

Have you read 'Sharlak Homz kā Pahlā Kārnamā'?

An informal history of crime fiction in Urdu is delight for those interested in thrillers – or old books and magazines (or both)

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Cover of 'Khūnī Chhatrī' (The Murderous Umbrella), by Shivnath Rai [Image, from 'Urdu Crime Fiction']

Urdu Crime Fiction, 1890–1950: An Informal History

By C. M. Naim

Orient BlackSwan, 304 pages, Rs 875

“Humankind, I like to believe, can be divided into two groups: one group swears by science fiction, the other cherishes only mysteries. I belong to the latter.” Thus begins C. M. Naim’s homage to the writers who once provided generations of Urdu-speaking mystery-lovers hours of sleepless delight.

Meticulously researched, this ‘informal history’ unravels how crime fiction first originated in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, how Urdu writers responded to this new stimulus, and the rapid emergence of what then became the *jāsūsī adab* in Urdu. Described as ‘wonder-inducing’ and ‘sleep-depriving,’ bearing titles like *Khūnī Chhatrī* (The Murderous Umbrella), *Tilismī Burj* (The Magic Turret), and *Mistriz af Dihlī* (The Mysteries of Delhi), Urdu thrillers sold in the thousands.

Aficionados of the Netflix series *Lupin* may be surprised to learn that a century ago, Maurice Leblanc's gentleman thief, Arsène Lupin, was adored by Urdu readers in his *desī avatār*, Bahram, 'transcreated' by Zafar Omar in a 1916 bestseller that made Bahram a household name. We discover Tirath Ram Ferozepuri, the prodigious translator of mysteries and thrillers—114-odd titles, spanning 60,000 pages. We meet Nadeem Sahba'i, of unfettered imagination, who produced masterpieces of Urdu pulp fiction.

Urdu crime writers were quick to capture the new material realities of urban India—from the 'exotic' mannequins, latex masks and 'truth-serum' to the everyday advertisements, gramophones and cameras. Significantly, they also highlighted India's new 'secular' spaces—railway platforms, public parks, libraries, restaurants and cinemas, where people interacted, unburdened by tradition or identity—in ways that other Urdu writers failed to do. Their stories hold a mirror to 'the idea of India' before independence.

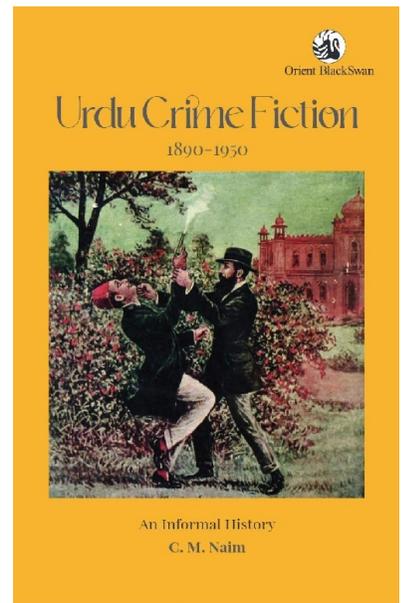
Naim, Professor Emeritus in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, founded and edited the *Annual of Urdu Studies* from 1981 to 1991. His translation of the autobiography of the famous Urdu poet Mir was published as *Remembrances* in 2019 in the Murli Classical Library of India. He is the author of several books, including *A Most Noble Life* (2021).

His latest work, the first on the subject, will delight and inform anyone passionate about crime fiction in any language.

Here is an excerpt from the book:

Holmes in Urdu

[...] A few Urdu speakers in India must have read Doyle's tales even as they were appearing in *Strand* since the magazine was easily available in India; a great many more Indians, we can be sure, read them in the two collections, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, as they came out in 1892 and 1894 respectively. It took a few more years, however, for someone to introduce him to Urdu readers. The earliest translation, so far found, dates to 1903. It is a translation of 'The Red Headed League,' titled '*Ajīb Sāzish* (A Strange Conspiracy), and published as an independent book of 34 pages. The translator, Muhammad Muhsin Faruqi, is described on the cover as a *hakīm*—a practitioner of the Greco-Arabic system of medicine—born in a small *qasba* in Moradabad district. In his brief introduction, Faruqi tells us that (1) the book was a fruit of his efforts in the very first year of his learning English, and that (2) it was his second book, since the first book, a similar 'fruit,' was lengthier and still in the press. A marginal note indicates that the first book came out before March 1903, and that the second translation was titled *Khāmosh Surāghrasān* (The Silent Detective). Very likely it was another Holmes story, though the Urdu title does not immediately suggest any in the Holmesian canon. ('The Adventure of the



Dying Detective’ came out in 1913.) Faruqi’s translation is fairly accurate, but often too literal. As a result, his language is too formal compared to the original, and not so enjoyable—it could not have pleased the new generation of readers who relished the more colloquial narration by then popular in all periodicals and newspapers. The relatively high cost of the small book could not have attracted many buyers either.

Later the same year, the weekly *Intikhāb-e Lājavāb* (The Matchless Selections), published from Lahore, began to serialise a translation of *A Study in Scarlet* under the title *Joshilā Qātil* (The Passionate Murderer) that continued into 1904. The translator was Syed Mustafa Athar. *Intikhāb-e Lājavāb* (Lahore), edited and published by Munshi Mahbub Alam, was a weekly modeled on the famous English weekly *Tit-Bits*.

Alam was an extraordinary entrepreneur, who made his fortune through innovative journalism and publishing. His most famous venture was the *Paisa Akhbār* (The Penny Newspaper), which was modeled on the ‘Penny’ journals of England. The journal lasted for many years, first as a weekly and later as a daily, and at its peak, it claimed to have a circulation of several thousand, reaching far beyond the Punjab. Alam was also the first to publish a monthly magazine exclusively for women, *Sharīf Bībīyān* (Genteel Ladies), and another monthly exclusively for children, *Bacchon kā Akhbār* (The Children’s Journal). Besides being a successful publisher and journalist, he was also a prolific writer himself, specially of instructional books on different technologies and trades that were then beginning to appear in India. His press published much popular fiction, including anonymous translations of crime fiction done by its staff as was noted in Chapter 1.

There is no record that *Joshilā Qātil* was ever published as a separate book. Nor have I come across any other publication by Syed Mustafa Athar. The translation, however, was briefly reserialised in 1913, with a new title: *Sachchā Intiqām yā Bahādur Raqīb* (The True Revenge, or The Brave Rival), but discontinued after a few instalments when several subscribers complained that they had read it ten years earlier. The over-conscientious publisher paid no heed to the appeals of the new subscribers who were left in the dark.

A Study in Scarlet was retranslated and published as an independent book in 1920. The new translator, Firozuddin Murad, was a professor of Physics at the Aligarh Muslim University. He called his translation *Khūnnāba-e ‘Ishq* (Blood-tears of Passion); however, when he republished it in 1930 he changed the title to a plainly descriptive, *Sharlak Homz kā Pahlā Kārnāma* (The First Adventure of Sherlock Holmes). Evidently, by that time the name of the detective was all that mattered to attract attention to a book. Murad was such an ardent admirer of Doyle and his ‘ratiocinating’ human machine that he contacted Doyle and asked for his permission to translate him into Urdu—a rare instance in Urdu literary history. And Doyle generously gave it too—for all his Holmes stories! It was a sad choice on Doyle’s part, for Murad’s translation is earnest but clunky, and he tends to abridge too often as he goes along.

Another equally earnest attempt was a third translation of *A Study in Scarlet* called *Tishna-e Khūn* (The Bloodthirsty). The translator was Lala Amarnath ‘Mohsin’ of Amritsar. The cover describes it as ‘a novel that won laurels in the field of detection (*jāsūsī*) with the help of Physiognomy, Anatomy and Chemistry.’ It is, however, an abridged translation, and, most curiously has the appearance of a play script—it is chiefly in the form of verbal exchanges

between the characters of the story, and all other portions of the original narrative have been severely shortened or entirely omitted. This peculiar feature of Mohsin's enterprise could reflect the fascination many Urdu writers of the early years of the twentieth century had for 'naturalistic' dialogue as opposed to the 'idiomatic' exchanges of Nazir Ahmad and Sarshar that were cherished earlier. As noted in our discussion of Reynolds's novels, any prowess with dialogues was considered a matter of pride by many Urdu fiction writers of those early years. Mohsin's translation, however, was not a plagiarism of Murad's book. In fact, his language has some nice literary flourishes of the old-fashioned kind, whereas Murad's only relatively fuller translation is ever so often clumsily literal.

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