

Awake in a Dream

Reviewed by Muhammad Sheeraz

Jaagay Hain Khuab Mein (Novel). Akhtar Raza Saleemi. Lahore: Dastavez Publications, 2018. 241 pages. Pakistani Rupees 350

Once I thought of writing a tale of a princess who sleeps for several weeks to live the dreams that she could not dream of living all those summers she had been awake. I needed to know how they work. Dreams, thus, became my favorite shopping. I would search them everywhere: book stores, coffee shops, flower markets, shining eyes. This search one day brought me my best Urdu novel on dreams: *Jaagay hain khuab men* (Awake in a Dream).

Written by Akhtar Raza Saleemi, this book has dreams scattered everywhere in it. Dreams that explore life. Life that travels through space in time. Time that expands in dreams and contracts in the real. The real that happens to be an illusion. And illusion that outshines the real!

Inquisitive by nature and interested in cosmology, the protagonist of the novel, Zaman, lies down on a rocky platform at the mouth of a cave and lets his eyes feast on the stars. His background knowledge of physics boosts his galactic imagination. Moonlit nights spark questions in his mind. Motion—be it that of a rabbit or of the solar system—transports him to persons and places existing at a time distance as humble as a moment to as great as a light year. His romantic self lives in dreams, nature, physics and philosophy, and wears a range of persons from his paternal line.

The summary-and-scene balance of the novel keeps us engrossed. At one point, we experience stillness, at another, we find ourselves surrounded by the Sikh army preparing to kill Syed Ahmad Brelvi. The zigzag plot of the novel hikes through the mountains taking us to the heights of ecstasy as we go in and out of Noor Abad. In and around the town, we see questions inscribed on rocks: What is time? What is space-time? Are we awake only in dreams? Can a well-dreamed sleep fully unpack all our genetic codes and show us through all the persons we have been living since Adam? Are we the us who lived ages ago? Does a perfect victory of our internal nature over the external one make us experience timelessness? Can we see forth in time the way we can look back through it?

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Faced with these and several other such questions, we cry out for help, only to awake Zaman.

If you dream a lot, if dreams trouble you, if you dream of places before you actually visit and see them, if your dreams have actually happened to others, if you believe in spiritualism, if you see oneness in the universe, if you wish to be jolted by storms and earthquakes, then the first thing you want to do is read *Jaagay Hain Khuab Men*. Its ambitious characters, novel setting, complex plot, converged subjects, fluid style, and vivid images make *Jaagay Hain Khuab Men* an extraordinary book. Books like this are there to be read, translated and made into films.