

*1. You wrote your first novel, when you were still a student, in English and now after decades of an extremely full creative life in Urdu you have translated, some may say rewritten your novel Kai Chand The Sar e Aasman in English as the Mirror of Beauty. Did you feel hampered by a lack of apprenticeship in English?*

Actually, the novel—if novel it can be called—was in Urdu. As for lack of apprenticeship in English, well, I have read English and loved its literature for many more years than I care to remember. But in terms of experience of writing fiction in English, I am certainly unlettered. All that I can recall is a short story which I wrote when I was 15, and which I translated into English three or four years later. Both the versions were liked by my teachers. But I never felt hampered when I began this work in 2011. I don't know if I can claim to have rewritten the novel. But I certainly made sure that I was writing in English, in fact shamelessly archaic English, but I was writing an Urdu novel. If that makes sense.

*2. You wrote the novel in Urdu first and then were closely involved with its Hindi rendition. What prompted you to take on the English translation yourself?*

It was my children who went on and on about it. That is, after others (including you and my daughters themselves) found the job hard, and time taking, time they none of you—and others— could spare.

*3. Translation itself is another telling, in Ramanujan's words but translating the Urdu you wrote in the novel into English must have posed its own challenges? Did you have any models before you.*

No, that was both a liberating and inhibiting thing. I didn't need to follow anyone; I didn't have anyone to follow. The nearest that I had was Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*. But I didn't think his English, or his translation dynamics, could be of help to me. Qurratulain Hyder's English was quite bad. Abdullah Husain, whom I admire greatly, was not before me. I hadn't even read his translation of Udas Naslen. Nor did I want to.

*4. Has the novel's tremendous success in India surprised you? Has the reception been different in Hindi, Urdu and English?*

I can't say that I was not expecting the Urdu to be a success. For I had published some chapters in 'Shabkhoon' to great acclaim, and my stories were already there, fairly well known and widely admired. The novel, in a sense, was more of the same. About Hindi, and English, I was pretty confident. I was confident that my English was up to the job. I was confident that the Hindi world would welcome the culture, the linguistic creativity—much of which stayed in Hindi, thanks to Naresh Nadeem, the first translator, and Kranti Shukla, with whom I went over the Hindi version word from cover to cover in the most meticulous way.

As you know, I am always unsure of my work. That is a given. Subject to that, I was rather expecting, than not expecting the acclaim the it got, particularly in English.

*5. Urdu, obviously doesn't enjoy the same hegemony in India as it did before independence but would you say it is a dying language here?*

How can it be a dying language when I am writing in it and you are performing in it? Jokes apart, Urdu is doing well here. Much better than ten years ago, and those ten years were better than the previous ten. Urdu's crisis here—and I fear, to a certain extent in Pakistan—is that it has no dearth of people wanting to and actually reading Urdu, and the number is growing. But we don't have good teachers. Teachers, even professors, are unacquainted with the basic idiom of Urdu. There is no style book in Urdu, for instance. But if there were one, our teachers wouldn't be able to make sense of it. There is nothing like a guide to good Urdu. And no one today seems capable of writing it.

*6. Early in your career you championed the superiority of poetry over fiction. Has the novel's success prompted you to take fiction more seriously and are you thinking of writing something new.*

Well, I think my theoretical formulations are unchanged, as far as I am unconcerned. And it wasn't as simple as it sounds in your version. I wrote that there is a hierarchy of genres, and fiction ranks lower than poetry in it, but fiction is capable of doing things that poetry cannot. Fiction investigates the human psyche, and the complexities of the human mind, better than poetry. These observations are in that same essay, but none seem to remember them. I wrote a long short story, or a short novel, Qabz-e Zaman while I was doing the novel in English. It was very well received in both countries. I have another fiction in mind, maybe a novel, but it's gestating somewhere deep in my brain at present.

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