

MUHAMMAD UMAR MEMON

## Naiyer Masud: A Prefatory Note

*Hai ghaib-e ghaib jis-kō samaj<sup>br</sup> haiñ ham shuhūd*

*Haiñ xhvāb mēñ hanōz jō jāgē haiñ xhvāb mēñ*

The absent of the absent: what we see is merest seeming.

It is the dreaming into which we awaken from dream.

—Ghālib

### I

NAIYER MASUD, little known outside India and Pakistan, is both a scholar of Persian and Urdu and a short story writer. Passionately involved with fiction, he started writing stories in his early boyhood, but didn't start publishing until the 1970s. The five stories which make up his first collection, *Sīmiyā*, initially appeared individually in the literary magazine *Shab-Khūn* (Allahabad) and went largely without critical comment. When they later appeared as a book they were greeted warmly and, as often, dismissively. Some Urdu critics praised his work, in casual newspaper columns or in coffeehouse banter, but none of them could tell the reader what was good or bad about it, or even where it led. The message, the meaning, the experience remained elusive. The world of *Sīmiyā* and *It̤r-e Kāfūr*, his second collection, pulled reader and critic alike straight into the center of a vortex—at once seductive and inaccessible. In short, reading Naiyer Masud's stories evoked the sensation of being thrown headlong into a self-referential circularity. Entirely underivative and unlike anything that preceded them in the history of Urdu fiction, these stories stood in a class by themselves. They were different from the work of the early Urdu Romantics and Didactics on the one hand, and the Social Realists such as Munshi Premchand and the Progressive writers on the other. Strangely, they also didn't approximate anything of the modernist abstraction and symbolism that had swept over the Urdu fictional

landscape in the 1960s and onwards with such relentless force. In Masud's fiction one encountered order, neatness and decorum. These qualities dispelled any idea of "unreality" in the way it had come to pervade Urdu symbolist and abstractionist writing. His fictional world demanded respect, an admission of its unique ontological orientation, but gave no clue to what its existentialist identity or purpose might be. In the sum of its parts it didn't correspond to any image of the world familiar to the reader. A mirror-image of the real world in its outer form, at a deeper, more emblematic level it sought to subvert that image. And even though each element in it appeared palpably real, oddly, the aggregate didn't add up to anything known. The decontextualized tidiness created the disorienting effect of a free fall down an abyss of fast-closing circularity.

The shimmering but elusive quality of the stories may derive from a number of factors. Not the least of which is the terse and highly clipped prose of the writer, one that shuns even the slightest trace of hollow rhetoric, so stark in its suppression of qualifiers that it unsettles the mind. No or few idioms, no verbal pyrotechnics of any kind. It is Urdu all right, but it does not read like ordinary Urdu. Attenuated but overlain with invisible density and evocative of absence.

The economy, the avoidance of even an occasional exaggeration or embellishment, lend his prose an element of unfamiliarity, if not of unreality. Words are selected with extreme care, not for their meanings, but for their predisposition to evoke silence and stillness in which the elusive becomes self-evident. Rarely has Urdu seen a writer more jealously protective of his verbal choices. There is absolutely nothing arbitrary or rushed about them. Those of us who have worked in consultation with him on translations of his stories know too well his insistence on keeping the same word, often even the same order in which different verbal elements appear in a sentence. And, above all, how he hates the slightest emphasis when such emphasis could be creatively exploited in the translation. Personally, I can remember many instances when my better judgment and patience were taxed to their limits. The deliberate suppression of the expected withholds the wherewithal needed for most readers to cognize and perceive.

Another factor may be the use of certain elements identified with the architecture of spatial narratives. For instance, key words deployed at varying intervals horizontally across the fictional space. They seek to carry the meaning—or whatever its equivalent may be in Masud's stories—incrementally forward, often even modifying it in unexpected ways, and always in a state of flux, continually evolving. Often they are

woven so seamlessly in the narrative structure that one misses them altogether. The tendency of the human mind is to subdue (fathom, sort out, catalogue, close) and move on. But Masud's narratives work as a reminder against completion and closure. One experiences things in dynamic movement, not as objects with fixed perimeters, in a state of repose or quiescence. So one cannot be done with them and move on. Circularity has no terminus. Finishing one of his stories does not bring the expected comprehension and completion. What it does bring is a continual engagement with the unsaid and the ineffable, preserved in memory.

These qualities most likely result from an inherent tension between the expansiveness of experience as embodied in Masud's stories, its refusal to be chopped up and packaged in neat little packets, and the form in which he alludes to that experience. A tension, in other words, between content and generic expectation as understood in Urdu letters.

The tendency away from closure might itself stem from the denial, at a trans-empirical level, of linear temporality, of the divisions of time into past, present, and future. The moment, or for that matter any division of time, is simultaneously present throughout. As if it were a gathering together of all time into an eternity that is *necessarily* present. Experience, which can only be a single indivisible entity, is continuous, indeed it is coeval with consciousness. Eventually, the two may be the same thing.

The matter may be less abstruse from the point of view of Sufi metaphysics. Here Reality = Being reduces temporality to pure nonexistence, except in relation to the created world—itself devoid of reality qua itself.

But as stories, Masud's work falls squarely within the limits of the created world. And it is here that the suspension of the defining temporal conventions creates the dizzying sensation of disjuncture. At the same time, it jars the reader into the recognition that behind the apparent multiplicity of his work lies a single concern: the experience of being. Therefore no limits or ordering perimeters or boundaries are possible. Each story is merely a variation on a single theme. Just as the present is an imaginary point along a continuum where consciousness may choose to place it, a story is a discrete embodiment only insofar as consciousness chooses to see it as such. In essence, it has no beginning and, therefore, no end.

In the process of working closely with Masud's fictional universe, I'm nowhere closer to its "meaning" today than I was some years ago when I first started. But, increasingly, I feel that to insist on some palpable meaning, or even a shard of meaning, in reflexive fiction such as Masud's

is to put the wrong foot forward. “Meaning” inevitably has to do with the domain of logic, discursive reason, empiricism. It is inherently suggestive of a split, a dichotomy, a state of divorce and rupture. Whence its inability to deal with reality except piecemeal. Our generic expectations from the short story proceed from the basic premise that objects have meaning. These expectations are not likely to be met in a perusal of Masud’s short stories. These stories are preoccupied instead with being. *To be*, and not *to mean*. The maze is entered for its own sake—to become maze—and not to subdue, to get somewhere. Keeping in mind the culture where Masud has grown up, his predilection to preface his work with quotations from Persian mystical lore predisposes me to think that the subject-matter of these stories (if one could be rash enough to use the phrase “subject-matter”) is less accessible to the domain of reason. It is not an object to be cognized, but one can begin to get some intimation of it experientially, in something like a visionary flash in the trans-empirical realm of pure reflection. If the stories do not begin at a discrete logical point, if they don’t close at the end of the day, if they fail to reach resolution and appear open-ended, it is because they do not deal with reality as something divisible or linear. Their sole purpose is perhaps to evoke silence, a stillness in which the distracted self can begin to experience its ineffable totality, its inherent identity and synchronicity with Being.

I’m not suggesting that these stories are the product of Sufi thought or carry Sufi metaphysics forward. I’m only suggesting that we borrow a methodology which is Sufistic in its character and see whether this might lead us to the center of the Masudian universe. In other words, to make a case for experiencing and being, rather than knowing as the fundamental point of entry to his work. The tension between content and form is after all the obverse of the polarity between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between time and eternity.

I recall once talking to Shamsur Rahman Faruqi about the effect Masud’s stories had on me and being amazed at his remark: “They don’t go anywhere; they’re like dreams.” I wasn’t sure how to take this remark. Coming as it did from Urdu’s most astute critic, the remark, I’m inclined to believe, didn’t imply a negative judgment. Faruqi Sahib rather meant to underscore the need for the construction of a fictional theory in Urdu expansive enough to embrace Masud’s work. A radically different poetics of fictional art pointed away from traditional notions of meaning and inherited form, to a trajectory more hospitable to an ethos more nearly representative of cultural strains which make up the composite personality of a South Asian Urdu writer.

The need is both urgent and relevant. After sifting through the bulk of the Urdu short story and certainly the best of it, one is left with a curious paradox. Readily intelligible to a Westerner in most of its content, it is virtually riotous in the arbitrariness of its form. Eventually it is cut off from its own pre-modern cultural experience. Some canon formation is called for, not only to validate its peculiar South Asian flavor, but also to explain the disjuncture.

## II

Given the dubious reception of Masud's work in South Asia and my conviction that though dimly accessible, it was much more than simply vacuous, that something was irreducibly authentic about it, I decided to introduce it to the readers of the *AUS*. My hope was that it would generate useful critical discussion and open insightful ways of looking at Masud's fiction. Hence this special section on him. A number of friends have been instrumental in making that happen. I'm grateful to Moazzam Sheikh, Elizabeth Bell, Sagaree Sengupta, Aditya Behl, and Shantanu Phukan for agreeing to translate a number of short stories for this special section and patiently going through several revisions to produce a translation at once faithful and readable. Ms. Bell, whose help has been immense, deserves a special note of thanks. She made up to a degree the relative lack of critical essays on Masud's fiction by her contribution. Although more in the nature of an encounter of two writers across two cultures and two languages, Ms. Bell's essay eminently succeeds in delineating some of the difficulties as well as distinctions of Masud's art. She also went over the text of five translations and offered many fine suggestions for improvement. And all this with a dedication and promptness which only add to my sense of gratitude.

It is a pleasant duty to record my thanks to an old and very considerate friend. Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman, in spite of his joyous engagement with other more satisfying literary pursuits, took the time out to give *S̄miyā* a second critical reading and sum up his thoughts on it in an essay, which arrived just as we were going to press.

I have been in consultation with Naiyer Masud throughout the project. His cooperation, in no small measure, contributed to insuring that the original text has remained intact in its English incarnation. He meticulously went over nine of the eleven translations included here, and supplied the required clarifications and explanations promptly and

unstintingly. Many thanks to him.

Three translations included here have appeared previously. “Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire” in my *Domains of Fear and Desire: Urdu Stories* (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1992; reprint as *Domains of Fear and Desire: An Anthology of Urdu Stories*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), “The Color of Nothingness” in my *The Colour of Nothingness: Modern Urdu Short Stories* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991), and the third, “Remains of the Ray Family” in Geeta Dharmarajan, ed. *Katha Prize Stories*, Vol. 3 (Delhi: Katha, 1993), where the author and translator were both recipients of an award. They are reproduced here after appropriate revision and with permission from their publishers. The remaining translations were done especially for the *AUS*. One of them (“Sheesha Ghat”), I am glad to report, has been selected by Katha to receive the A. K. Ramanujan Award for Translation for 1997 and will appear in December in *Katha Prize Stories*, Vol. 7. Congratulations to the translators and thanks to Ms. Geeta Dharmarajan and Ms. Chitra Padmanabhan.

The publication details of the stories included here follow: “Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire” (“Ōjhal”) and “The Color of Nothingness” (“Nuṣrat”) are taken from the author’s first collection of short stories, *Sīmiyā*, pp. 5–40 and 41–60, respectively; “Sultan Muzaffar’s Imperial Chronicler” (“Sultān Muẓaffar kā Vāqī‘a-Navīs”), “Interregnum” (“Vaḡfa”), and “Essence of Camphor” (“Iṭr-e Kāfūr”), from his second collection *Iṭr-e Kāfūr*, pp. 49–79, 105–31, and 133–84, respectively; “Remains of the Ray Family” (“Rē Khāndān kē Āṣār”), “Lament” (“Nudba”), “Ba’i’s Mourners” (“Bā’i kē Mātam-Dār”), “The Myna from Peacock Garden” (“Ṭā’ūs Čaman kī Mainā”) and “Nosh Daru” (“Nōshdārū”) from *Quarterly Āj* (Karachi), Spring 1992, pp. 9–23, Summer–Fall 1992, pp. 74–88, Summer 1994, pp. 59–73, Spring–Summer 1995, pp. 9–44, and Spring–Summer 1996, pp. 38–51, respectively; and “Sheesha Ghat” (“Shīsha-Gḥāṭ”) from *Saughāt* 10 (Bangalore), March 1996, pp. 174–91.

To give the readers a flavor of Masud’s original Urdu prose, I have included the short story “Ganjefa” at the back of translations. It was written at my request especially for the *AUS* by the author and is appearing here for the first time.

### III

Naiyer Masud was born on 16 November 1936 in Lucknow. His parents

both came from families of physicians (*hakīms*), but in both families the practice of traditional medicine had effectively ended with Masud's maternal and paternal grandfathers. Coincidentally, his wife too comes from a family of physicians and in that family, too, the ancestral profession had terminated with her father. Naiyer Masud's father, Syed Masud Hasan Rizvi Adeeb, was a professor of Persian at Lucknow University and a renowned scholar of Persian and Urdu. His library was well regarded for its sizable collection of rare books and manuscripts. "I owe the greater part of my literary training to him and to this collection," he admits to the present writer in one of his letters, dated 20 June 1997, and continues: "I was educated in ordinary schools and was an average student, more interested in reading all kinds of other books, novels and short story collections, than my course textbooks."

He holds two Ph.D. degrees, one in Urdu from Allahabad University, the other in Persian from Lucknow University, which he joined in 1965 as a professor of Persian and has been there ever since.

He married in 1971, and shares with his wife three daughters and a son. The family lives in the house which Masud's father had built and appropriately named "Adabistān" ("Abode of Literature"<sup>1</sup>). He finds social life tedious, and travel bothersome. Any prospect of spending time away from his native Lucknow makes him nervous, but he did visit Tehran in 1977 for a few days at the invitation of Iran's Ministry of Culture to participate in a conference of teachers of Persian. Subsequently he published a hilarious but insightful account of the trip.<sup>2</sup> "But correspondence with friends, my job at the university, and visitors have saved me from becoming entirely cut off from the outside world."

In his boyhood Masud wrote some poetry, short stories, and plays, which were published in children's magazines. Later, starting in 1965, he devoted his energies to writing research papers. His friendship with Shamsur Rahman Faruqi revived his desire to write fiction. He wrote his first short story, "Nuṣrat," in 1971. This and the other four short stories

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<sup>1</sup>"Literature" is only one of the meanings of the word "adab"; the phrase can also be rendered as "Abode of Cultured Living." Naiyer Masud has written a brief but interesting account of this building, intertwined with reminiscences of his family and memorable personalities of Lucknow, for which see his "Adabistān," in *Saughāt* 4 (March 1993), pp. 354–64.

<sup>2</sup>See his "Khunuk Shehr-e Īrān," in *Izhār* 4 (Bombay; August 1978), pp. 427–51.

included in the collection *Sīmiyā* initially appeared in Faruqi's magazine *Shab-Khūn*. "I'm very slow at writing," he remarks. "I've written only twenty-two short stories in the last twenty-five years." He is also very fond of translating, but regrets that he hasn't been able to translate as widely as he'd wanted to. "Some twenty pieces of Kafka, fifteen short stories and a few poems from Persian, that's as much as I have translated."

In the same letter he mentions his interest in calligraphy, painting, and music. "There was a time when I could play a few instruments," he writes.

I can also manage minor repair jobs around the house which have to do with plumbing, masonry, electrical work and carpentry. But I did learn the art of book-binding formally. My true occupation, at any rate, is reading and, occasionally, writing.

Masud has published some two dozen books which fall in the following categories: fiction, children's books, translations, and research works. His fiction includes: *Sīmiyā* (Lucknow: Kitābnagar, Nuşrat Publishers, 1984; reprint, Lahore: Qausain, 1987); *It̤r-e Kāfūr* (collection of seven short stories; Lucknow: Nizāmi Press, 1990); and *T̤ā'ūs Čaman kī Mainā* (third collection of short stories; Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, 1997). Notable among his translations is a volume of Franz Kafka's short stories and parables, entitled *Kāfka kē Afānē* (Lucknow: Kitābnagar, 1978) and numerous contemporary Iranian short stories, which have appeared in *Quarterly Āj*. □