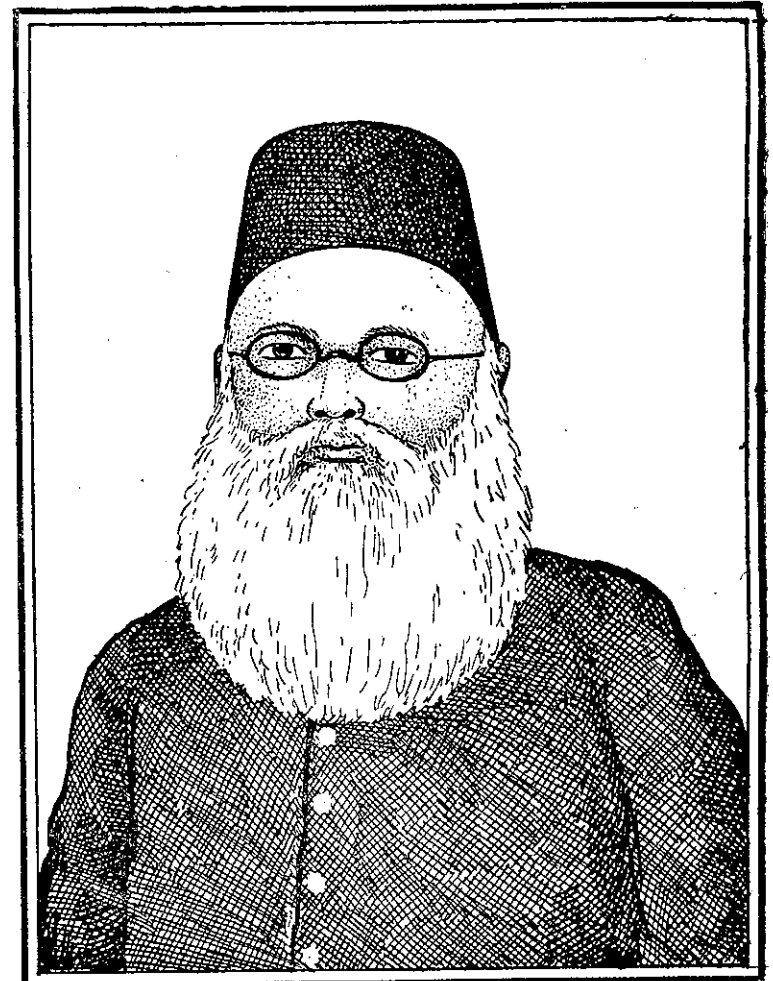


## Sharar Lukhnavi

Maulvi Abdul Halim, *Sharar*, and Pandit Rattan Nath, *Sarshar*, share the honour of being the best novelists of India. Maulvi Abdul Halim received his early education in a *maktab*, and later he had the advantage of studying in the famous seminary at Farangi Mahal in Lucknow. His maternal grand-father was one of the courtiers of Wajid Ali Shah; the last king of Oudh, and went with him to Calcutta, when the king was deposed. Young Abdul Halim thus got a chance of going to the then Metropolis of India with his grand-father. This contact with the princely family of Oudh, gave Abdul Halim an opportunity of cultivating his knowledge of elegant and idiomatic Urdu, which proved so helpful to him in the literary career which he subsequently adopted. He wrote verses under the *nom de plume* of *Sharar*, which means a "spark". He soon found that he could use his ability and talent in a manner more useful than writing love songs. He started life as a prose-writer and soon won a reputation for writing very attractive prose.

Maulana Bashir-ud-Din, Editor of *Albashir* of Etawah, who was a personal friend and admirer of *Sharar*, says in a sketch of *Sharar's* life published in the *Zamindar* of Lahore many years ago, that *Sharar* was influenced, to a great extent,



Moulvi Abdul Halim Sharar

by the writings of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, though he did not come very much in personal contact with the Syed. He and Sir Syed met one another perhaps only once or twice, but he was impressed very deeply by the articles contributed by the latter to the *Tehzib-ul-Akhlaq*.

In 1883 *Sharar* began his journalistic career by making literary contributions to the columns of the *Oudh Akhbar*. He had acquired a knowledge of English by self-study and had thus added greatly to his store of information about history and literature. It was the study of English which inspired him with a desire to serve Urdu through the medium of interesting fiction, written in the form adopted by novels written in English. The *Dilchasp* and the *Dilkash* were the two earliest stories written by *Sharar*. The style introduced by him became popular very soon and it found many imitators.

When the connection of *Sharar* with the *Oudh Akhbar* ceased in 1883-1884, the idea of his bringing out a monthly magazine in Urdu was suggested to him by his friend Maulvi Bashir-ud-Din. He accepted the suggestion and started his monthly journal, named *Dilgudaz*, which established his reputation as a distinguished writer of good prose and proved a paying concern. He was thus enabled to earn an independent living and to publish his famous novels.

One of the best productions of *Sharar* is the novel called *Malik Al Aziz* and *Vergina*, describing the battles between Christians and Moslems during the period of the crusades. *Sharar* has interwoven with the history of the battles the romantic love

between a young Moslem hero and a charming Christian Princess. The story is full of interesting adventures. The novel enjoyed great popularity and laid the foundation of the historical novel in Urdu. Another novel of *Sharar*, dealing with a historical theme nearer home is *Mansur Mohina*. It was followed by a charming story called *Flora Florinda*, the plot of which is derived from a narrative relating to the days of the Moorish reign in Spain. *Hasan Angelina* is another readable novel, based on a story relating to the Russo-Turkish war.

The stories above named are novels in the strict sense of the term. There were some well-known tales in Urdu before, but they were full of superstitions dealing with *talismans* and giants and evil spirits. The stories of Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad, who is another great writer of fiction belonging to the Delhi School, were true to life, but they were without any exciting plot. Though they were useful and instructive, they lacked the element of romance, which constitutes the main attraction of the novel.

The novels of Pandit Rattan Nath *Sarshar*, the great contemporary of *Sharar*, are in some respects even more interesting than those of *Sharar* and parts of them compare favourably with some of the best writers of the West, but their unwieldy length stands in the way of their recognition as model specimens of the novel. I think, therefore, that the credit of being the first writer of novels in Urdu belongs to *Sharar*, who appears to have taken the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott as models for his works of fiction.

He could have hardly gone to a better source for inspiration for fiction with a historical basis. I am not in a position to say how far he was in touch with the writings of Scott at the time when he began to write historical novels. He may have had an opportunity of studying the works of Scott when he went to England, as a companion and tutor to the sons of the then Prime Minister of Hyderabad Deccan, Nawab Sir *Viqarul Umara*.

In choosing Islamic history as the back ground of the pen-pictures which *Sharar* wanted to paint, he followed not only his natural bent of mind towards the study of history, but went with the spirit of the time in which his writings began. The strong impetus given to the knowledge of Islamic history by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the rousing appeals of Hali to the past glories of Islam and the research works of Maulana Shibli, had deeply stirred the mind of Moslems and had turned their thoughts to a study of the history of Islam. *Sharar* saw that if he could dress some facts of history in the garb of fiction, adding imaginary plots here and there, to add to the zest of his books, he would be rendering a service not only to Urdu literature, but would also help to popularise the study of history. It was with this double object that he started his writings, and, it can hardly be denied that his efforts were crowned with success.

The literary activities of *Sharar* were temporarily interrupted on account of his going to England. The *Dilgudaz* had to suspend publication for several years and there were no fresh books from the pen of *Sharar*, but men like him,

who are imbued with the true spirit of serving literature, do not give up their work even when circumstances are not quite favourable to the achievement of their desire. So *Sharar* kept up his study of history, during this period of comparative retirement from active literary life. When he returned to Lucknow he started again the publication of the *Dilgudaz*. The announcement of the re-appearance of his popular journal was hailed with delight by its old admirers, but the Deccan called him once more and the second period of the publication of the *Dilgudaz* did not last long.

When *Sharar* went to Hyderabad for the second time, he was given an office which suited him particularly. He was to supervise the department of *tasnif-o-talif*, that is the work of literary compilations in the State. This gave him an opportunity of intimate contacts with many well-known literary men who were residing in Hyderabad. Out of them the poet *Dagh* and *Maulana Shibli*, deserve special mention. He also received a commission from His Exalted Highness the Nizam to write a complete History of Islam and was allowed to carry on this work comfortably at his home town. He returned to Lucknow and started his journal *Dilgudaz* for the third time. *Maulana Bashir-ud-Din* states that *Sharar* completed the first volume of his History of Islam and sent his manuscript to Hyderabad, but he does not know whether the book was published or not. He says that he had been shown some portions of the book by *Sharar* and had found them very interesting.

*Sharar* was a prolific writer and is said to have written about a hundred books, but he did not derive sufficient pecuniary gain from them. It is said that many publishers published his books in very cheap editions and made money for themselves, instead of looking to the interests of the author, but he was too busy to look after the business side of his literary work. Besides being a literary man, *Maulvi Abdul Halim* was a social reformer. He had strong opinions on the existence of the *pardah* system among Moslem women and wanted to bring out a radical change in the society of his day. For many years he ventilated his opinions in a newspaper, called the *Parda-i-Ismat*, which he started with this object. He met with great opposition on this subject from the orthodox and conservative sections of society and his newspaper did not receive much encouragement, but he succeeded in making an impression on people who had received Western education. They gradually introduced modifications in the seclusion of women as prevailing in Moslem families and some of them have now decided to follow the line advocated by *Sharar* and to allow their women to be fully free from *pardah*.

As an advocate of female emancipation *Sharar* naturally laid great stress on the education of girls and in that respect also his views have influenced a large number of people, though he was not listened to much at the time when he was preaching them.

*Maulvi Abdul Halim* does not count for much as a poet. He could have shone in poetry if he had adopted that line of writing, but he preferred

prose and raised it to a high level. He tried to introduce blank verse in Urdu poetry, but time was not ripe for it then. This idea, therefore, did not become popular in his time, but he can be regarded as the fore-runner of what is now called the progressive school of Urdu verse.

After serving the cause of literature and learning, *Sharar* passed away at the ripe age of seventy, in 1926 A. D. His death was widely mourned in the literary circles of India and it was felt that Urdu literature had lost in him one of its greatest benefactors.