

MUHAMMAD SALIM-UR-RAHMAN

## Classics Revisited

### Mayhem in Paradise

PIQUED BY WHAT APPEARED TO HIM too cavalier a treatment of Salahuddin Ayyubi by Walter Scott in *The Talisman*, his novel about the Crusades, Abdul Halim Sharar made up his mind to become a writer of historical fiction himself. The intention perhaps was not to set the record straight but to concoct a romantic mishmash of chauvinism, glorification of the past and random nostalgia. Decisions which change a man's life are not always sensible ones.

In the case of Sharar the trouble obviously is that he was a casual reader, jumping to conclusions without a second thought, and it is doubtful if he read other novels by Scott or read them right. There is more to Scott than cheap history-mongering—his deep sense, for example, of the Scottish locale. His characters, it has been aptly said, are embedded in a context of tradition. Sharar's fiction—clipped incidents from history—suffers from rootlessness. History in it is not interpreted or validated, but trivialized.

Born in 1860, just as the Muslims in India, bludgeoned into submission by the trauma of 1857, were dazedly searching for a new sense of identity, Sharar's sensibility may have found the general air of insecurity a great dampener. The desultory schooling which he received, in which English was not included, left him, in the changed circumstances, unfit for any profitable job. However he was practical enough to learn English on his own and later on a three-year stay in England, made possible when he was chosen as a tutor to a *navāb's* young son, must have led to a better comprehension of the language.

While the Indian society was undergoing a hesitant metamorphosis, new opportunities were also turning up. It was now possible to choose journalism or publishing or both as a career. The world of Urdu

journalism was still undisciplined and precarious and Sharar entered it with some trepidation but soon found it very congenial or addictive. In a sense, he never outgrew it. He began to publish *Dilgudāz*, a magazine of his own in which he serialized his novels. It is claimed that his novels were very popular and the magazine a success. Circumstantial evidence suggests otherwise. From 1887 onwards, when the first issue of *Dilgudāz* came out, he suspended its publication at least five times, abandoning it as soon as a chance to do something else presented itself, and restarted it only when no other options were left. Perhaps in his heart of hearts he saw the whole affair as a drudgery. When he died in 1926, the author of nearly a hundred books, one-third of them fiction, he was a well-known figure, but as an editor and publisher he was still struggling to survive.

The consensus is that *Firdaus-e Barīn* (The Sublime Paradise) is the best or at any rate the most popular of his historical novels. The theme itself, built around the intricate machinations of the Iran-based *Bāṭiniya*, a ruthless secret medieval society, is of absorbing interest and even Sharar, with his awkward prose and clumsy craftsmanship, could not quite succeed in stripping it of its appeal.

The principal characters are Husain and Zamurrud, two young lovers. They accidentally fall into the clutches of the *Bāṭinīs* whose adherents carried out assassinations at the behest of their superiors. The high drama in the novel comes from the delineation of the web of deceit woven around Husain by the *Bāṭinīs*. He is completely taken in and commits two particularly gruesome murders so that he can gain admittance to paradise—an artifice gorgeously planned by the *Bāṭinīs* to delude their disciples—and meet Zamurrud whom he believes to be dead and changed into a *hūrī*. In fact she is not dead but merely a pawn in the deadly games the *Bāṭinīs* play. The way in which they brainwash the victims, typified here by Husain, appears convincing. The esoteric and metaphysical details which accompany the act, however, are less plausible. Historically some of the particulars in Sharar's work can be discredited and a number of incidents are too preposterous, but the novel derives its strength from an idea and not from historical accuracy. The idea is simple. Promise your followers paradise on earth and a life of sensual pleasure and give them a historical cause, however travestied, and they will blindly follow you. The *Bāṭinīs* held out this promise, and in fact they went it one better by actually fabricating a paradise. Those who excelled in serving the ringleaders were let into it for a while to whet their appetite. It was thuggery in style.

The other striking portion of the novel is the destruction at the hands

of the Mongol army of the mountainous stronghold of the *Bāṭinīs* which also housed the sham elysium. The narration of the havoc wrought by the assailants is unimpressive. Sharar's imagination and language are not equal to the task. The manner in which Husain is allowed to kill the archons of the *Bāṭinīs* primarily responsible for hoodwinking him is a naïveté fit only for poorly conceived fiction for boys. The fascination which the account of the sack holds for the reader stems from the paradox that while the image of a paradisiacal place is pleasurable, the very notion of ravaging and burning it is, somehow, equally agreeable. Perhaps it helps to activate some atavistic barbarism in us.

So these are the things which make *Firdaus-e Barīn* partly memorable. No one, having read it, would care, given the choice, to read it again. But reading it once is enough. Some of its scenes stay in one's memory. This is what constitutes the book's strength and confers on it the status of a minor classic.

Sharar's prose—lacking poise and style, and complacently commonplace and turgid by turns—is often disappointing. It was laughed at by many of his contemporaries who nicknamed him “Sharar & Co.” because he constantly misused *kō*, a postposition in Urdu. To be fair to him we must not lose sight of the fact that he was essentially a journalist who wrote quickly and without much thought. He might have fared better had he not felt so harried most of the time. As an observer of the national politics he was not without a certain perspicacity, and suggested nearly a hundred years ago that India should be divided to allow the Hindus and the Muslims to live separately and in peace. He could not have foreseen the huge armies which have sprouted in the subcontinent after 1947 and our mounting belligerence. Only there are no paradises to be pillaged now.

### A Classic—In Eclipse

SHAMEFULLY NEGLECTED BY THE CRITICS and passed over by the publishers, *Nīstar*—first published nearly a hundred years ago and probably written towards the end of the eighteenth century—is an autobiographical novel which deserves to be taken notice of. It is a classic, a minor one to be sure, in eclipse.

Supposed to be an Urdu translation of a Persian manuscript in which a young man narrates how he and a beautiful young courtesan fall in love but when the crunch comes he fails in his bid to escape with her, a fiasco

which leads to tragedy, *Niṣtar's* genesis is rather mysterious. Nobody seems to have seen the Persian original, except Sajjad Husain Anjum, the translator. In the circumstances it can't be ruled out that the whole thing is possibly an elaborate hoax. It is very likely that Sajjad Husain himself made up the story and referred to the Persian manuscript only to lend his fiction authenticity. The problem will remain unresolved unless the Persian manuscript turns up somewhere. Another way to solve it would be to have a look at Sajjad Husain's other writing. He produced at least three more works of fiction which are no longer available. Once again we run into a dead end.

The story in *Niṣtar* proceeds *lentissimo* as if the main characters (or at least the lovers) have all the time in the world. The tempo, in a way, suits the times in which the action takes place. It is the fag-end of the eighteenth century. The scene is western U.P., but it could be any place. There are no wide, open spaces here, no backdrop, no identifiable landmarks. It is cloistered, stagy, and heavily conversational.

Hasan Shah, the hero, is employed as an accountant-cum-manager by a British quartermaster. The Englishman, a rakish sort of person, not averse to having native mistresses, often engages courtesans in order to have his fill of fun and sex. In one of the groups of entertainers hired by him is a very attractive young woman. Hasan Shah falls in love with her and is delighted to see his passion acknowledged with equal ardor. The lovers have to be very circumspect because affairs of the heart are usually frowned upon by the senior members of such groups. The young girls are their main money-makers and to lose them, through marriage or elopement, is tantamount to bankruptcy.

The romance has a strange furtive air, as if it were taking place between two prisoners. Things slowly but inexorably drift toward disaster. The quartermaster is recalled to Calcutta and the group to which the girl belongs prepares to move again in search of some other patron. At this stage, Hasan Shah could have run away with the girl, damning the consequences. But he dithers and muffs his chances. He never sees his beloved again and she, quite rightly feeling that she has been betrayed, dies of a broken heart.

Most remarkable in *Niṣtar* is the portrayal of a hero who is adept at self-deception. His love for the girl allows him to indulge in self-pity to his heart's content. He is primarily narcissistic, in love only with his own emotions and feelings. For him at least, though not for the girl, the whole thing is like a subtle game, full of romantic yearnings and exquisite little tortures, in which delightful wordy duels, charges and counter-charges,

love letters stealthily exchanged, meetings covertly arranged, happy deceptions, meaningful glances and utterances, fits of weeping and real or feigned indispositions, mesh together to form a pattern of highly satisfying *amour propre*.

Although a refined person, Hasan Shah is weak-willed, and when the real test comes and the game is on the verge of becoming something earnest and demanding, his courage deserts him. He is supposed to set off to rescue the girl. Instead he just marks time and his reasons for doing so are feeble and ridiculous and no better than bureaucratic temporizing. No one genuinely in love can possibly behave so caddishly. Finally, when he learns of his beloved's death, he is in his element again, ready to howl and weep and tear out his hair. If tragedy springs from a serious flaw in a person's character, Hasan Shah can even be invested with a tragic halo. But the tragic figure here is clearly the girl whose dream of a better and respectable life comes to naught because of her lover's vacillations.

There is something strikingly modern about Hasan Shah. It would be more to the point to say that the skill with which his warped personality has been depicted belongs distinctly to our times rather than to the preceding century. *Niṣṭar* has no counterpoint in the Urdu fiction of the nineteenth century. Its characters are often stereotypes or caricatures. Hasan Shah, on the other hand, is a well-rounded character, not particularly endearing it is true, but completely understandable as a human being and psychologically convincing. If the book is in fact a translation of something written two hundred years ago there is certainly cause for more astonishment.

Why has no one ever thought of making it into a movie or a teleplay? All the good old ingredients which ensure box-office success are here. You can cram in as many songs and dances as you like. There is romantic love, sentimentality and refinement. The costumes can be eye-catching. And to cap it all, such a sad ending! A real tear-jerker. What is more, it would be so easy to vulgarize it.

*Niṣṭar* was published by Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab, Lahore, in 1963 and the first edition is still available for a song.<sup>1</sup> Some classics are very hard to sell!

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<sup>1</sup>A fuller review of this novel appears elsewhere in this issue. —*Eds.*