

## Questions by Sonal Shah on ‘The Mirror of Beauty’

1. You make the research for this book look so effortless, yet decades must have gone into the accumulation of all the details here. By the time you started writing it, was the world you were describing familiar enough to you that you could just dive into it and emerge with the story? Or else, could you tell us a little about your research process or perhaps your library and the resources you managed to use? Will there be a bibliography in *The Mirror of Beauty* as well?

‘Effortless’ is the right word, in the sense that I didn’t do any systematic, formal research. As I wrote, I did consult a few books when I needed to verify some particular detail, dates mostly, of historical events. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the novel had always existed in my head as an amorphous, identity-less entity. Facts, memories, impressions — and of course my reading before I’d begun to compose the novel—it was all there—a chaos, especially because I didn’t have anything like an idea to write a novel with Wazir Khanam as the chief character.

As for memory, yes, I do have clear memories—or what I believe to be clear memories—of things in my childhood, even babyhood, that is, when I was less than five years old, more than seventy years ago. But the chief source was my reading which was always eclectic and wide even when I was very small. And of course, I was incomparably enriched by my love for and reading of pre-modern Persian and Urdu poetry.

Later, what went into my unconscious more than I realized, was my reading of the Dastan of Amir Hamza—a series of loosely linked oral romances whose 46 volumes and 42000+ pages and more than twenty million words I read, and in some cases re-read, over the twenty years since I read the first volume in about 1980. I’ll always remain obliged to Frances Pritchett who directed my attention to the Dastan.

Yes, I always depended on my own collection of books. One reason is that I am too lazy to go to a library.

I did give a bibliography at the end of the Urdu version, but it is really too small and can’t compare with the pages upon pages of bibliographies that one often finds nowadays in a work of fiction in English. I believe the English version doesn’t need a bibliography especially when it consists mainly of Persian and Urdu books which would normally have

no interest for those who don't have these languages, or who aren't interested so much in the 'history' as in the 'story' that the novel tells.

2. Thinking about your translation, I was reminded a little of the debate surrounding Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*, written in English, for an English publisher, then translated into Urdu some years later. Besides the fact that your book is far wider in scope, you don't seem to have been impelled to seek an English audience in the same way. Does your confidence in the primacy of Urdu for your own writing reflect any truths about the general state of translation and publishing in India/South Asia today? And then, how were you convinced to ultimately translate the book, and for whom?

Well, I wrote in Urdu because I consider myself an Urdu writer. I do write or translate in English occasionally; 'occasionally' here is the main word. I had no thoughts about translating the novel into English, or Hindi, or preparing an English or Hindi version of it. It was just fortuitous that everybody at Penguin liked the novel so much that they had me give them the rights for publishing its translations in English and other Indian languages, particularly Hindi.

I believed that Penguin would find a translator in due course. It wasn't something that I needed to bother my head about. I had enough to do as it is. In due course, it appeared that no one seemed to agree to do the translation. Still, I wasn't bothered, really.

Many years passed, then my daughters began to raise a high clamour. In fact they almost hounded me with it: Why don't you translate the novel? You know that none else can do it. You know that you can do it easily. You know that you can find the time, &c, &c.

So, one morning in April 2011 I sat down to do it, or embarked upon my blind voyage. It turned out to be not so blind, after all. My current editor Sivapriya liked my 50+ page sample, and I think Chiki also liked it. My daughters liked it, naturally. ('Naturally' is the operative word here.)

So, one evening in April 2012 found me writing the final words.

3. Among recent Urdu novels, *Kai Chand The Sar-e-Aasmaan* and Mirza Ather Baig's *Ghulam Bagh* (both fat, ambitious, complex debut novels) are notable for their popularity. You also mentioned the flowering of Urdu novels in the last 40 years in your biography note. How would you describe the state of

the Urdu novel today and do you notice any trends? What about its relationship to other genres? Do you see contemporary Urdu novels drawing as much from the tradition of the Dastan or European romance as from the modern or post-modern Western novel?

Actually, *Ka'i Chand...* is not a debut novel. I did write a short novel (I am quite ashamed even to think of it now) when I was 15. It was even published serially in a magazine. I don't know about Athar Beg, but the ambition of my life always had been to write a big, big novel. The four stories that I wrote during the two years before I began the novel were quite long, in fact each one could almost be called a short novel. So when I wrote *Ka'i Chand...* I wasn't trying my hand at something new for me.

In Urdu, novels are now much in evidence, some of them quite voluminous too. Unfortunately, they don't reveal any sense of form, or a real concern with anything but what is reported in the media nowadays. They seem to be moulded on the pattern of 'breaking news.' There's little effort to go behind the event, to try to make sense of what is happening around us.

4. In another interview you've described poetry as "a way of existence" and said that the "Hindu-Muslim way of life placed great value on eloquence and the power of expression." In the passage reanimating Fanny Parkes, there's a funny incident in which she praises Wazir by reciting Byron, a fellow explorer of the East. Was this something you picked up from her notebooks? Or how did you come up with the incident, and does it suggest an earlier affinity (perhaps one denied by the process of colonization) between the Hindu-Muslim way of life and the English way?

Well, I just invented the Fanny Parkes incident, like much else in the novel. I read her diaries (as edited by Dalrymple) many years ago, just as a part of my reading anything that took my fancy. I was struck by her rather un-English understanding of Indian ways and Indo-Muslim mores. The Byron poem I read long ago, very long ago. Much later, it occurred to me that it applies to *our* kind of women, rather than *their* kind of women.

No, I don't pretend that there could be an affinity between the English way of life and the Indo-Muslim way of life. Especially because the Indian-English relationship was based mostly on hypocrisy and self-vindication on their side and self-hatred and puzzlement on our side. If, and that is a big if, the baggage could be shed by both parties, then maybe some true affinity could develop.

5. While many of the poems used seem difficult to translate into English, I liked that you provided an explication of certain words and didn't try to hide the work of translation. One of the things that comes across beautifully because of this is the mingling of languages that went on in Delhi and outside it too: Braj Bhasha, Khariboli, Farsi, Arabic – not to mention Angrezi. All this suggests a society with a less straitjacketed approach to learning and living in languages than perhaps we have today. Yet at the same time, there were numerous markers of class, caste and region encoded into dialect, as well as highly specialised scripts, as you've described. Could you talk a little about this seeming contradiction between multilingualism and specialisation and perhaps state your thoughts on how the commingling of languages (or lack thereof) informs writing and literature today?

You have a good point there about multilingualism. Much before it became common to learn languages for commercial purposes—media, interpreting, translating not for pleasure but for gain—the Indo-Muslim milieu was multilingual in a natural, seamless process of acquiring languages. This was the case up to my time even. My father placed great stress (and value) upon English, wrote and spoke the Urdu of an educated man, knew quite a bit of Persian, some Arabic, much Hindi, and was a fluent speaker of Bhojpuri, the language of our village and the district in which it was situated. It didn't strike any wonder in my heart that my mother, and her mother, *always* spoke Awadhi. My mother's mother was unlettered, my mother was not. She wrote letters in quite literate Urdu. I remember once she used the word *qadambosi* in a letter (it means 'to kiss the feet'=to go see some senior person, an elderly relative.) I wanted to know what it meant. She didn't explain the meaning as I did just now, she just said, it means, 'go and present yourself before someone.' But she never *spoke* Urdu, and she read the Qur'an in Arabic, though she didn't understand it.

It is one of my greatest sources of pain in the modern world in India that our children are culturally deprived and also linguistically deprived. They have no mother tongue to speak of, they use English all the time, and even their English vocabulary is ridiculously limited.

You may not believe it, but even up to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Delhi and other urban centres, even as far Arcot (now Tamil Nadu) there were persons who spoke Persian fluently but had the greatest difficulty writing it. They acquired Persian from their environment, not from books. So it was as if they had two mother tongues: Urdu and Persian. Mirza Rahimuddin Haya, a Prince of the Realm in early 19<sup>th</sup> century couldn't even write Urdu

comfortably, but he was a major Dastan reciter, and you know that Dastan in those days was recited as much in Persian as in Urdu.

As for my own translations in this novel, I have been translating from Urdu and English for more years than I care to remember. The poems in this novel were perhaps the hardest to translate because normally a translator chooses texts with the view of their translatability as much as their excellence. Whereas excellence and appropriateness to the narrative moment were my considerations here. I didn't even imagine at the time I composed the Urdu that it will have to suffer translation, eventually. So when it did come to translation, however unwillingly, I thought I could do no better than translate with the view of comprehensibility while trying to make sure that I was making sense in English too.

6. A more fluid approach to defining languages also has implications, especially for Hindi and Urdu, of a more flexible understanding of religion and its linguistic and cultural components. There are many examples in the book of a person's faith being not immediately apparent, or of Muslim communities that are culturally almost indistinguishable from being Hindu. One of the contradictions of the contemporary moment is that religious identities are constantly ossified, even while plurality and "post-religious" attitudes are espoused. How much of a role do you think colonialism played in this current state of affairs, and how did you try to address that in the book? What kind of a role do you think literature can play in creating or blurring these identities?

I believe colonialism played the major role in creating divisions where none existed. Most people don't accept this as true, but the fact is that it was not uncommon for learned Muslims in the past to know Sanskrit. They certainly knew Braj Bhasha in Delhi and Awadhi in Lucknow and Telugu/Kannada in the South and Bengali in Bengal. Bahadur Shah Zafar was a poet in Urdu, Panjabi, Braj Bhasha, and of course he was fully fluent in Persian and knew Arabic.

Literature can let us develop wings to fly above and transcend the artificialities of the faiths. And Urdu can do it better than most, because it is the one modern Indian language whose writers come from all imaginable faiths: Parsi to Roman Catholic.

7. Would you say writing literature in Urdu on the rise, even from non-native speakers of the language? What kind of support does the Urdu literature need to flourish?

Urdu literature is certainly on the rise everywhere. Non-native speakers of the language try to learn Urdu in order to read its

poetry and eventually to write poetry in it. What I think is needed is a national consciousness about Urdu as the repository of a literature that is unique in many ways—and all its ways are firmly Indian—and Urdu speakers in general must shed their own sneaking feeling of inadequacy. Well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was common to believe that Persian poetry was superior to Urdu (then called ‘Rekhtah’, or more commonly, ‘Hindi’). By the time Urdu speakers were coming out of that pernicious belief, they fell into an even greater error: English literature was immeasurably superior to Urdu literature, so acquiring English was a ‘superior’ activity. This feeling may not be common now (because very few Indians at present really know English literature), but what is still common is a general feeling of inadequacy.

Urdu literature and Urdu literary culture are the only literature and culture in the world whose practitioners have an extremely low opinion about their past literature and culture and one of whose favourite activities even at the highest academic and critical levels has been to deride, and denigrate and vilify much of Urdu literature, particularly pre-modern Urdu literature.

8. The way you channel Wazir Khanam’s stream-of-consciousness with regards to her thoughts on a woman’s place in the world demonstrates a remarkably subtle understanding. Who or what do you credit with allowing you to give expression to these thoughts? Was it something about your wife, who you have eulogized so beautifully; your daughters; your readings; or the example of Wazir herself?

A number of things went into how I ultimately came of think about gender and ‘the woman question.’ I suspect that there is a bit of woman in me somewhere and I never found reason or occasion to ‘eject’ that entity from my psyche. I remember that as a boy I used to resent my sisters wearing colourful, eye catching dresses, especially on festive occasions. I even expressed my resentment occasionally in tearful tantrums. Not that anyone cared, for I was not a pampered boy, nor was our family that kind of family.

Another thing that struck me very early in life were the protocols of behaviour: women always ate last; men and boys ate first; my father always had the choicest dishes, dishes that were often denied to me, though I was the eldest son. Everybody used to lose their night’s sleep over the question of marriage: marriage of the girls in the family. I never saw, or even suspected anyone ever worrying about a boy’s marriage.

Jamila made me conscious of many things. Before we were married, we had an argument once: I asked her if she would polish

my shoes and iron my clothes when we were married. She said no, though not rudely. I was disappointed and hurt, because I believed that these were acts of love: doing little things for the husband, like polishing his shoes. Clearly, Jamila didn't see the matter in that light.

Then, when we were married and lived together, I would hand over all my earning to her as a token of love and trust. In most families that I knew, the husband controlled the purse strings and made a fixed allowance to the wife, just as one would do with a housekeeper. What surprised me was that Jamila never expressed gratitude for this act of abnegation on my part. She clearly believed that I was giving her nothing but her due. Similarly, she thought that purdah was not necessary for women and it in fact was unnecessary and unnatural. I was more or less of the same view, but Jamila made me conscious of it as a social issue and also a woman-issue.

All this was very educative. Then, much later, Frances Pritchett gave me some insight into the nuances of feminism. I had always believed that men and women were equal, though Islam, while being extremely liberal in many ways, seemed also to lean toward the view that men are superior. Exposure to modern feminist ideas confirmed me in the position that the 'excesses' of feminism notwithstanding, it had lessons which men must learn and abide by.

9. What was the reasoning behind the change in title and poem referenced? I didn't see the Ahmad Mushtaq quote in the proof copy of *The Mirror of Beauty* – will it be included eventually? And who is the "Persian poet" referred to as the creator of the "sleeping mirror" verse, or is it unattributed?

The line from Ahmad Mushtaq's ghazal is untranslatable, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the huge panorama that the novel projects. All of us made numerous false starts, trying to find an adequate rendering. In despair, I decided upon plain 'Wazir Khanam'. But Chiki Sarkar and everyone else at Penguin said that it would be hard for the non-native speaker to pronounce, and would convey little to her anyway. So the search began again. My younger daughter suggested a line from Hafiz Shirazi from a book of Persian verse that I translated decades ago. The line was: 'My eye is the mirror of her beauty.' From that line, Sivapriya hit upon 'The Mirror of Beauty' and it became an instant success with everybody in Penguin. I am quite comfortable with it, for in a way the novel is about beauty, womanly beauty, and beauty in general.

10. The book stops just before 1857, yet there is a strong sense of its characters' stories continuing beyond its pages. Elsewhere, you've mentioned that you have ideas for further novels. Can you describe the gist of any of these ideas, whether or not you plan to write them? Would you want to delve further into India's Mughal past, or continue the stories of the characters of *The Mirror of Beauty*, or explore something else entirely?

While I was doing *The Mirror...*, I also wrote a long short story, almost a short novel. It mixes some supernatural from the 15<sup>th</sup> –16<sup>th</sup> century and the literary-historical culture of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I have another theme in mind for a novel, again from the 18<sup>th</sup> century; the work will span both Lucknow and Delhi. It is still quite nebulous in my mind. I may not live to write it anyway.

Some readers desired to know what happened to the main characters, especially Wazir Khanam, after she was ejected from the Red Fort. They even suggested that I write another novel on the life of Wazir and Dagh post 1857. But I would rather write another novel, about something else. I think Wazir Khanam has done her job and played her role and needn't be troubled further.

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