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The Seventh Door—A Review Article

INTIZAR HUSAIN. *The Seventh Door and Other Stories.* Edited and with an introduction by MUHAMMAD UMAR MEMON. Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

BEAUTIFULLY produced and pleasant to read, this collection comes as the latest in a series of translations from Intizar Husain's writings, among them *Leaves and Other Stories*[1] and the novel *Basti*.[2] These translations do not come as a surprise, for Husain is regarded as one of the preeminent Pakistani writers. His story "Ākhirī Ādmī" ("The Last Man"), first published in 1958, is considered a milestone in the development of the Urdu short story. Along with a handful of other writers, Husain introduced in the 1960s a number of new narrative modes—symbolic and fairy-tale- and parable-like. He made conscious use of the Subcontinent's rich tradition of story telling in its various forms and thus enriched his "predominantly moral" concerns in a general way.

The present selection—to which Caroline J. Beeson, Leslie A. Flemming, Nancy D. Gross, Muhammad Umar Memon, C. M. Naim, Javaid Qazi, Daud Rahbar and Richard R. Smith have contributed translations—is based on the material which was published earlier in a special issue of the *Journal of South Asian Literature*[3] on the writings of Intizar Husain, but the material here has been "substantially revised" (p. ix). It was certainly worthwhile to bring out the earlier translations in book form, as this may provide them a much wider and more permanent readership than would be otherwise reached by the *JSAL*.

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[1] Tr. Alok Bhalla and Vishwamitter Adil (Delhi: Indus, an imprint of HarperCollins, 1993). For a review of this work, see Jason Francisco, *AUS* #9 (1994), pp. 239–42.

[2] Tr. Frances W. Pritchett (Delhi: Indus, an imprint of HarperCollins, 1995).

[3] 18:2 (1983).

The stories included in the present volume are selected from five collections spanning the period 1952–81 and, hence, provide a broad sampling of Intizar Husain's work over this period. For later works, one will have to turn to Alok Bhalla's collection.

The profound introduction (pp. 1–54) provides the reader—unfamiliar with the literary and social context of Intizar Husain's writing—with the necessary background information. In parts I and II, Memon sketches the development of modern Urdu fiction in the nineteenth century, the main literary movements of the twentieth century (the Progressive Writers' Movement and the Circle of Possessors of Taste), reform movements and their impact on literature, the political awakening of Indian Muslims prior to the partition of India, the partition and its aftermath, and important events in the political history of Pakistan, before turning to Intizar Husain's writing. One really does not see any reason why Memon has to be so apologetic about this highly instructive socio-political and historical excursion. He seems to be at odds with the effect of socio-political factors on literature though he himself admits that such an effect cannot be denied (cf., e.g., pp. 4–5, 6, 23, 26). Why feel ashamed of something that in fact is an asset of the book? Is this uneasiness to be explained by Memon's strong reservations about the reductive concept of realism propounded by some of the "Progressives" which makes him feel suspicious of any straight and direct link between life and literature? Memon's repeated attacks on the "Progressives" seem to point to a distinctive bias against them and in favor of such modes of writing as are not overtly realistic, as well as to a bias against any expressed social or political commitment of the writer. Understandably, then, Intizar Husain's mostly oblique and indirect mode of expression finds much more favor with him—though this very mode may also serve thinly veiled moralizing and didactic intentions. But more of this later, when I will turn to parts III and IV of the Introduction. For now, let me make some minor remarks about parts I and II.

Describing the lasting effect of Sir Syed's movement, Memon writes: "whether he intended it or not, his plan polarized the Muslim intelligentsia into two discrete, rival camps, with no middle ground for give and take" (p. 8). There can be no doubt about the divide between the extremes on both sides existing to this day. But has there not also been a continuous struggle for a practicable synthesis, as reflected, e.g., in some of Nażīr Aḥmad's writings? Are not most of the Muslim intellectuals in India and Pakistan today caught in the same conflict? Are they not trying somehow to practice a kind of synthesis in their thinking as well as in their day-to-day lives?

The other remark concerns secondary literature: In the context of Ḥālī's approach to literature, suggestions for further reading are given in footnote 9 (pp. 47–8). Here, one could also mention F. W. Pritchett's recent book on Ḥālī and Āzād, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics.*[4]

Part III deals with Husain's historical consciousness and his worldview, especially his rootedness in the Indian Muslim culture and his passion for Pakistan—ideals hard to reconcile. It was thus with a "baggage of pain" but his heart "full of uplifting hope" (p. 16) that he came to Pakistan in 1947. Part IV describes the development of Husain's creative writing under the impact of the *hijrat* (migration) and of the fate of the newly founded Pakistan. Memon quotes Javaid Qazi's taxonomy of Husain's work: phase one, the 1950s: emphasis on social, cultural and religious symbols; phase two, the 1960s: emphasis on animal imagery and metaphor, and phase three, the 1970s: emphasis on concepts of self and self-identity—the unifying theme being that of "man's effort to keep his humanity, or humanness, intact, and his inability to do so" (p. 18). In close correspondence with Qazi, Memon divides Husain's writing into three phases seen as stages in a journey with the following thematic focus:

> (1) reclamation of memory, some initial success in this respect, but, ultimately, failure, leading to (2) man's moral perversion and fall, resulting in (3) the extinction of all the creative principle in life. (p. 18).

The experience of migration is shown to be essential for Husain's sensitivity and creativeness. Numerous remarks by the writer himself point to this fact. A fundamental difficulty linked to Husain's and probably also to Memon's concept of *hijrat* as a creative experience in history becomes evident when it is related to Pakistan:

> [T]here is no contradiction if it is identified as the dominant experience of an age even if the aggregate of Muslims of that age in a given area did not physically experience it. Only a part of the population of contemporary Pakistan is made up of Indian immigrants. The rest remained right where

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[4] Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

> they were. But even they, Husain thinks, participated in the dominant experience of their age. Their participation was, however, purely imaginative. (p. 19)

Did they really participate? Looking at developments in Pakistan from 1947 to this day, one would rather assume that a vast segment of the Pakistani population did not feel involved with the new state—let alone those who resented its creation. And then there is the considerable number of people for whom the new state/country just meant new opportunities of influence, power and economic profit—Husain himself mentions as much. And repeatedly. The seeds of corruption and hypocrisy were there right from the beginning. Is this not one of the very factors which contributed to all the failures and tragedies in the history of Pakistan? Memon remarks: "To exploit the potential of the 1947 *hijrat* creatively, Muslims needed to look back to their past and define their cultural personality. It is exactly at this point that things failed to go the expected way" (*ibid.*). Is this really all that went wrong? Didn't Pakistani Muslims also have to define the social and political character of the new state? Just think of Pichwa in the story "An Unwritten Epic" who believes that land, houses and factories in Pakistan should be distributed among refugees from India (p. 98) and that the *zamindars* in Pakistan will share their land with him in the name of Muslim brotherhood (p. 96). Finally, when all his hopes are shattered, he returns to India, only to be killed by Hindu fanatics.

This lack of moral commitment and responsibility, and the dominance of selfishness and greed are among the main motifs which appear over and over again in Husain's stories from all periods. So what happened to the initial enthusiasm felt by at least some Pakistanis when the new state was founded after so much agitation and bloodshed? Was it not wasted exactly because others were not allowed to share it? Because there was so much talk of Islam but virtually no action to establish a more egalitarian society, to provide food, shelter, education, and justice to the poor? Because Islam was merely used by the upper strata of society to maintain or expand its own power and privilege? And this is what has been going on ever since. What has flourished instead is self-indulgence, greed, indifference toward the fellow human being, pride in one's status and riches, and the most shameless display of wealth and power. Not that there have not been admonishing voices—Intizar Husain's being one of them. Memon rightfully stresses the importance of the moral impulse in his work (p. 26). In the stories from the collection *Ākhirī Ādmī* (1967), the decline in personal morality is sometimes shown in realistic detail, as in the experiences of the coachman Yasin in "The Legs," sometimes in a parable-like setting, as in "The Yellow Cur" or "The Last Man," where all attempts to maintain one's humanity fail, or in "Metamorphosis," where such an attempt is not even made. Memon epitomizes this collection as

> more of a novel in eleven stories, as each piece explores with haunting power the steady erosion of moral consciousness and the resulting decline in imaginative cognition, leading to an eventual hollowing out of personality. (p. 21)

Husain's fourth collection of short stories, *Shahr-e Afsōs* (1973), came out shortly after the political fragmentation of Pakistan in 1971 and reflects in various ways the tragic event, repeatedly depicting the "interconnected themes of crass inhumanity and loss of selfhood" (p. 22). Here, again, Memon adds: "However, these stories are deliberately swathed in eerie unreality to discourage any attempt to ascribe them too closely to a specific time and place" (*ibid.*). Let us postpone the question whether this "eeriness" really gives them greater artistic value and a more general meaning. Suffice it to say that Memon voices—here as well as at many other places—his own preference for a particular literary style which is not necessarily shared by every reader.

Intizar Husain's novel *Bastī*, written in a similar vein, is discussed in part V of the introduction. Stretching over almost half of the introduction (pp. 26–44) and comprising quite extensive polemics against critiques of the novel brought forth by several Pakistani critics, this chapter seems to be a bit out of place in this volume. Would it not have sufficed to refer to the English translation of the novel with the excellent introduction by Memon himself?

But let us now turn to the stories. As mentioned above, the volume presents a selection from Husain's first five collections covering a period of roughly thirty years. The first two stories, "The Seventh Door" and "The Back Room," as well as the fifth, "The Stairway," are drawn around childhood reminiscences, creating a very intense and yet dream-like emotional atmosphere. Other stories, such as "An Unwritten Epic," "A Stranded Railroad Car," "Towards His Fire," "Comrades," "The Shadow," and "The Prisoners," are situated in a contemporary, predominantly realistic setting. Of these, I must confess, the first five are my favorites. As far as I think, Husain has not been able to achieve a similar intensity, authenticity, intimate atmosphere, and emotional appeal in his other work that is set in an abstract environment. In these stories, Husain skillfully interweaves fairy tales and legends of Muslim saints, etc., into his narration. But this device begins to wear out when repeated in story after story. For instance, the parable of the mouse and the mountain on fire related by Shaikh ʿAli Hujvīrī occurs not only in "Towards His Fire" but also in "Comrades" (cf. pp. 125 and 131). Stories such as "The Stairway" and "A Stranded Railroad Car" certainly draw much of their power from the tender rays of love and the experience of beauty which illuminate the whole narrative. The delicate texture of unexpressed love and longing and the special atmosphere of *sharīf* middle-class Muslim culture represented by the older generation, create a rich, bitter-sweet ambience in which sadness is balanced by the reward of experiencing something very precious: purest feelings, neither perverted nor thwarted, which survive and turn into a hidden treasure for the character to draw strength/solace from.

No such ray illuminates the stories that deal, overwhelmingly, with the experience of loss, alienation and disorientation. Although a number of critics agree that Husain's stories display a "remarkable unity of mood," created by "experiences of anxiety, pain, loss, and disorientation,"[5] I see a major difference in the group of stories containing a love theme. The mood here is one of resignation rather than the utter despair so prevalent in some of Husain's other work.

Thematic distinction and different phases aside, there appear to be three basic narrative modes which Husain has used in the present stories. "Social realism"[6] dominates in one mode, an abstract, highly generalized, subjective narration in another, while the third employs fairy-tales and religious parables and traditions (*ḥikāyāt* and *malfūẓāt*). These modes may of course be combined in certain stories, and all three, as I've already mentioned, are represented in the collection under review. It seems that the "eeriness" in the spatial and temporal setting Memon praises as one of the special qualities of Husain's style (p. 22), quite often necessitates a direct, all-too-overt expression of the characters' anxieties and concerns. This unveiled expression of the central concerns of the stories also occurs—but to a lesser degree—in works with a more concrete setting. I agree with Pritchett that

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[5] See, Frances W. Pritchett, "Narrative Modes in Intizar Husain's Short Stories," in *Journal of South Asian Literature,* 18:2 (1983), p. 192.

[6] Javaid Qazi, "The Significance of Being Human In Intizar Husain's Fictional World," in *ibid.*, p. 187.

> by and large, Husain's weakest stories are those which deal directly and explicitly with the experience of disorientation and loss, while his best stories are ones in which he indirectly suggests this experience and compels the *reader* to raise questions about it.[7]

Pritchett mentions "The Shadow" and "The Lost Ones" as examples of the former type and feels that "The Lost Ones" is a more successful story than "Shahr-e Afsōs ," the title story of Husain's fourth collection. Here, the existential questions (Who are we/Who am I? etc.) are uttered in dialogues, whereas they are part of the main character's inner monologue in "The Shadow." When the character has already asked all the questions out loud, what is there left for the reader to do? In a way, this type of literature is no less didactic and moralizing than that of the "Progressives." One has to admit, however, that Husain's parables raise more questions than they answer. I again agree with Pritchett that stories in which questions of identity, morality, humanness, evolve as a result of the character's experience, of his interaction with the outer world and other human beings, are much more successful in conveying their meaning. Such stories may be written in any of the three modes. "Metamorphosis" is among the best examples of stories that make use of fairy-tales to get their meaning across, "The Turtles" of the parable type, woven around *Jātaka*-stories.[8] But, after all, which stories a reader enjoys more than others is a question of individual literary taste and stylistic preference. The present collection offers a choice of some of the most famous and successful stories in all the three modes and is therefore truly representative of Husain's writing till 1981.

Being a native speaker of neither Urdu nor English, it is rather difficult for me to judge the quality of the translations; all the same, I did enjoy reading the English versions. At no place did the language feel awkward or unnatural. That much of the flavor of the original is lost in translation is a fact we have to accept for every piece of literature that is carried over into another language. Thus, it is impossible to retain the special idiom and dialect some of the elderly women use in their speech in Husain's short stories. What disturbed me at some places, however, was a certain verbosity or circumlocution which is not found in the Urdu original and—to me at least—unnecessary in English as well. To give just a few examples, compare the following passages in Urdu and in English:

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[7] "Narrative Modes," pp. 192–3.

[8] For a detailed discussion of this story, see Jason Francisco's review of *Leaves and Other Stories*, in *AUS* #9 (1994), p. 240.

> "*safar vafar mēṅ kyā rakʰā hai.*" ("To tell you the truth, travel isn't enjoyable any more." [p. 77])
>
> "*vaqt kā dʰyān rakʰnā čāhiyē.*" ("One ought to, though. One should always keep track of the time." [p. 105])
>
> "*aur sōčtā hūṅ ke javānī dinōṅ mēṅ kaisē čalī jātī hai.*" ("I cannot help feeling the inexorable flight of time. How fleeting youth is! It is gone before you know it." [p. 118])
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> "*ḥaẕrat ṣāḥib baṛī hastī tʰē.*" ("This Hazrat Sahib of yours sounds like some great man." [p. 121]) [In this example, even the tone seems to have been changed considerably.]
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> "*ādmī sālē kā kō'ī i'tibār hai?*" (The rotten human race … how can you trust anyone nowadays?" [p. 149])

There are many more instances where one of the special qualities of Husain's style—short, sometimes elliptical sentences, a brevity of expression which is highly expressive and evocative—is lost in translation. (It is this particular concise style writers like Ghālib or Nażīr Aḥmad are so famous for!) Was this style sacrificed to make the English more colloquial? In this regard, I find Daud Rahbar's translation of "Zard Kuttā" ("The Yellow Cur"), to name only one example, more congenial. On the whole, however, the translations are very successful, and the fact that different translators contributed to the volume has not led to disparities in style obliterating the original author's voice.

To sum up, the collection provides a balanced and variegated selection of Husain's short stories in which his themes and narrative modes are well reflected. The translations make for a smooth and pleasant reading. Together with the fine paper and excellent print, the volume is a pleasure to look at and to read. ❒