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The Un-Contexted Master: An Out-of-Culture Experience of Naiyer Masud

No contributor to the *Annual of Urdu Studies* is less erudite than the present writer about South Asian culture, the Urdu language or its literature. My remarks are those of a Western reader who is engaged with the world and addicted to good writing but by no means an academic, and who happens to experience a strong resonance between her inner meditations and the work of Naiyer Masud. This may be attributable in part to Masud's emphasis on the isolation of the individual, strongly evocative of the themes of existentialism that permeate the Western mentality in the latter half of this century.

For Masud's is a first-person world, seen through a seeking "I." It is a world of mirror images, of ambiguities, of vacancies both subtle and salient that dizzy us with the draw of the void. The past is continually impinging upon the present but just as constantly rebukes any attempt to make sense of it. It is a realm of unknowing; we feel our way through it like children, unclear on specifics, controlled by various external authority figures and harboring the illusion that someone, somewhere, holds the key to the puzzle of existence. Masud's recurrent motifs—doorways, smell, muteness, wounds—form a grammar of disorientation and loss.

His fiction makes brilliant use of the child protagonist as a ready-made universal: we are all born into a world rife with mystery, arbitrariness and overlapping contradictory truths, and, Masud keeps reminding us, things never become any tidier. As though to foreground the universality of this condition, he eliminates even fundamental specifics: the child "I" has no name or precise age; at best, we learn relative ages, often of characters in different stages of childhood. Towns and other people tend to go unnamed as well, stripped down to their functional attributes

in the text, e.g., near or far from home, in a subordinate position in the household, etc. It is a relational rather than a determined world, boldly denuded of qualifiers that might hinder reader identification.

"We" are on stage, then, in all our ignorance. We vaguely sense, and deeply desire, the existence of some deep logic behind the welter of reality as it presents itself to our perceptions; unable to grasp its coherence, we look to others. Elders, history, the "wisdom of tradition" hold out the promise of enlightening us—and inevitably disappoint. Masud constantly points to the inadequacy of history as an interpretation of reality. His stories are permeated by a resistance to received knowledge, to the world as insisted upon by the individual's societal surroundings.

The young protagonist of "The Color of Nothingness" excitedly awaits a trial by the elders of a "bad woman" on (typically) unspecified charges. Various layers of unknowing have already been laid out: there was a previous case of a "bad woman" deliberated at the child's home, but his awareness was at the time ("my nonage") even more unformed. The room has been furnished for the occasion with additional artifacts of the past, antiques, "some of them centuries old," brought in "to enhance the room's decor." The child is excited by the prospect of knowing, of having a mystery revealed, but it is not these trappings of tradition that captivate him. Rather, it is the chair on which she will sit, representing the chance to apprehend directly the object of his curiosity. "My heart began to pound. I could almost see her sitting right there. In fact, what aroused my interest in the matter was the opportunity it offered of looking squarely at a bad woman."[1]

The boy fails to actually witness the proceedings. Instead, he enters the deserted room where the judgments have already been passed, the interpretations made:

> A deathly hush had now swept over the room. The chairs were in total disarray, and some hastily scribbled scraps of paper lay near some of them. I collected the scraps. The scrawled writing marked the consultations which had taken place among the elders and honorable guests. […] I had a hard time deciphering the writing on the scraps, but once I had mastered it I tried to ascertain the events that had taken place during my absence. I arranged and rearranged the scraps in many different ways but failed completely to make any

[1]P. 84. All page numbers refer to the current issue of the *AUS*.

> sense of them; as soon as I changed their order the events they were supposed to represent also underwent a complete change. I wasted a considerable amount of time juggling those scraps and was none the wiser for my effort. My interest, tremendously aroused by the sight of them, began to dampen and then vanish altogether. The room, lined with antiques, began to suffocate me. I felt I couldn't stay there any longer. [p. 90]

The evidence does not of itself lead to the ordained conclusion: it could just as easily point 180 degrees away. The effort to comprehend the established system has been a waste of time. The sense of suffocation, here and elsewhere, resembles a certain very Western nausea.

In "Interregnum" the narrator also undergoes a disillusionment in regard to acquired wisdom after his education is reverently given over to a tutor once he reaches trouble-making age. His reaction to the old teacher goes from amusement to active hostility:

> I could also read, but the massive handwritten manuscripts remained entirely inaccessible to me. Some of them were not in my language, and others were so convoluted in their verbal structures and script that only after the greatest reflection could I get even the vaguest grasp of their import, and even this never stayed with me longer than a fleeting moment. On such occasions, anger toward my teacher would surge up in me; I spoke to him very rudely many times. Once […] I yelled and picked up a heavy tome and hurled it at his chest. [p. 100]

Likewise the protagonist of perhaps Masud's most complex story, "The Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire," is quite specific about his repugnance for the past-as-given. The youth—here neither quite a child nor quite an adult—announces to his family his wish to leave home and strike out on his own.

> Upon seeing all the elaborate arrangements they made for my journey, I realized how comfortable and secure I had been in that house and felt rather fed up with myself. A few days before my departure they gave me a small stone amulet inscribed with sacred names to wear around my neck. It was an heirloom which had been in our family for many generations. This increased my annoyance. Quietly I took the amulet off and put it back in the chest full of old

clothes where it had always been kept. [pp. 67–8]

"Essence of Camphor" offers many examples of conflict between natural and imposed interpretation. Its iconic image embodies a fundamental ambiguousness which is obvious to the naïf but negated by tradition. The child narrator fixates on a handmade effigy of a bird which sits on the mantelpiece of his home; he describes it in detail, with this telling particular:

> The bird's claws were raised in the air instead of resting on the branch, making it difficult to know whether the bird was landing on the branch or flying away; perhaps that's why it was disturbing to look at for long. My family, however, took it to be the portrait of a bird rising. [p. 15]

This arbitrary decree does not satisfy the protagonist, however, who has

> […] the repeated impression that it was lifting off the branch *and* coming back down [my emphasis]. [p. 27]

Such undeterminabilities and diametrical opposites are among Masud's favorite playthings. Over and over in his stories, up is down, closed is open, past is present—or you cannot discern which is which. In "Ba'i's Mourners," a child turns out to be an old woman; a bride is buried alive—or is she dead? A character in "Interregnum" is a beggar, a learned teacher, again a beggar; the child narrator is his dead father. These simultaneous countervailing realities are subjective, but are not ambivalences. It seems perfectly natural for a Masud narrator to come up with a formulation like "She treated me not as though she were much older than I, but as though I were quite a bit younger than she" ("Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire"), or "I felt as if I had solved an obscure puzzle, yet couldn't resist the feeling that the solution itself was still more obscure" ("Interregnum"). Even when one narrator states that his friend "hadn't changed much," then a paragraph later remarks that she had "changed a great deal," we are sure that he doesn't mean a little of each: here as elsewhere, both facts exist in an unselfconscious purity that seems to call into question our framing of the concept of contradiction.

The apotheosis of Masudian ambidirectionality is reached in "Lamentation," in which the figure of the seeker reaches its full stature as

Everyman and referential vagueness has reached the proportions found in fable. After a lifetime spent exploring cities, towns, then one unfathomable rural and even wilderness culture after another, each with its incomprehensible language, the narrator has learned nothing and has returned "home." The tale suppurates with unknowing, undeterminability, arrows that point in both directions. Speaking of the outback groups he has visited on his travels, the protagonist notes that

> […] the traces of habitation left by these communities tended to disappear rather quickly—or perhaps weren't even there in the first place. [p. 126]

And

> [t]heir speech sounded like a corrupted form of my own language—or its primitive form before corruption had set in—which was unfathomable to me. [p. 131]

He has communicated with them via signs, but

> [d]ifferent communities expressed themselves through different signs, and sometimes the same sign denoted the opposite meaning in a different community. Where one community used a particular hand gesture to express happiness, the other used the same gesture to express sorrow. Where a nod of the head indicated "yes" for one, the other used it to indicate "no." [p. 126]

Now, after "a long time," a group from one of these wasteland communities has shown up in his town, wheeling a mysterious cart and bearing a slip of paper with the narrator's address written in his own hand. Their presence is announced by "the local crazy boy" who, the narrator muses, probably isn't crazy: another dubious societal designation. The cart appears to be unoccupied but is not. It holds a mysterious passenger whose closed eye appears open; his other eye sees through the merest slit. It is a little boy—no, a wizened old man. Or is it? And here lies what this reader sees as Masud's pivotal di-vision.

The community is desperate to preserve this member, the "last" of his category; his "lastness" alone is unambiguous, but whether "last child—or last old man" the narrator confesses he does not know. What is this treasure that anchors us to existence? Is it the innocent perspective of child-

hood, our ability to apprehend the world freshly, creatively and nondogmatically, that will save us, or the eons of traditional knowledge, technique and control embodied by our elders? To put it negatively, are we doomed by our inexperience and predilection for the direct and immediate, or by hewing to exhausted interpretations and hollow formulas rooted in a time that is no more? Old age and infancy are a constantly recurring dyad in Masud's fiction, but their metaphorical dynamic is not dialectic. They are polar opposites, or they are identical. The helpless ignorance of the child embarking on life and the anguish of the experience-saturated elder, whose knowledge is useless in the face of death, are primordial states of existential isolation. They may, the author insinuates, be interchangeable.

If certain of Masud's techniques for conveying themes of duality/singularity, polarity/unity, feel heavy-handed to my sensibility and culturally determined literary expectations, others are insidiously subtle. The latter include pictorial images that reprise earlier scenes but in reverse, and are so seamlessly enmeshed in the narrative that they may escape notice on a first reading. The details of these "backward" snapshots may be dispersed over several paragraphs, emerging from the subliminal level of the text the way semiperceived details of reality become available only in retrospect. In "Interregnum," for example, the narrator has preserved from his early infancy a single recollection, a very specific image as he gazes up at his father, who

> would lay me flat in his lap and gaze silently at my face. […] [I]n a verandah, he is bent over me gazing at me silently, and along with his face I see a part of a high ceiling, a few tattered red and green paper decorations hanging from its beams. [p. 96]

Pages and time go by; we are caught up with other actors, sites, events and ruminations before we arrive at a scene in which the child comforts his injured father. We pluck out of different parts of the text

> I sat down on the bed and placed his head on my knees [p. 104]

and

> I saw in his eyes the reflection of my face along with the decorations hanging from the beams of the ceiling, or perhaps I merely imagined it. [p. *ibid.*]

This mirror image is a literal "reflection," and the metaphorical implications of the reversal of boy and father—as well as the hint of the two pairs of eyes as facing mirrors, with the resultant multiplication of images—may be explicated at length in the context of the story. The looking glass will reverse again, but emptied. Toward the end of the piece, the narrator lies face up at the same spot and even mentions the decorations as though we have never heard of them before: he is gazing at the same frame seen in his babyhood, now permanently vacant of his father's visage

Returning to "The Color of Nothingness" for a second example, we witness the boy bustling back and forth through the courtyard of his home in preparation for the arrival of the "bad woman." Each time he passes the central tree, he reaches up and tugs at a branch. Only gradually does he become aware of the presence of a young girl he knows sitting beneath it.

> I looked at Nusrat. She sat leaning forward now, her head resting on her knees, her fingers still tracing lines busily [in the dirt]. […] Tiny yellow leaves covered her hair and shoulders, and she was dressed in white. It was bright and sunny under the tree, but too warm to sit outside. [pp. 85–6]

This condensed description stays with the reader and is quickly recalled when, after an indeterminate time, Nusrat appears again under the tree at the climax of the story. However, the fact that the tableau has been reproduced in negative must be gathered piecemeal. There is no more tugging at the tree branches: they are "drooping" so low that the protagonist bends down to lift them up (or is he taller…?). Over the space of fourteen sentences we glean that Nusrat's hand is still rather than in motion; leaves cover the front rather than the back of her head; she is dressed in black rather than white; under the tree it is shady, not sunny; and the air is chilly, not warm.

The story then comes to an abrupt close with one of Masud's trademark endings, the closed door.

> [I] ran in through the side door. […] As the door was about to close I peered through the slit that remained to see whether Nusrat was still sitting there as before. She was.
>
> I shut the door and was never able to open it again. [p. 94]

In the final sentence of "Essence of Camphor" the child reaches a door, realizes the futility of his mission, and turns back the way he came. Another young narrator is sent out the back door, never to return, in the end of "Sheesha Ghat"; in the last scene of "Ba'i's Mourners" the protagonist watches Sahib close his door, take his leave, and depart forever.

These doors, by the way, are what this Western reader would refer to as "double doors," and the discovery of this repeated closure device in the stories was one of the pleasures of reading as much of Masud's translated fiction as I could obtain. Yet the doorway motif that runs through "Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire" felt starkly contrived, at each appearance a rude shove, rather than a tantalizing lure, in the desired direction. Which brings us back to the particular perspective of this essay, that of a nonspecialist North American aficionado of literature from Achebe to Zola. Masud's work, and Urdu short stories in general, afford many opportunities to interrogate my subconscious demands of a text and the value judgments they imply, explorations essential to my growth as a reader.

By this sort of investigation and by gauging the reactions of friends to this literature, I can almost piece together the viewpoint of a hypothetical perfectly ethnocentric Western reader. This limited character will be dazzled by Masud's mastery of scope—all but the shortest pieces seem to have the generous horizontal dimension of novels—and totally absorbed by his superb setting of mood. But why, s/he will ask, the proliferation of motif fragments, some of which remain so undeveloped as to serve no purpose (the marks on Mah Rukh Sultan's hands in "Essence of Camphor")? Why the overkill in cases where the merest allusion would do? For example, why does the child who has been frightened by the story of a legendary bride's clinging jewelry have to say, when a real bride's necklace snags his collar button, "Just then I recalled the bride whose jewelry had grabbed a man. The selfsame bride was standing before me, I felt; why, I could even see her dust-colored face behind the veil and floral strings"? ("Ba'i's Mourners") Where's the climax? our reader will demand of "Lamentation." What was the plot resolution? Of "Interregnum": The plot's flopping around sideways—why doesn't it *go* somewhere?

Without attempting to sort out these specific responses, or to claim or disclaim any of them personally, I would like to respectfully offer the formulation that the interface between Urdu fiction and the general Western reader is itself in evolution. It would be pitiably unproductive to attempt to explain these instances of discord in terms of either the writer or the reader alone. On its side of the interface, the Urdu short story,

whose history and numerous tendencies have been so well explicated by Professor Muhammad Umar Memon in the introduction to his anthology *The Colour of Nothingness: Modern Urdu Short Stories* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991), appears to be in the midst of a growth spurt *as a form*. If originally borrowed, it clearly has no intention of uniformly resembling the imported model, nor has it yet coalesced into an independent entity. This last, however, I see as its certain destiny.

On the other side, Western literary tastes are still maddeningly smug and parochial, but show signs of opening, with their usual fusty creakiness, toward the East. We must learn to stop counting, to stop rushing forward—indeed, to question whether we know what "forward" is. We need to look sideways. Above all, we need to look at violations of our extremely limited expectations as indications that it is time to learn something new. We have a long way to go. But with the combination of these motions, that of the literature and that of the readership, it is only a matter of time, I believe, before the lumps in the interface will disappear on their own. When Urdu fiction establishes its own premises, unmistakable for any others, and Westerners manage to see past their own noses, no more stupid questions will be asked. ❐