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Dream Mirage: A Novel¹ by

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From Retelling to Translation:

Umrāo Jān Adā as Khwāb Sarāb and Dream Mirage

Khwāb Sarāb, translated by Arif Ansari as *Dream Mirage: A Novel*, is part of Urdu novelist Anis Ashfaq's trilogy which includes *Dukhyāre* and *Parī Nāz Aur Parinde*, about old Lucknow. Winner of Sahitya Akademi award in 2022, *Khwāb Sarāb* is a literary retelling of Mirza Hadi Ruswa's iconic Urdu novel *Umrao Jān Adā* (1899) which has been translated in English by Khushwant Singh and M.A. Husaini and has been put on the silver screen, most memorably by Muzaffar Ali in 1981 and less successfully by J. P. Dutta in 2006. The plot of Anis Ashfaq's retelling has three important concerns: a search for another version of *Umrao Jān Adā*'s lost manuscript and Umrao Jān's daughter if there was one, documentation of the history and nomenclature of well-known and less-known neighborhoods, monuments and cultural practices of Lucknow and a lament for the gradual decline of the former aristocrats and landed gentry in the modern Lucknow. The novel is held together by the intertwined lives of different sets of characters. Reading like a jigsaw puzzle in some portions, new relationships of characters retain interests of readers in the narrative. A less likable feature of the novel is the defeatist attitude of the narrator, a central character in the novel, who does not try to save either Shehba's home or Jahandar Begum's home from their greedy and scheming relatives.

Obsessed with his view that Mirza Hadi Ruswa also wrote another

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version of *Umrao Jān Adā* which showed Umrao Jan as a mother, the narrator of *Dream Mirage*— who though strangely and inexplicably, remains without a name almost till the end of the novel—sets out to search for that lost manuscript in different locations of Lucknow. His search keeps the plot moving in the first half of the novel. The novelist exploits a reader's basic instinct of curiosity and the novel reads like a detective novel in some parts. The novel uses the ambiguity about Umrao's existence, whether she was an actual person or a fictional character, to good effect. Once the narrator is sure that Umrao was an actual person, he collects all possible information about her from different sources in Lucknow. His search takes him to different characters in the novel. In the later part of the novel, readers' curiosity about the identity of Umrao Jan's child, who is supposedly an old lady when the action in *Dream Mirage* unfolds, is aroused. Among the many persons the narrator meets early in the novel, Sardar Jahan, a former courtesan, dwells on Umrao's suffering and clarifies that Umrao was a dancing girl and not a prostitute. At this point the reader also suspects that Sardar Jahan could be Umrao's daughter. Jahandar Begum, an old and lonely figure the narrator meets, comes from an old respectable family of Lucknow related to Mirza Hadi Ruswa and shares important information about him with the narrator. Hakim Saheb, who treats his patients with his medicines and wise counsel, shares with the narrator his precious knowledge of all places and families of Lucknow.

In between the narrative, there is a lot of focus on the personality and art of Mirza Hadi Ruswa. Allan Mian, a minor character, remarks that in all novels of Ruswa, "the characters are real people, except he has changed a little bit about them." Jahandar Begum, who calls Ruswa Ammujan, informs that Ruswa told the story of her paternal uncle in his novel *Akhtarī Begum*. Shumaila Khanam, Umrao's daughter and a major character in the latter part of the novel, is not happy with the version of *Umrao Jān Adā* published by Ruswa: "He didn't do the right thing publishing Amma's story, and that too a false version," she complains. She wants the narrator to write everything truthfully in his retelling of *Umrao Jān Adā*. Readers also learn from Jahandar Begum about Ruswa's deep interest in medicines, architecture and machine parts and tools. Ruswa's stay in her house where he brought his large number of books is the likely place for the narrator to look for his lost manuscript. The brief account of Ruswa's collection of books provides evidence of his extensive reading and diverse interests. The narrator is able to spot not only Firdausi's *Shahnāmā* and Hafiz's *Divān-e Ḥāfīz* but also books

on chemistry, astrology, astronomy and Greek philosophy. Married many times, as Jahandar Begum informs, Ruswa was in love with Umrao but he could not have brought her to his home because of social pressure. Nawab Sultan in *Umrao Jān Adā* is very much modelled on Mirza himself. Like Ruswa, he is shown to love songs, dance and poetry and is an expert in martial arts

Various literary and cinematic representations of Lucknow have marked its distinct identity in different aspects of life. Hakim Saheb, who makes a fine distinction between the methods used by hakims in Lucknow and Delhi, points out that unlike hakims in Delhi, the ones in Lucknow avoided use of *kushta*² In Urdu literature, the Lucknow school has always sought its distinction from the Delhi school. As Lucknow has been an important seat of learning, it has been represented in literary writings by a large number of writers and poets. *Dream Mirage* gives a nod to the literary culture of Lucknow by referring to writers and poets who have written about Lucknow. Early in the text, a reference to Urdu writer Rajab Ali Surror's description of Lucknow in his stories stresses the literary aspect of Lucknow. The narrator refers to his reading of Ratan Nath Sarshar's *Fasāna-e Āzād* and Abdul Haleem Sharar's novels, especially his *Āb-e Hayāt*. Even the steps of the mosque frequented by Mir Taqi Mir and the house where Mir Babar Ali Anees lived, are remembered with devotion and nostalgia by characters. Mir, who spent some time in Lucknow, and Ghalib are quoted by characters liberally. Zaheer Hasan, a tea-seller who is well-known for his abusive language, brings Ghalib in his conversation. Arif Ansari translates the couplet cited by him: "As I am hard of hearing, kindness should be doubled for me/For I cannot understand anything, unless it is repeated to me." Shehba's distinction lies in her literary education and in her ability to critically read and compare the two versions of Mirza Hadi Ruswa's texts. The novel also provides an account of the popularity of the *qissagoi* (story-telling) tradition in Lucknow.

It is not only the literary Lucknow but also the city's geography, history and everyday patterns of life that find reflection in the novel. Offering a view of different localities of Lucknow, the places visited by the narrator or described by different characters include Mashak Ganj, Purana Chabutra, Nurbari, Rustam Nagar, Nakhas, Naya Gaon, Aminabad, Chidiya Bazaar, King George's Medical College, Mehtab Bagh, Sathati, Bheem ka Akhara, Dilkusha, Shah Najaf, Banarsi Bagh,

² A purified, calcined herbo-mineral powder used as highly potent medicine.

Mehndi Ghat and Bazzazey where the narrator lives. Very keen to preserve old Lucknow culture, Hakim Saheb bemoans how the names of places change when Khaliq Bazaar started being called Khula Bazaar. Jahandar Begum chides her maid Saliman for calling Dayanat-ud Daulah³ as Dayanud Daula and even quotes Wajid Ali Shah's couplet written in praise of Dayanat-ud Daulah.

The novelist pays attention to minute details of every nook and corner of these localities. The narrator's quest takes him to interview Tunday, a famous kebab seller, from whom he learns the difference between his recipe of kebab from that of the preparation available at Asghar's shop at Phul Ghulam Husain. His conversation with Tunday brings out the variety of kebabs which include *rumālī*, *poṭlī ke kabāb* and *khaṭāī kabab*. Syed Naqi, whom the narrator meets in his quest for the identity of Umrao, narrates an incident of a woman seeing Tunday finely slicing onions with just one arm. The novel contains a lot of mundane details about characters coming to a house, exchanging pleasantries and saying goodbye. A culture of hospitality which defines lives of the residents of Lucknow is aptly brought out in the novel. All characters are shown to be self-respecting and very hospitable. Offering others to stay in their homes comes naturally to them. At the same time there are greedy relatives and gangs of people who are out to appropriate others' properties by forging papers and land records.

There is also a very detailed account of Muharram rituals in different parts of Lucknow, and all traditions associated with it, most importantly the reading of *majlis* in an evocative manner. Going from one *majlis* to another, characters also visit different karbalas in the novel. Sabila and her mother's talk provides information about the significance of Talkatora karbala. The *Sīnah zanī* ritual in which people beat their chest in mourning is performed by both Sabila, her mother and the narrator.

An important feature of the book is the genealogy of many established families of Lucknow. In this fixation on the family tree of

³ The beautiful Karbala Dayanatud Daula Bahadur. It was built by Dayanat-ud-Daulah, a khwajasara (eunuch) of King Wajid Ali Shah and incharge of his Pari Khana-the centre of music, dance and drama at Qaiser Bagh that functioned during the days when Wajid Ali was the heir apparent. The khwajasara was earlier named Mohammed Ali Khan but when the title Dayanat-ud-Daulah was conferred upon him he came to be known as Muatamad Ali Khan (Muatamad means trustworthy). He had built the Karbala as his burial place (Safvi)

respectable families, there is also a sense of nostalgia and loss for those times when class differences were maintained very strictly in society. The rise of new classes who do not descend from so-called respectable *ashrāf* families is not seen with approval by most characters in the novel. There is also an effort to redeem the courtesans of Lucknow by providing them respectable family trees and presenting them as women who have fallen on bad times. The narrator consoles Sabila, Umrao's granddaughter and a marginalized figure in her social set-up, saying "Your mother is absolutely of noble descent. Your Nani was pure nobility," there was no contamination in that gene pool for many generations." Many impoverished families of noble descent have also turned artisans to sustain themselves. As Heenga says, in old Lucknow "young women either do embroidery on kurtas or make envelopes and kites." Shehba, a girl of noble descent who has fallen on bad times, earns her living by making envelopes and kites.

As a translator, Arif Ansari faced the challenging task of translating not only the flowing prose of Anis Ashfaq but also a substantial number of Urdu verses used in the novel. From ghazals, nazms, marsiyas to nohas, *Dream Mirage* draws liberally from Urdu poetic culture which the translator has ably translated for English readers. Many marsiyas of Anees and Dabeer included in the text are translated by him. Thus, he translates Dabeer's marsiya: "When the daughters of Ali were kept captive in a prison/Trouble and hardship befell the sanctuary of Hussain." A marsiya giving the account of Zafar Jinn written by Mirza Ishq appears in translation and is narrated in detail by Najmul Hasan, a preacher. The use of Persian maxims and verses which often defined the speech of the respectable class in Lucknow is often retained in the novel.

Lucknow was recently declared a UNESCO Creative City of gastronomy. As the story in *Dream Mirage* is steeped in Lucknow's culture of food, the translator retains some culture-specific words in his translation often explaining them by adding their description in English. *Qīma paratha* is translated as "minced meat filled with flatbread," *halwa* as semolina pudding, *shīrmāl* explained as "red, flaky, sweet, flatbread," *khīr* as rice pudding and Juice of *fālsa* as "sherbet berry." From *nihāri* and *kulche*, which sold at the famous Rahim's hotel in Chowk, to "peas pilaf with dill", *kofta*, *do-pyāzā*, *sat-paitha*, *arwa* rice, *rakhauche* and *bādashāh-pasand dāl*, many items of Lucknow cuisine are mentioned and discussed in the book. A famous Lucknow snack *kachālu* which is made of guavas is prepared by Shehba and relished by the narrator.

Many other culture-specific words capture varied patterns of

aristocratic culture. The narrator's mother was an accomplished hadis-reciter, a term coined by the translator. The difference between *achkan* and *sherwani* is nicely explained by Jahandar Begum. *Katra*, awkwardly translated as "concatenated properties", refers to a particular kind of property owned by the wealthy. One important choice that Ansari makes is the translation of a key word *kotha* as "terrace" in the novel. As the story is centred on the life of a courtesan, the use of the word terrace for *kotha* in expressions like "famous terraces of Chowk" shows the pitfalls of translation. To be fair to the translator, he does mention the word *kotha* in its first reference which he could have retained in all future reference too because the word terrace evokes entirely different images in the minds of English readers. Sports like kite flying are represented with attention to the art of making kites and the terminology used in kite making.

In its retelling, *Dream Mirage* offers a perspective on other characters of *Umrao Jān Adā* as well as its style. Faiz Ali who marries Umrao and has a child from her is more of a rebel against the British than a dacoit. Shumaila Khanam informs the narrator that Gauhar Mirza who was given birth by a Domni, a professional singer, and had effeminate characteristics, was presented in *Umrao Jān Adā* by Ruswa in exaggerated details. *Umrao Jān Adā* has been written in difficult Urdu; the narrator in *Dream Mirage* is advised by Sabila to use simple Urdu in his book. The narrator also notes that in the discovered manuscript there are some changes and Ameeran's name has been changed in it.

Both *Umrao Jān Ada* and *Khwāb Sarāb* use Indian classical music and dance as important motifs in their plots. Sabila has learned music from masters like Ustad Rahmat Khalifa and Afaq Hussain. From Rahmat Khalifa she has learnt "all the difficult frameworks...*Todi, Khamaj, Pilu, Marwa, Kafi and Puriya*" and from Afaq Hussain "*Sohni, Yaman, Durga, Darbari, Shivranjani, Bihag* and some others." She is also familiar with *khayal, dhrupad* and *thumri*. In *Khayal*, she has learnt *drut, vilambit* and *Madhya laya*. As Umrao, her grandmother, was a trained singer and dancer, *Dream Mirage* provides details of the finer aspects of music and dance mastered by her. In the latter part of the novel, there is a detailed account of one particular *mujra* performed by Umrao Jan at Sheesh Mahal in the month of *Shābān* where she gave evidence of her mastery of dance and music. In this dance performance she sang a *short khayal* in *Puriya Kalyan* framework; then sang a stanza in *Rāg Bihag* followed by her singing in "*Mishrā Desh* framework and *Dādrā* rhythmic cycle". She followed it with a *thumri* in *Khamaj*

framework in the morning.

To conclude, *Khwāb Sarāb* not only retells Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jān Adā*, but it also familiarizes a modern reader with the history of Lucknow's well-known as well as forgotten landmarks. Various cultural and literary practices of Lucknow come alive in the pages of the novel. Arif Ansari's translation of *Khwāb Sarāb* as *Dream Mirage* becomes an important link between *Umrao Jān Adā* and *Khwāb Sarāb*.

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