 2013. 984 pp. Rs. 899. ISBN 9780670086757.

MILAN KUNDERA OBSERVES SOMEWHERE that the novel does not write a society’s history. Its overwhelming concern is, rather, with the existential condition of the individual. Philosophical discourse is not part of its provenance, though its characters may engage philosophy, where the latter is not the object of novelistic intention but only an element of its strategy, to reveal tellingly some aspect of the character’s persona.

In his masterwork, *The Mirror of Beauty*, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi seems to have found a happy medium. It is a novel as much about a woman—a stunning beauty of elegant grace, infinite dignity and gravitas—as about Indo-Muslim culture in its heyday and during its precipitous decline, mostly at the hands of the British in nineteenth-century India but partly also because of the sapped energies of the late Mughals who failed to rise to the demands of statecraft with creativity,

steely grit, and shrewdness. However, the overarching impulse behind its creation springs, perhaps, from the author's tender love and profound feelings for a way of life whose memory is fast receding from our collective memory—to preserve for posterity what little can still be preserved of a manner of being before the corrosive forces of time and commerce, and our own manic scramble toward materialism, have annulled for all time what was once a living, scintillating reality, or, at least, our romanticized vision of that reality.

Faruqi, however, does not use his protagonist as a convenient showroom for the display of cultural artifacts, divested of personality, volition, and selfhood, seeking some ineluctable *raison d'être* beyond itself. His intimate knowledge of a bygone era, its people, their manners and language, compounded by an uncannily intuitive sense of the nuances and intricacies of the poetics of good fiction, enables him to interweave the quintessential qualities of both with such deftness and surety of touch that the two melt, almost as a dialectical necessity, into a breathtaking intimacy. It is the culture that makes Wazir Khanam who she is, and it is the mirror of her being in which the entire elegance of that culture, its decorum, its insatiable love of the literary arts, miniature painting, music, a myriad of crafts, even maladies and their indigenous as well as Greco-Arab herbal cures, is reflected in a rainbow of warm, dazzling colors. The delightful ambiguity of “beauty” in the title further reinforces the author's twin concern, as the beauty of the protagonist and the culture meld so seamlessly it is impossible to think of them as separate entities, or to discern where reality eases into illusion.

But it is a beauty as much illusory as tangibly real. Illusory in the form of the nonexistent Bani Thani (Bani Ṭḥānī; “The Bedecked One”) who dominates the first 150 pages of the novel, and every bit as sensually real as the ravishing Wazir Khanam of the remaining 850. Either way, its seductions prove fatal in the end. Even as it generates the desire for heaven or for earth, it destroys by the lethal effect it has on men.

Central Asian culture, transplanted to India by the Mughals with an ecumenical incorporation of native Indian customs and conventions, is enacted through Wazir Khanam and a fairly extensive cast of characters, some from the lower classes and in subservient roles, but most drawn from the upper crust—indeed some of them historical personages—and in commanding positions. And all this in the midst of the irritatingly painful presence of the foreign intruder: the Company Bahadur.

The English, literally in awe of the manners and majesty of Indo-Muslim culture before the 1800s, had acquired, as William Dalrymple notes in *The White Mughals*, all the hubris, the hauteur, the arrogance of an upstart with the advent of Wellesley on the horizon of India in 1798 as Governor-General.

Although fictionalized, Wazir Khanam is a historical character. She was the mother of the Urdu poet Dagh Dehlavi. Born sometime in early nineteenth-century Delhi, Wazir's ancestors were natives of the Hindal Purwah village some twenty miles from Kishangarh in the province of Ajmer in Rajputana, until her great-great-great grandfather, the miniature painter Mian Makhsumullah fled to Kashmir. He had painted the image of an imaginary Bani Thani. On an unsched-

uled visit to his estate, Maharval Gajendrapati Singh saw the iconic image hanging in an alcove of Mian Makhsusullah's hut. Its lifelike resemblance to his own younger daughter Man Mohini so enraged him that he suspected some promiscuous goings-on in back of the portrait. He had Mohini brought in a palanquin, accused the innocent girl of dishonoring him, and slit her throat, giving the residents until the next morning to vacate the village. Still later, Mian's two grandsons, the twins Daud and Yaqub, moved to Farrukhabad and Delhi, with a brief stopover in their ancestral Rajputana, where they lost their hearts to two ravishingly beautiful orphan sisters, Habiba and Jamila, and married them.

But who is this enigmatic Bani Thani, and was Mian Makhsusullah's some morbid fixation?

By the time Mian arrives in Kashmir he is firmly resolved never to paint again. He learns, instead, the art of producing *talim* (*ta'lim*)—i.e., the creation of exceptionally intricate designs for carpet weaving. But the imaginary Bani Thani is so enmeshed in his being that he paints her yet again, this time on ivory, and hangs it in an alcove in his atelier. He would gaze at it many times during the day and, as often, during nightlong vigils (76). He goes through the motions of living, with a soul on fire, desperately seeking an ideal well nigh unattainable in this life. The day his son is born, he places the infant in the arms of his brother-in-law and leaves the house never to return. He is found reclining against a mighty oak, covered in his blanket—dead, his hand clutching the piece of ivory. He and his Bani Thani are laid to rest in a single grave.

The strikingly beautiful and mysterious Bani Thani is something of a Platonic ideal, not the image of some flesh-and-blood woman. Some thought she represented the beautiful queen of a seventeenth-century ruler of Kishangarh, who was called Bani Thani, and "Some people also described her as 'The Radha of Kishangarh', meaning the beloved of God Krishna" (64–65).

The reference to Radha, "the beloved of God Krishna," and the disquietude in Mian Makhsusullah's soul, as much as his absorption in something beyond human contingency, represent, in Shelley's eloquent words, "The desire of the moth for the star, / Of the night for the morrow, / The devotion of something afar / From the sphere of our sorrow." In other words, the painful realization of the yawning gulf interposed between the phenomenal and the transcendent eternal—the Ground of Being, and the impatient desire to be gathered up in it until all consciousness of personal ego is extinguished—a notion common enough in the Sufi metaphysics of *Vaḥdat al-Vujūd*. Makhsusullah (Appropriated by God) may not have been a Sufi, but he certainly had an unmistakable sufic strain in his disposition, as reflected in his detachment and otherworldliness. Bani Thani to him was a symbol of something lacking in human existence—lacking but necessary, something sublime and of an infinitely higher order that existed beyond time and space, and drew him inexorably to itself. Even though he may not have been able to articulate with the clear vision of a Sufi, his Bani Thani was not an object, but the mimesis of the cosmic spirit in an imagined earthly medium.

Wazir's character dominates the novelistic space from Book Three. She comes through as an individual minutely conscious of her unassailable erotic

powers over men. But she knows how to restrain those powers from riding roughshod over her drooling admirers, schooled as she is in the courtesies and mores of her culture, and deferential to a fault to its requirements and limits. Sprightly, self-willed, unwilling to submit to domesticity, full of wit and subtle humor, with a passion for life and aware of the demands of her flesh, she never oversteps those limits yet manages, amazingly, to preserve her individuality.

Mistress of three men (Englishman Marston Blake in the employ of the Company Bahadur; Nawab Shamsuddin Ahmad Khan, a close relative of the poet Ghalib; and Agha Mirza Turab Ali), hoping someday to rise to the status of wife, she is singularly unlucky as the lives of all three are snuffed out prematurely. Blake meets his end in Jaipur at the hands of an overexcited mob that suspected the Company of interfering in the business of the Maharaja's succession; the Mirza is done in by thugs; while the public hanging of the Nawab owes in no small measure to the rivalry and ultimate humiliation of the Resident to the State of the Company Bahadur, Nawab William Fraser Sahib, who had lost the affections of Wazir to the handsome Nawab. (Not content with his burgeoning seraglio of half a dozen *desi bibis* and numerous boy-lovers, Fraser wanted to add Wazir to his sprawling harem as well.) Her fourth wooer, none other than the Mughal prince and heir apparent Mirza Fathul Mulk Bahadur, who finally bestows on her the much longed for and much delayed dignity of becoming a legally wedded wife, dies suddenly in 1856, a year before the sun was to set irrevocably on the Mughal Empire, or whatever was left of its nominal authority amidst the steadily encroaching power of the English.

Wazir goes through her tragic vicissitudes with exceptional grit, stoicism, and superhuman grace. The deaths of the four men in her life, whom she loved in her own way, are not the only wounds life has given her. Practically disowned by her religiously devout father and eldest sister, who could not put up with what they assumed to be her unforgivably unorthodox ways, she also had to suffer the haughtiness, the sleazy machinations, the petty-mindedness and jealousy of the relatives of her four lovers. Not only is she divested of material assets after their deaths, even her two children with Blake are practically snatched away from her lap by Blake's cousins, the Tyndales.

By the time the novel has moved to Wazir Khanam, the spiritual purity and considerably less materialistic aura of the traditional culture has already undergone a palpable change. The affinity of Wazir and Bani Thani is not in the physical realm but in a notion of beauty—bewitching enough to put men beside themselves.

Something of an epic in its palatial expansiveness, *The Mirror of Beauty* defies any attempt even to enumerate its tantalizing wealth, much less to adequately discuss it in a few hundred words, which would be like the attempt "To see a world in a grain of sand" and "eternity in an hour." The whole way of life of eighteenth and nineteenth century India is gathered in the novel's encyclopedic sweep. One can literally assemble several inventories of manners, ceremonies, festivals, fabrics, jewelry, arts and crafts, arms and weaponry, you name it. The description of Wazir's attire at her first visit to Nawab Shamsuddin alone is spread

over four pages (360–64), and that of his palatial residence in Daryaganj takes up over five (356–60).

Strangely, elsewhere a champion of Urdu, here, clear up to the middle of the nineteenth century, Faruqi consistently identifies the work of the classical poets of that language as Hindi, and only a few times as *rēkhta*. This is neither a slip on his part nor some concession or magnanimity. However, none of these poets, nor countless other writers of *that* language, would usually find their way into contemporary Hindi syllabi or literary histories, while diehard Urdu zealots would scarcely ever deign to acknowledge any reference to it as Hindi. What is left unsaid is a testament to the sordid history of linguistic nationalism.

Some individuals defy our notions of human possibility and limit. Faruqi is one such individual. A civil servant in the postal department until his retirement, he accomplished in letters what few are able to in educational institutions and literary academies. A poet, a critic, a theorist of literature, a fan and translator of detective novels, a polymath, with a profound knowledge of music and painting—the list of his achievements is endless.

As if his studies of Ghalib and Mir, his incisive comments about the nature of fiction, his insightful forays into lexicography and prosody, and, lately, his three-volume critical work on the Urdu *dāstān*, a stunning contribution to world literature, were not enough to leave ordinary mortals breathless over his vast erudition and creativity, he has achieved in a single novel what writers toil a lifetime to achieve, but few ever do: the brilliant portrait of a vanished time, when a Mir could assert with proud confidence:

*Mat sabl hamēñ jānō, phirtā hai falak barsōñ
Tab khāk kē pardē sē, insān nikaltē haiñ*

Faruqi came to fiction later in his career. Roughly fifteen years ago, Urdu readers were literally stunned by the appearance of about half-a-dozen short stories, all dealing with the lives and circumstances of major Urdu poets, all penned by different authors whose names were not encountered before, and all bearing everywhere the spoors of an accomplished writer. Eventually, Faruqi owned these literary gems as the product of his craftsmanship. He published them in a single volume, *Savār aur Dūsre Afsānē* (The Rider and Other Stories). While readers were still reeling from the stunning beauty of these stories, a treasure of cultural riches broke upon their senses with a crashing force—his gargantuan novel *Kaʿī Čānd thē Sar-e Āsmāñ* (*The Mirror of Beauty* in its English reincarnation).

The *Mirror* is not a translation. It is a reworking in English of the Urdu original, but in its main events it rarely drifts away from the original. The entire story is carried over intact into English. And Faruqi alone could have accomplished this formidable feat. The characters of a bygone age, their every breath and movement steeped in the unmistakable ambience of a self-sufficient but, ultimately, doomed culture, with its penchant for high-living, pleasure, illusion and poetry, required an idiom commensurate with their times and cultural personality. The stylized English invented by Faruqi—notwithstanding its few infelicitous contemporary “hey” and “girlie” and “you son of a gun”—gives the novel its razor-sharp edge of

authenticity.

India should be rightly proud that two of the greatest living Urdu writers, both recipients of the Sarasvati Samman—Faruqi and Naiyer Masud, an academic, research scholar and a short-story writer—make their home in its bosom. And Penguin, equally, should be congratulated for publishing them both in the same year (Masud's *The Occult, Seemiya* in its original Urdu, will appear later this year). □

—MUHAMMAD UMAR MEMON
(*University of Wisconsin–Madison*)

[A shorter version of this piece first appeared in Mint Lounge: www.livemint.com]