

1. The Mirror of Beauty is being lauded as the next big opus of canonical standards. How do you feel about that?

I don't know if 'The Mirror of Beauty' is going to make the canon anytime soon. But I am very happy that I wrote the novel (in Urdu) and then transferred it into English. To write a big novel had always been my ambition.

2. It is a translation from Urdu to English, a massive task that you undertook yourself. What were the challenges you faced during the translation?

The most insurmountable difficulty was the high Urdu and the profusion of Urdu and Persian poetry. There was then the problem of the archaic Urdu that I have used almost throughout. I gave up the high Urdu, translated the poetry as explicitly and faithfully as possible. For narrators and dialogues purporting to be from the 18th-19th centuries, I used 19th century English, that is, I used no words which were not in use in early 19th c. and obversely, I used no modern words.

3. Wazir Khanam is a historical figure that you fictionalized in your accounts. How did you stumble upon her colourful life? What attracted you towards the character? What made her so special to you?

Anyone who knows about the poet Dagh will almost certainly know something about his mother (though most of what is written about her is dismissive). The novel is something like a continuation of my stories about Indo-Muslim literary and social culture of the 18th-19th centuries. The first one I wrote in 1999; the latest one I wrote a few months ago.

4. What sort of historical narratives/tools did you rely on for your research?

I made no research, really. The novel was more or less what, over the years, I learned and absorbed of the literary and social culture that I write about. I looked up specific history books to verify a specific fact, like the year the East India Company introduced its own coins. But there was no 'research' in the conventional sense. The novel has a multiplicity of narrative voices, sometimes the narrator and the novelist-as-narrator are one, most often they are not.

5. So, how far is the story based on Khanam's life? How much of it factual?

All the important details of her life as narrated here are historically accurate. The only deviation I made was to show Marston Blake's death as occurring in about 1829-30. Actually, he died a few years later. I describe the circumstances of his death accurately.

6. Tell us about the creative procedure for writing the text.

I write when I feel like writing, which is often enough. Mostly, I first narrate the event to myself in my mind. Some times, I even frame the actual sentences. Then, once I begin, I let the flow take its own course until I come to the next historical event.

7. Professionally you were a civil servant but literary criticism and writing fiction and poetry is something that your heart always desired. Why did you not pursue your dreams as a writer/academic early on in life?

It may be hard to believe, but I began writing at a very early age, at the age of about 7 or 8. I began to publish a little (almost all of it fiction) when I was 14 or so. I didn't attract much notice and suffered much frustration. But I went on. It was some sort of an impulse, or let's say, a way of life for me. My life as a civil servant didn't come into it. My first book of criticism came in 1968, my first book of poems in 1969.

8. You were the editor of a literary magazine, *Shabkhood* for 40 years. Tell us about your publication.

I began the magazine as a sort of challenge: new writing challenging old writing, questioning old norms, especially the progressive norms, colonialist assumptions. I promoted literary theory, prosody, translation, fearless reviewing, experimentation, modernism. My wife Jamila supported it financially, except during the last decade (1994-2005) by which time the magazine had become self-sufficient. Also, my books were selling more and more and much of what I earned that way went into the magazine. Jamila's moral support stayed with me always.

9. Tell us about your days of "nonage". How did you overcome that phase in your life?

All that I wrote before I was, say, 24 or 25, I regard as the writings of nonage. The greatest hurdle was the colonialist heritage. It was very, very long before I could put it behind me. For example, it took me years to realize that all cultures create their own canon. There is no universal canon. This was a painful discovery.

10. How did you chance upon the title, *The Mirror of Beauty*?

Everyone found it very hard to translate the original Urdu title. Defeated, I adopted 'Wazir Khanam' as a working title. My friends at Penguin, especially Chiki and Sivapriya, were sure that a more appropriate title was needed, one that was also easy on the tongue. Everyone, family, friends began to search anew. Baran, my younger daughter, recalled a ghazal from Hafiz that I translated and put in my book *The Shadow of a Bird in Flight* (Rupa, 1994). One of the lines went:

My eyes are the mirror of her beauty

Chiki and everyone else said 'Eureka!'

11. How did your love for literature grow? What drew you towards your subjects?

As I said, doing literature is a way of life for me. I cannot imagine my life without it. As for the subjects that I have written on, I just kept going from one to another. There was no plan. It was just as my fancy took me. Lexicography, practical linguistics, prosody, literary theory, pre-modern Urdu literature, especially of the 18th-19th centuries, oral narrative, narratology, the list is very long.

12. You speak quite freely about how you were not comfortable with English at one point of time and then to have aspired to write in the language to translating a massive narrative of 1000 pages from Urdu to English requires a lot of skill and effort. What do you have to say about your literary journey thus far?

I don't think I said that I was ever uncomfortable in English as a writer. I view myself as an Urdu writer who has written and translated quite a bit in English. My discomfort, if it was that, was about how to translate into English a huge text, which a number of competent translators said they were unable/unwilling to do the job.

13. The moral or the message you are trying to convey through this work?

I don't believe that a literary text should have a message, or a moral. I remember when some of the chapters of the novel came out in serial form, my friend the late Syed Sirajuddin, a man of great learning and former Professor at Osmania in Hyderabad, asked me: Hey, you are doing a brilliant job, but where are you going with it?

I confess that I hadn't thought about it this way. The text, most especially a narrative text, is its own master or mistress and leads the author by the nose. But when I pondered, I realized that Wazir Khanam and her Delhi were the mirror image of each other. Both had everything going for them in abstract terms of culture, sophistication, learning, refinement. But nothing went their way. Delhi was not an effete, obsolete, illiterate city as the colonialist and his comprador intellectuals said. Wazir Khanam was not the flighty, amoral harlot as she was routinely described.

There's another thing which was first perceived by Baran: *Bani Thani* and the other paintings in the novel are actually Wazir Khanam, an ideal beauty that no one's really able to possess. A sort of mystic vision of Beauty. Later, this dimension was noted independently by some other readers and reviewers like Muhammad Umar Memon and Asif Raza.

A day in the life of Faruqi sa'ab?

Well, actually, my life is pretty disorganized. I have no daily schedule, though I try to work for 7-8 hours a day, down from 14-15 nearly a decade ago. I have no social life (at least now), no recreations (at least now) except reading thrillers. I read compulsively. I have a variety of birds, and three dogs. I look after them with loving pleasure.

14. Creative process? What gets your intellectual/imaginative juices flowing?

I am not sure. But I don't believe in 'inspiration'. What I think is most important is to observe, and absorb, and read, and think. I can write whenever I want to write. All that is needed are a reasonable state of good health, and time.

15. Your favourite among everything you have written so far.

I don't know. Perhaps these fictions that I wrote over the last 12 or 13 years.

16. Things people assume about you just because you are a writer and are mostly incorrect?

Well, many people believe that I am arrogant, and unapproachable. Their belief evaporates when they meet and talk with me for a reasonable length of time, say 15 to 30 minutes. I don't suffer fools gladly, but very often I do. There must be much more that people must believe about me. I am not really interested.

17. Is the writer's block a myth? If not, what do you do when you hit it?

I can write when I really want to. As I said above, I just need to be in reasonably good health and have the time. I never suffered from the writer's block.

18. Best and worst compliment you have received so far for your book?

Can compliments be categorized as 'bad', or 'worse'?

19. The most absurd place you've had an idea for a book?

Sorry, I don't follow. For writing a book, or keeping a book, or a place to write about?

20. Do you have a muse? Who is he/she/it?

I don't believe in muses, human or non-human.

21. If you had to pick one between being on the top of the bestsellers list and a big literary award but a small niche readership, which one would you pick? On a similar note, tell us about the audience you had in mind while writing *The Mirror of Beauty*.

I don't believe that God, or Nature, would ever give anyone such a choice. Actually, 'a big literary award' always attracts readers. So your 'choices' boil down to the same thing. As for my putative audience, my reader had to be literate, interested in 'literary' literature. The novel's success in Hindi proves that its reader didn't need to have Persian, or even Urdu, to enjoy and appreciate it. I don't think I have written an 'intellectual's novel'. I wanted to, and did write a novel that should be sophisticated and complex.

Favourite authors? And a few must reads for you?

I am a great reader of thrillers. Some authors I like more than the others. I have my favourite poets in Urdu .

22. Any advice for young, aspiring writers?

Since I don't believe in inspiration, and talent none can acquire, I suggest to all aspiring writers that they must read, must know about the world nearly as much as about literature.

23. Most distracting activity/temptation while writing?

To watch an important Test match in Cricket. Before TV, to listen to the running commentary on a match of similar description.

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, July 17, 2013.

(Answers to the questions sent by First City Magazine.)