

A FEATURE FROM THE URDU PRESS

Dream, Mirage

How a crumbling empire, a vanished courtesan, and a lost manuscript gave Urdu its first novel — and what their ruins still have to teach us

By Adil Akhtar • Daily Jang Magazine, Miscellany • 19 October 2025

English-language adaptation and condensation of the Urdu original, *Khwab, Saraab* (transliterated from Urdu)

For two hundred years the Mughals ruled Hindustan in magnificent style. But when the sixth emperor, Aurangzeb, died, the resolve and statecraft that had held the empire together died with him, and the throne began to come apart like a house built of playing cards.

An Empire Undone

In 1739 the Persian king Nadir Shah swept into India and met no real resistance from a hollowed-out Mughal army. Delhi was ransacked, its treasures carried off to Iran, and with them went the last of the dynasty's prestige. Political collapse curdled into social collapse, and social collapse into moral collapse.

The irony was bitter: at that very moment Europe was in the full flood of its scientific and philosophical awakening. Thinkers, scientists and statesmen were pouring out new ideas, and the great powers had developed a consuming appetite for charting the world's oceans. That appetite eventually carried European ships to India's shores — and of all the newcomers, the British proved shrewdest, planting themselves firmly at Calcutta while Mughal authority disintegrated behind them.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the disorder was total. Hundreds of rajas, nawabs and petty lords had made themselves sovereign in their own small domains; there was no law and no order left to speak of. The wealthy lived in extravagant luxury while the poor lived like insects underfoot. Highways belonged to bandits, cities to thugs, and the country sank into a mire without any central government to pull it out.

A Stolen Child, a New Name

In that lawless climate, kidnapping children for sale became a livelihood for criminals. Around 1840, one such man abducted a ten- or twelve-year-old girl from the outskirts of Lucknow and sold her to the madam of a courtesan's house. The madam renamed the girl — born Ameeran — as Umrao Jan, and began training her in music and dance. The child proved remarkably gifted: she mastered the courtesan's arts, and in time began writing poetry of her own under the pen-name *Ada*.

The Novel That Preserved Her

A Lucknow gentleman of the period, Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa, became a regular visitor to Umrao Jan's house. Both were considerable talents — Ruswa in particular was accomplished in poetry, music, dance and medicine — and he took a deep interest in her life story, eventually shaping it into a book. Published in 1898 as *Umrao Jan Ada*, the novel is prized as a vivid portrait of its society, and Urdu scholars regard it as the language's first true novel. Some fifty or sixty years later, when cinema arrived, the story was filmed more

than once under the same title, each version a considerable box-office success.

“The mansions their grandfathers built for glory now sheltered only their great-grandchildren's poverty.”

The World Those Mansions Left Behind

The political map kept shifting. The British eventually left India, the country was partitioned, and two new nations, India and Pakistan, took its place. Lucknow's old aristocratic culture did not survive the transition. The grand houses that noble families had once built for themselves passed down to grandsons and great-grandsons — and by then they were ruins: weeds sprouting from the rooftops and doorframes, and not even enough money left among their occupants for basic repairs. The old language, the old manners, the old way of life — all of it changed beyond recognition, and a whole civilisation quietly vanished.

Chasing a Lost Manuscript

Years later, a young Lucknow man named Ali Haider grew up listening eagerly to the elders' memories of that vanished world. Through them he learned something intriguing: Ruswa had in fact written a second, unpublished account of Umrao Jan's life, kept back from print because it held certain private secrets the first book had not disclosed.

Determined to track the manuscript down, Ali Haider sought out Lucknow's old families and combed through their private libraries. The search opened up a hidden world: every elderly man or woman he met, it seemed, was quietly guarding a chest of old secrets, and one by one those secrets came to light. The nawabs and grandees whose names he had grown up hearing — once addressed with grand honorifics — had left behind third- and fourth-generation descendants now living quietly amid the rubble of former greatness, having sold off the jewellery first, then the vessels, the furniture, the fine clothes, until nothing of value remained.

With no income left, poverty, illness, unemployment and despair had become the family inheritance instead. The basements of those crumbling houses still held piles of old letters, curiosities and family trees — for which there was no longer a single buyer. All that was left to console anyone was the threadbare pride of an old saying: *my father was a king, once*. Even the neighbourhood mosques had fallen dark and empty, their lamps long since unlit.

Ali Haider visited many such families and came away in tears more than once, hearing how houses that had once blazed with light every night now lay sunk in permanent darkness — each family's grief somehow deeper than the last. Through it all he kept searching, and after a long hunt he finally recovered the genuine, original manuscript and read it with something close to reverence. Along the way he had also encountered a vanishing world of connoisseurship — master physicians of the old school, musicians, poets, dancers, cooks, the last of the great houses, the shrines, the graveyards, the etiquette of gatherings, even the old forms of greeting — an entire universe of custom passing, quite literally, before his eyes.

Reviving the Ruins on the Page

It is this vanished world that the novelist Anees Ashfaq brings back to life in his book *Khwab Saraab* (“Dream, Mirage”) — the very title the present essay borrows. Ashfaq has also written a companion novel,

Dukhiyaray, and literary circles have praised both highly. The women at the centre of *Khwab Saraab*, Sahba, Shahba and others, belong to the third or fourth generation of those old aristocratic families — living, breathing images of destitution inside once-magnificent, now-crumbling mansions. The fault for their bleak inheritance lies squarely with their great-grandfathers, men who lived only for fine clothes, rich food, vanity, artifice, cunning and self-interest, and who left the world believing — as an old Persian maxim had taught them — that one should seize pleasure now, for the world does not come round twice. It never once occurred to them to ask whether the earth was round or square, or why a fruit falls from its branch to the ground.

While Europe Asked Why

That last question, of course, was exactly the one Europe was busy answering. Newton had already set down the laws of motion; in time, another generation of scientists would explain that even the atom — the smallest known particle of matter — contained still finer particles carrying electric charge. By the era of *Umrao Jan Ada*, the speed of light itself had been measured, and within a few years of the novel's publication a young physicist named Einstein would upend the scientific world with his ideas. None of this registered with a class absorbed entirely in its own pleasures.

The essay's author draws the parallel further: the Muslim societies of that era, he argues, kept their heads buried in the sand even as the storm bore down on them, indifferent to the wise and watchful voices among them who were trying, in vain, to sound the alarm.

A Homeland, and a Choice

God's mercy, the essay reflects, has not run dry: despite every failing, Muslims were granted a free homeland, its rivers running with water and its hills — Saindak among them — heavy with gold, every blessing bestowed on it in full. Yet those blessings, it argues, have too often fallen into the hands of the unjust, even as modern states are built and sustained on constitutional government and fair elections.

In Pakistan today, the essay observes, the wealthy still live in their mansions and the poor in their shanties, some too poor even to light a simple clay lamp. If nothing changes, it warns, the generations still to come will go on wading through a river of fire. Readers drawn to the old culture of Lucknow, it suggests, might turn to Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* or Anees Ashfaq's *Khwab Saraab*, or watch the films *Umrao Jan Ada* and *Shatranj Ke Khilari* (“The Chess Players”).

Pakistan, both at home and abroad, is not short of thoughtful people who understand exactly why nations fall and how they might yet be saved — the trouble, the essay closes by suggesting, is that those who have seized the country's blessings are rarely willing to listen. God built Pakistan out of mercy; it remains, the piece concludes, for its people to build it into a nation of dignity through honest effort — or else to hand the generations after them nothing but humiliation and helplessness.

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