

IANS Interview (Alankrita)

- [How difficult was it to do justice in English to the original Urdu? Were there any specific challenges to keep the essence of the original intact?](#)

Because I was the author of the original Urdu, I had some freedom and I took liberties here and there, but essentially, I stuck to the text, except of course, in 2 things:

A. The high Urdu, or the very high Urdu often used in the novel.

B. The Urdu archaisms, because the novel was written in the greatest part in the Urdu of early 19th c. (Please remember that at that time the language was almost universally called 'Hindi' and that is the name that I have used throughout.)

About A., I could do nothing, except retain in literal translation the titles and honorifics that were actually in frequent use at that time. Re. the rest of the high Urdu, I compensated by using the English of early 19th c, thus giving a certain piquancy to the narrative, and also satisfying the requirements or conditions imposed by the fact of B. above.

I had to sacrifice things absolutely specific to Urdu language and culture: Womens's language (that is, words and expressions used by none but women in those times); Words, though common in themselves, but having special connotation in literature, such as martyr (to mean, lover); wounded (to mean, lover); murderer (to mean, beloved), unopened bud (to mean, early youth); etc.

I can say that except for the instance of a modern narrator, or a modern person through whose eyes the events are seen, I have consistently used the Urdu, or the English, of early 19th c.

- [How long did it take to write Urdu novel? The period setting and the richness of details suggests a lot of research necessitated on your part. Could you elaborate a little on this?](#)

The Urdu took four years (with some gaps); the review of the Hindi translation (with my friend Kranti Shukla) took slightly upwards of six months. The English took a year and one month.

I did no real research, except check on some facts and details, like the details of the Poona Durbar of 1792; or when did the East India Company start to

issue its own coins? Or, what was the title given to a certain King or Navab after his death? etc. And of course, I constantly consulted dictionaries to make sure that I used no word (English or Urdu) not in use in early 19th c., and books of poetry; or my own diary (or commonplace book) where I jot down quotes, notes, extracts from books, etc.

- [Considering it's epic quality—in content and length—do you think it might get restricted to a niche audience?](#)

Frankly, this didn't bother me a bit. I wrote with the following readers in view:

1. I, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi.
2. Anyone interested enough in the Indo-Muslim literary and social culture of the 18th and 19th c. to take the trouble to read the book.
3. My immediate family. (Wife, daughters, some brothers and some sisters in law, a couple of nephews), and that's it.

- [It is unusual to read about a Muslim woman of the Mughal era striving for independence when it comes to making life choices. Were you wary about writing this character? Did you think it could be potentially controversial--to make such a character the protagonist of your novel?](#)

Women like Wazir Khanam were unusual at that time, but not entirely rare and difficult to find. In fact, it was History which solved my problem, because Wazir Khanam is a real character, and all that she did, or all that happened to her, is strictly true, except for the details.

- [Does the English title capture the essence of the book? How did you come to it?](#)

The question of the English title bothered all of us: Family, Publisher, Friends in foreign countries, among them those who didn't know enough Urdu to have read the original, but who are people of good taste in English. The title was more or less discovered by my younger daughter Baran in a translation from Hafiz that I made long ago. The actual line was:

My eyes are the mirror for her beauty

This struck my Editor R. Sivapriya and my Chief Editor Chiki Sarkar as extremely appropriate especially for a non Urdu speaking audience. The entire Penguin team liked it, so did I. And thus ***The Mirror of Beauty*** became our title. My working title was Wazir Khanam, actually.

- As an eminent Urdu writer and critic, what do you think are the reasons for the current unhealthy state of the Urdu language?

In terms of readers, students, admirers, the language is doing well, actually. I know many non-Urdu speaking persons who learnt Urdu in order to read and write poetry in it. And their number is growing. I won't say that more doesn't need to be done. But I also say that more needs to be done by the people, the speakers, or those whose parents were the speakers of the language. This includes both Hindus and Muslims. I blame both of us for deserting and forsaking Urdu after the Partition.

I am certainly not satisfied with the current state of Urdu literature. This is mainly because Urdu is now not so much taught at home as at School, College and University. And the quality of teachers through the whole gamut leaves much to be desired.

Shamsur Rahman

Faruqi, June 14, 2013, Allahabad.