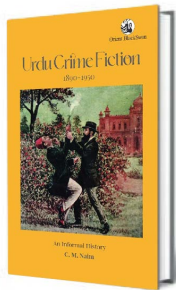


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PULP FICTION

C.M. Naim's 'informal history' of early Urdu crime fiction sees the genre getting its rightful place in the literary canon



URDU CRIME FICTION, 1890-1950
An Informal History
 by **C.M. Naim**
 ORIENT BLACKSWAN
 ₹875; 308 pages

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rowing up in a relentlessly high-minded household, I had little acquaintance with the pulp fiction that formed a large part of the cultural production of my hyper-literary Allahabad. The prime 'culprit', Ibne Safi, of *Jasoosi Duniya*, produced a thriller a month for years on end. My acquaintance therewith was limited to fleeting glimpses of lurid covers at railway station bookstalls. It is, therefore, something of a pleasant surprise to discover that two of my most beloved high-literary Urdu scholars—Shamsur Rahman Faruqi and C.M. Naim—have committed their fascination with this world of glossy pulp to print. Faruqi translated four 'novels' by Ibne Safi, and C.M. Naim has now written an 'informal history' of Urdu Crime Fiction, 1890-1950.

Though Naim modestly describes his work as an 'informal history', motivated mainly by "nostalgia and curiosity", it is marked by a lifetime of academic work, and is a formidable bibliographical achievement. Ibne Safi has received a certain measure of attention in the recent past, but Naim's dates frame a period before the advent of *Jasoosi Duniya*. It takes formidable academic stamina, tracing down scarce copies of forgotten works in widely scattered libraries. Naim makes particular mention of the

admirable Urdu archive that has been created by Sanjiv Saraf at Rekhta.org. The annual Jashn-e-Rekhta is well-known—and crushingly well-attended. It is a cultural phenomenon in its own right, but the library of scanned Urdu and Urdu-related works that Rekhta.org has created, deserves to be much better known.

'Crime fiction' is rarely acknowledged as one of the 'gifts' of colonialism. But whereas there must have been crime before colonialism, it was under colonial aegis that crime fiction came to India. In fact, as Naim points out, 'crime fiction' was a relatively new form in England as well. There were accounts of crimes a-plenty, and salivating ones of the sufferings inflicted on prisoners—torture-porn. But the stuff of modern crime fiction—the mysterious criminal act whose perpetrator must be "detected", and then "thrillingly" brought to book—to name the two broad variants identified by Naim, the mystery and the thriller—this seems to have some intimate connection with modernity. Under feudal conditions, before the coming of the modern city

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of anonymous proximities—there was little 'mystery' about who the perpetrators of crimes were. And little faith in the state's institutions of justice (this might sound familiar). The stable and impartial moral centre is in any case something of a modern fiction—and, interestingly, on

Naim's account, it seems to fade away after World War I. Enter Philip Marlowe, the somewhat louche gumshoe, significantly different from the upright, 'scientific' citizen Sherlock of high-Victorian England.

There are more questions here than one can even indicate in a brief review, but what it does enable one to see is that crime fiction, even, and perhaps particularly, of the pulp and popular variety, is an invaluable resource for opening up new angles of social enquiry. ■

Alok Rai