JOHN KENNETH MUSE

The Craft of Naiyer Masud*

> It plays its game out in the open, but no one is able to understand it. Isn't that something to fear?
>
> (Masud 2003c, 174)

It might seem mildly presumptuous for a non-Urdu-reader to analyze Naiyer Masud's prose style—rather like a color-blind person describing a rainbow. In the case of Masud, however, reading in translation seems particularly appropriate. Masud's style strikes readers as odd and unfamiliar in any language, even his own. Urdu readers often mistake his stories for translations from a foreign tongue (Farrukhi 1997, 275). Although Masud at times composes first in English or Persian and then translates back into Urdu (Sengupta 1998b, 154), the sense of dislocation and foreboding his stories engender arguably has less to do with linguistic or cultural distance than with his own narrative and stylistic peculiarity. Masud takes pains to strip his stories of colloquial, idiomatic and figurative language, leaving a spare prose of disorienting simplicity and deceptive depth. Ironically, Masud's careful attention to crafting language produces stories less dependent on a given language. One can find his stories in Finnish or French, English or Urdu, yet in any language they feel disorienting less as translations from a foreign tongue than as missives from the uncanny, private world of Naiyer Masud.

According to Walter Benjamin, the ultimate goal of a translator is not to transfer information accurately but to "produce an echo" of the untranslatable insights the original evokes but can never denote. Translation highlights the remoteness, the foreignness of *all* language, measuring the distance between words and truths beyond words (1958, 75). If the

*I am deeply indebted to Professor Sara Suleri-Goodyear for introducing me to Naiyer Masud's stories and for sharing her insights on his world.

heart of any good translation lies in its ability to echo the unsayable, Masud's stories (in Urdu as in English) are projects in translation, aiming less to transmit information than to distill untranslatable essences.

While Masud has inevitably been introduced to the West as a "third-world" writer of postcolonial literature, his stories evade such labels as they do genres like realism, modernism, or postmodernism. Sagaree Sengupta claims Masud's "translated stories bring into 'world literature' an aura of place, time, and mind without concrete points of reference" (1998a, 82). In other words, Masud's literature is more otherworldly than "world." One can locate faint pulses of socio-political relevance under the surface of the stories. As Zeenat Hisam notes, "Masud chronicles vanishing values, fading culture, dying institutions and withering relations in a society in throes of change. The reader, while traversing the narrator's universe, feels the currents of turbulent change underneath the calm, shimmering surface" (2003, n.p.). Hisam rightly identifies decomposition as a pervasive theme for Masud; yet to read his stories primarily through a social or historical lens seems to me an exercise in futility. Many of Masud's stories document decay, but the deteriorations they record are individual, subjective, or familial rather than national, and the larger social world remains a vague intimation. Ignoring "The Myna from Peacock Garden," exceptional among his stories for its historical markers, I must agree with Muhammad Umar Memon that Masud's stories fail to "yield up even an ounce of social usefulness" (1991, xxix).[1] If Saʿādat Ḥasan Manṭō's stories cannot *but* be read outside the context of Partition, Masud's tales elude national or historical readings. Sengupta rightly points out that Masud's works "embody a wish that Urdu literature go beyond … obligations to be a 'third-world' literature bringing social problems to the attention of its readers" (1998a, 88). Masud's tales are riddled with problems and mysteries, but the questions the mysteries prompt—what is it possible to know, what are the roles of memory and forgetting, what is the nature of being—refuse to sit still under cultural or generic labels. Some have been tempted by this fact to dub them "universal": "Shorn of specifics, unanchored in locale, Masud's stories lend themselves to an aura of mystery and universality" (Hisam 2003, n.p.). To my mind, the term "universal" carries about as little meaning as its partner, "world literature." In any case, the term cannot be applied to Masud without qualification, for his narrative voice seems as eminently unique as it is

[1]Memon's quotation refers in particular to Masud's story "The Color of Nothingness," but his observation holds for nearly all of Masud's stories.

unspecific.

If we take seriously the notion Masud's work "defies any attempt at classification" (Memon 1991, xxvi), we are forced—and liberated—to look more closely at the stories themselves. This essay has two parts. The first explores the peculiar and exhilarating effect of Masud's sparse prose, a clear yet fragmentary language confounding the distinction between plain and complex style. The minimalist music of his sentences is lucid yet disorienting, grounded in detail yet largely unmoored from geographical or historical context. If locations and relationships often remain fuzzy, crafted objects stand out in sharp focus in the myopic, curatorial world of Masud's fiction. The second part of the essay examines material objects and images of craftsmanship in the stories. To linger over made objects in Masud's attentively-crafted tales is to reveal a network of reflexive symbolism beneath the narrative's calm façade.

Through a Clear Glass Darkly: The Riddle of Masud's "Plain Style"

> I pay great attention to language. I really do …I really had to struggle the most on language, on how to write precisely, on selecting words that would communicate my intent most accurately.
>
> —Naiyer Masud (Farrukhi 1997, 257)

> It's not that I want to inform you about things; that's not my job.
>
> —"Snake Catcher" (Masud 2003c, 180)

Masud's fiction frustrates conventional dualities like clarity and obfuscation, earnestness and dissimulation, realism and modernism, memory and forgetting. In his stories one enters a world described in clear, unassuming prose that creates a distant and disorienting effect. In "The Myna from Peacock Garden," the petition writer Amir Ahmad tells Kale Khan, "My good man! Why talk in riddles? Use plain language!" (1999, 154). Masud's stories confute this distinction; they are riddles in plain language.

Curiously, the exhilarating unfamiliarity of Masud's work arises from the most lucid sentences. Grounded solidly in first-person narration and economical description, the sparse prose of his stories offers little explanation for their oddity. Part of Masud's fictional project is to tap into the potential for straightforward prose to evoke the same effects as poetic language without resorting to poetic devices. He uses adjectives and adverbs sparingly, avoids long compound sentences, and very self-consciously eschews metaphor, going so far as to claim there is not a single

metaphor to be found in his work[2] (Sengupta 1998b, 153). The result is a reserved and reticent surface often masking profound depth. The opening paragraph of "Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire," the first story in Masud's first collection, sets the tone for the body of work to follow: "I have given up talking, not looking. It isn't easy to stop looking if one happens to possess a pair of eyes. Keeping quiet, even though one has a tongue, is relatively easy. At times I do get the urge to close my eyes. But as of now they are still open" (1999, 57–58). The lines need no syntactic, figurative, or allusive difficulty to be provocative and resonant. The first clause presents the logical paradox of a narrator talking about his decision no longer to talk. The ostensible obviousness of the next two sentences masks an important distinction between passive sight and active insight offered by voluntary silence. Like the unnamed narrator of this story, many of Masud's narrators seem to have open eyes and shut mouths. They witness the world, but tell of it only selectively.

On the surface, Masud's verbal economy and resistance to stale figurative language recall prose stylists like George Orwell, who condemns "worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power" (1955, 357). Orwell, though, lobbies for clear language as an aid to clear thought: "If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly" (*ibid*., 355). By contrast, Masud's formal clarity rarely produces mental clarity: "To state things openly … is not the job of fiction" (Sengupta 1998b, 131). Of course, plain language is rarely as plain as it seems. Hugh Kenner, writing about Orwell in "The Politics of the Plain Style," explains that plainness offers the writer "a mask of calm candor," disarming the reader with its seeming verisimilitude (1985, 52).[3] Kenner puts his finger on the potential for unassuming language to dissemble. Masud's narrators often display a rather opaque transparency. They give answers to questions, but the answers hold little meaning:

> "Who is it?"

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[2]Despite his resistance to metaphor, Masud is not afraid to use similes. Consider the three successive similes in the last three sentences of "Resting Place": "But when I'm seized by an attack of despair, I feel as if tiny yellow leaves are coming down in a shower between the nurse and myself. The boy who must own this house one day begins to seem like a vanishing shadow. And the ceiling of my resting place feels like it's right on top of my chest" (2003b, 200–201).

[3]I am indebted to Salim-ur-Rahman for connecting Kenner's article and Masud's disarming plainness. See (1997, 291).

> I gave her my full name.
>
> ("Epistle" 2003a, 208)

> "Where are you coming from?"
> "I've been wandering around."
>
> ("Resting Place" 2003b, 190)

Exploring Masud's stories, the reader frequently feels like the narrator of "Epistle," disoriented by an apparently straight path: "In my estimation I was proceeding along a straight road, but I had often experienced how seemingly straight roads turned this way or that imperceptibly, throwing the wayfarer completely off course" (2003a, 205). The following moment from "Snake Catcher" puts the reader inside the maze of Masud's disorienting irony:

> "Be glad that you only encountered questions." He got up and started to pace. "Suppose the questions had also accompanied answers, some of which might have themselves been in the form of questions, and you had been unable to determine which answer went with which question, and which question came after which answer or question, and which question followed it, and every time …" he choked on his words.
>
> Is he crying? I wondered and looked at him, but his eyes were dry and his voice had cleared.
>
> "… and every time, when you tried to remember but weren't sure, you would have regretted remembering even as much as you did," he said, and it was quite apparent that he was trying to remember something but was unsure about it.
>
> (2003c, 179–80)

The passage is not strictly representative; it is too obviously bewildering. More often the sense of confusion in Masud's stories arises gradually through the accumulation of moments both graceful and unextraordinary. Nevertheless, the passage works like a Masud story in miniature: ostensible answers collapse into questions, and what begins as a wise koan unravels into meaninglessness, then chokes into silence, before resuming as a half-forgotten insistence on remembrances better forgotten.

In a 1981 essay, "Contemporary Prose Styles," Annie Dillard separates all prose into two styles, plain and fancy. At first glance, Masud's prose appears to fit Dillard's description of "plain style":

> This prose is, above all, clean. It is sparing in its use of adjectives and adverbs; it avoids relative clauses and fancy punctuation; it forswears

> exotic lexicons and attention-getting verbs; it eschews splendid metaphors and cultured allusions.
>
> (1981, 215)

As the article continues, the resemblance of Masud's prose to Dillard's characterization of "plain style" is remarkable:

> The short sentences of plain prose have a good deal of blank space around them. [...] They erupt against a backdrop of silence. [...] This prose is craftsmanlike. It possesses beauty and power without syntactical complexity.
>
> (*ibid.,* 215–17)

Masud's prose swerves away from Dillard's category, however, when she discusses the *purpose* of plain writing: "... this prose has one supreme function, which is not to call attention to itself, but to refer to the world" (*ibid*., 215). For Dillard, plain prose submits to the world by stepping aside to reveal it (*ibid.,* 218). By contrast, fancy or modernist prose piles up between the reader and the world represented, calling attention to itself. If, as Dillard explains, plain prose acts like a hand pointing to objects in the world, while modernist prose demands we look at the hand itself (*ibid.,* 220), in Masud's stories we see a hand pointing clearly into a bank of fog.

The most vertigo-inducing and, ironically, the most characteristic aspect of Masud's fiction is its near-total lack of context. Masud resists revealing temporal or spatial coordinates, leaving most characters and places without proper names, avoiding idioms or colloquialisms that might place speakers in a certain class or region, and rarely including religious or cultural identifiers (Farrukhi 1997, 275). The narrator of "The Color of Nothingness" mentions a time when he was in his "nonage" (Masud 1997, 83); Masud's stories seem to present the reader with a non-age in a nonplace. In an eloquent gesture of throwing up one's hands, the critic Zeno (Safdar Mir) writes,

> It is not possible to describe what these stories are like. There are no such factors as plots or detailed characters or social or political conditions. All that we are made to feel are atmospheres, persons, places and a strong suggestion of things passing, decaying, dying. It is a matter of time flowing over cities, houses, people and civilizations.
>
> (1997, 302)

In fact, the stories generally do have definitive times and settings, but their

narrators suggest them only by implication or fail to mention them at all. Although Masud's hometown, Lucknow, is unnamed in all but a few stories, it remains a central character in his fictional world. Masud imagines a setting then chooses to forget it, making his stories clairvoyantly parochial.

Masud's stories, then, are not merely uncontextual, they are decontextualized. As Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman has thoughtfully discussed in "Once Below a Time: A Short Essay on *Sīmiyā*" (1997), omission plays a central role in Masud's storytelling. According to Masud, all of his stories were originally much longer than the published versions. He might write seventy pages and jettison fifty, paring away not only the excess but also the essential, removing significant background information or excising a conclusive ending, leaving the reader with unanswerable questions (Sengupta 1998b, 273). What "strange development" allowed Bibi to own the dock (ghat) in "Sheesha Ghat"? (Masud 1999, 90). What dead girl is the narrator of "Snake Catcher" running away from as the story opens? Who are the visitors in "The Weather Vane," and what is the father's occupation? Without answers to such questions, readers find themselves in the position of the narrator of "Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire," poking around in spaces operating at their own peculiar speeds, and looking for meaning in what cannot be seen:

> … I began to concentrate on the shapes these invisible parts formed. They shaped the outlines of different images which, at times, had a truly amazing resemblance to certain objects. But I never found a complete picture of anything. Everything appeared incomplete or fragmented, even though I examined countless such "invisible" parts. Some of these images had familiar shapes—of a lion, for instance, or a crab, or a pair of scales—but they were always unfinished. Other images resembled unknown objects and even though unfamiliar, still gave a sense of being incomplete. They left a strange effect on the mind which was impossible to articulate.
>
> (*ibid.*, 71)

It is fitting "Obscure Domains" should ruminate about invisible parts; the first drafts of the story itself were ten times longer than the published version. In this sense, Masud is a negative craftsman: "Consider it a trade secret, but certain things I purposely refrain from mentioning. At times I don't have the whole story in mind. Other times I do, but I leave out substantial parts in the finished piece" (Farrukhi 1997, 271–72). Like a sculptor chiseling out a human form, then removing the head, perhaps an arm, or

both feet, Masud leaves a finely-wrought piece flaunting its incompletion, and drawing the mind to the mysterious shapes formed by words withheld. At one point the narrator of "Obscure Domains" digresses to describe an unnamed woman with whom he may or may not have flirted:

> She was in the habit of arranging and rearranging her lustrous black hair. I thought she wanted to draw my attention to it. But she just disappeared one day. I was taken aback. I set out looking for her. [...] I never found her and I suspect that the fear I induced in her may have been the cause of her death. But I often console myself with the thought that her falling into the river was an accident. That she hadn't drowned; she'd been rescued.
>
> (1999, 72)

Tucked in a clause at the end of the paragraph, "her falling into the river" is the only mention of this event. We are given the bare bones of a story, but an autopsy cannot confirm the cause or circumstances of death, or even whether there was a death. Who is the girl attached to this lustrous black hair? Why did she disappear? Why did she fall in the river? Was she rescued? The confusion of the narrator echoes the confusion of the reader, for the woman's story has disappeared as mysteriously as she did.

"Sīmiyā," the eponymous story of Masud's first collection, evokes Masud's negative craftsmanship in a moment of self-referential symbolism.[4] In the story, a young fugitive takes up residence along with an occultist in the tower of an abandoned palace. The young man cannot figure out what disconcerts him about the structure until the other man suggests what is bothering him is the fact that even in ruins the palace does not look old. In fact, the ruined palace is not a ruin at all; "it has been built to resemble a ruin" (Salim-ur-Rahman 1997, 297).[5] The following exchange clarifies the self-reference:

> "But why are you looking so worried?" I asked and didn't know what to say next. "What is there to feel worried about?"
>
> "Because I would have done the same had I built an edifice myself," he [the occultist] said with great conviction.
>
> (*ibid.*)

The occultist ventriloquizes Masud, who himself constructs stories resem-

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[4]The first full English translation of "Sīmiyā" appears elsewhere in this issue.

[5]My quotation is from Salim-ur-Rahman's paraphrase of the scene, not from his translated sections of the story itself.

bling ruins. He builds a structure, then gradually removes pieces, leaving conspicuous holes and causing the whole to teeter precariously. The result retains the suggestion of the original shape, but rests only on the strongest, most intractable pieces. At times he goes further. Omitting the most basic elements—names, places, relationships, background details—Masud removes the foundations of his structures, leaving artifacts hovering in a void.

The combination of close descriptive focus and unclear narrative architecture in Masud's narrative has led several critics to compare the experience of reading Masud to a young child's experience of the world. For Elizabeth Bell, "we feel our way through [Masud's stories] 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" (1997, 279). Sagaree Sengupta makes a similar comparison, quoting Yi-Fu Tuan, who describes the "young child's world" as one composed of "vivid, sharply delineated objects in a weakly structured space" (1998a, 82). In conversation, Masud has exaggerated the indistinctness of his tales: "… you'll find you don't get a lot of details about any particular thing in my stories" (Sengupta 1998b, 125). In fact, the details given in Masud's stories are precisely concerned with particular things, but his lens is alternately in and out of focus. Architectural spaces are well-defined, as are individual objects, but humans and the relationships among them remain indistinct (1998a, 83). While conversations carry little meaning, objects tell stories.[6] The second half of the essay will look more closely at the stories told by some of Masud's objects. I mention the clarity of objects and fuzziness of background here to underline the disorienting childhood myopia of Masud's style.

Much of Masud's stylistic asceticism arises from his ideas about the way fiction should work. He maintains that clarity is not the role of fiction, and avoids "story-like" stories with clear conclusions (Sengupta 1998b, 132). Masud does hope his tales communicate something, but in his view the communication happens by a kind of mental osmosis whereby absent ideas insinuate themselves into the reader's mind:

> … when you have a very complex, long personal experience and you describe it in a plain and straightforward manner, with no details, but with everything present inside your own mind as you are writing, somehow it reaches the reader. Why it reaches the reader, through telepathy or some-

[6]For more on objects in Masud, see (Sengupta 1998a).

> thing else, I can't say.
>
> (*ibid*., 125)

Masud suggests his stories operate subliminally, so while significant details remain in the author's head, "the reader feels a palpable sensation of something, some story breathing behind all this" (Farrukhi 1997, 272). Elsewhere, though, he resists the idea that meaning crouches in the shadows:

> There's the feeling that something major is being signified, but when you scrutinize the story no such thing comes out. This is a big problem for me, that lots of people complain that they don't understand what I'm trying to say. I've just told a story—what's there to understand or not understand? […] Why ask me what I "said" in the story? What I said is right in front of you on the page![7]
>
> (Sengupta 1998b, 143)

In both cases, Masud seems playfully disingenuous. He pleads ignorance about the method of his stories communicative power, invoking fuzzy metaphysical ideas like telepathy or subliminal suggestion. In fact, there is far more at work in his stories than straightforward description with no details. His tales may have relatively little figurative language, but they are not without literary device. While individual sentences remain literal, the stories teem with tropes like repetition, synecdoche, foreshadowing, and—as the next section will discuss—symbolism.

Masud's Reflexive Craft

> The little chandelier twirled before my eyes, and everything I saw resembled some part or aspect of it.
>
> —"Essence of Camphor" (Masud 1999, 35)

Like origami, Masud's stories are carefully turned in on themselves. They

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[7]Masud's admonishment reminds me of the program note to E.E. Cummings' only full-length play, *Him*: "Relax, and give this PLAY a chance to strut its stuff—relax, don't worry because it's not like something else—relax, stop wondering what it's all 'about'—like many strange and familiar things, Life included, the PLAY isn't 'about,' it simply is. Don't try to despise it, let it try to despise you. Don't try to enjoy it, let it try to enjoy you. DON'T TRY TO UNDERSTAND IT, LET IT TRY TO UNDERSTAND YOU" (qtd. in Maurer 1972, 135).

are finely-crafted art objects littered with finely-crafted art objects. According to Memon, the vortex of Masud's self-referential circularity removes his stories from the domain of discursive reason and obviates the possibility of locating meaning in his work: "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" (1997, 8). I agree with Memon's reading, but would like to propose a qualification. Masud's reflexive imagery might cast little light outside his own hall of mirrors, but the self-referentiality in his stories by its very nature gives the reader a series of fascinating lenses through which to view the stories themselves. Masud's stories rarely point beyond themselves, yet they remain fascinating as meditations on the art, or rather the craft, of storytelling.

I am not the first to call attention to the many images of craftsmen and their handiwork in Masud's work; they are hard to miss. Nearly every Masud story features a character possessing some rarefied knowledge or expertise on the brink of obsolescence. From the aging snake catcher in the story by that name, to the occultists in "Sīmiyā" and "The Heir," the house inspector in "Obscure Domains," the father who is both woodcarver and mason in "Interregnum," the perfume-maker of "Essence of Camphor," or the mimic Jahaz in "Sheesha Ghat," so many of Masud's characters are (male) exemplars of skill. Sagaree Sengupta draws the obvious connection between these craftsmen and the craft involved in creating them: "The writer's imagining, remembering, designing, setting down on paper, editing and so forth is paralleled by the painstaking craft of perfumers, glassblowers, stone-carvers, physicians, herbalists, jewelers or other highly skilled specialists found in almost every story" (1998a, 87). The art or science practiced in each case is "woven thickly into the narrative" (*ibid*., 87). Following Sengupta's lead, I would like to unravel a few moments where craft is woven into the stories, looking in particular at crafted objects as self-referential emblems for Masud's style.

At the most obvious level, the preponderance of craftsmen in Masud's stories underlines the extent to which writing is a craft, a rarefied skill allowing the artist to produce objects of utility or beauty.[8] Salim-ur-Rahman calls Masud's prose "effortless" and "anything but calculating" (1997, 291). While I agree the stories are gracefully executed, Masud's process seems both highly calculated and characterized by tremendous effort: "My

[8]Another of Masud's interests, bookbinding, literalizes this connection by creating objects that *are* literature (Sengupta 1998a, 87).

answer is that 'true art' in fiction or poetry amounts only to ten per cent; ninety per cent is pure craftsmanship, work in other words—examining, writing, rewriting…" (Sengupta 1998b, 148). Masud uses a different ratio than Edison, for whom genius was one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration, but the insistence on painstaking, repetitive labor characterizes both innovators. Masud claims it takes him an average of four or five months to compose a story (*ibid*., 159). Over the past thirty-five years, he has produced about a story a year. In short, Masud approaches his work as just that—work—and the products of his labor offer meditations on the process of their own creation.

To those familiar with Masud's stories, the opening of "Essence of Camphor" reads like a manifesto:

> I never learned the intricate, tenuous art of perfume making practiced in ancient times, now nearly lost or perhaps already extinct; nor am I acquainted with the new methods of concocting artificial fragrances. This is why no one understands the essences I prepare, nor succeeds in imitating them.
>
> (1999, 1)

Masud winks here at his idiosyncrasy. His stories resemble neither the heavily perfumed style of classical Urdu literature nor the concocted artifice of many abstract modernist short stories. Instead, like the essence of camphor, his tales exude a pregnant absence: "Attempting to smell it one feels a vacant forlornness, but the next time around, breathing deeply, one detects something in this forlornness" (*ibid*., 2). Masud's characteristic synaesthesia works here metatextually, rendering the act of reading into an inhalation: an immediate, receptive relationship with the atmosphere of the story, producing at first a sense of "vacant forlornness," and later the intuition that something lies behind it. Masud's tales are essences, extracts boiled down from dreams and longer stories into concentrated form. If meaning does not always cohere in Masud's tales, remnants of it inhere: "… whatever is revealed in this forlornness already existed before the extract's conception. Indeed, the preparing of the extract relies on its existence" (*ibid*., 3). If much of the world of each story has evaporated, the dream behind each remains, quite literally, essential.

As "Essence of Camphor" continues, it becomes cluttered with self-referential crafted objects. The small, finely-wrought "camphor sparrow," trapped in time, either about to land or just taking off, reminds the reader of the narrative itself, simultaneously alighting on physical details and

detaching itself from them (*ibid*., 28). Mah Rukh Sultan praises the imitation clock made by the narrator for its evasion of verisimilitude: "This one is much nicer. The other one looked real" (*ibid*., 29). Masud's stories, too, delight the reader because they are just odd enough as representations to appear unreal. Even more evocative is the chandelier of fragrances Mah Rukh Sultan gives the boy before her death. As a delicate collection of distilled essences suspended in space, yet spinning "slowly and steadily so that none of its parts could be firmly envisioned" (*ibid.*, 35), the chandelier resembles Masud's collection of stories, each a unique essence, transparent and delicate as glass and yet somehow never clearly envisioned. The chandelier also evokes the very synecdoche in which it takes part. The narrator recalls the chandelier and says, "everything I saw resembled some part or aspect of it" (*ibid.*). The reader could say the same of Masud's story: every object—the eponymous fragrance, the camphor sparrow, the clay clock, the perfume chandelier—seems a distillation of some aspect of Masud's project.[9]

Masud's curatorial bent plays a large role in "Snake Catcher," one of his earliest stories. Seemingly apropos of nothing, the jungle reminds the narrator of a collection of curios in the outer reception room of his house. As the narrative focuses on each object, we notice each is incomplete:

> One was a tiger made of some kind of metal. It stood on its hind legs with its mouth wide open as though it were roaring. It's eyes were crafted from some precious stone and they had disappeared several generations before

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[9]Masud's love of objects and reverential treatment of the artificial recalls the speaker of Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium" who yearns to translate mere flesh into "the artifice of eternity." The final stanza of the poem manifests the artist's desire to represent the self not through characters, or animals, but through an intricately wrought object of art:

> Once out of nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any natural thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (1996, 194)

Yeats's golden bird finds cousins in the delicate camphor sparrow, and in the "birds made of solid gold" in the garden of the Badshah in "The Myna from Peacock Garden" (Masud 1999, 4, 126).

> me. Yet the tiger's only importance lay in its missing eyes.
>
> (2003c, 155)

The narrator faithfully describes the object, but, like the careful reader, he is most intrigued by the information denied him. The precious element missing for statue, narrator and reader is sight, and it becomes more valuable for being denied. A nearby statue also stands out for its incompleteness:

> Close by the tiger, but larger than it, was a horse molded from some reddish-brown material with a rider of the same material mounted on it. One of the rider's hands was poised in the manner of someone wielding a sword, but the hand was empty. The sword of that hand was sorely missed, but an elder of the family used to say that the rider had, in fact, held a scale, not a sword, in that hand.
>
> (*ibid*., 155–57)

The empty hand is mightier than the sword. The omission leaves the narrator and the reader uncertain what is being represented—is this a martial or judicial figure, Mars or Justice? Does it matter? Some may wonder whether Masud's omissions create brilliant ambiguity or reveal narrative laziness. Masud once jokingly suggested he leaves context out of his stories simply because it is easier:

> But if you must know, such specificity places added responsibilities on the writer. […] Once you make reference to a particular time and place, then you cannot in principle, allow anything in your story which would belie it. […] Call it a love of ease, if you like. Maybe I shy away from temporal and spatial specificity out of this sense of responsibility….
>
> (Farrukhi 1997, 258)

Like much of Masud's prose, this ironic admission winks at the reader, concealing painstaking craft behind a mask of calm candor.

The tiger and the horse and rider anticipate two even more resonant objects in the story, a miniature palace and a palanquin. The "delicate workmanship" of the tiny palace astounds, but no one can decide "whether the miniature was the model for or the memorial of its life-size likeness" (2003c, 157). As with Masud's stories, it remains unresolved whether art imitates life, or life art. Like the miniature palace, the stories manage simultaneously to represent reality and to construct an alternate reality. On one hand, they stand as miniature memorials to crumbled hopes, lives, professions and stories. On the other hand, they act like non-

Euclidian blueprints for a fragmentary world to be composed of memories and memorabilia. As the narrator stares at the palace, his reaction stages Masud's characteristic conflation of simulacra and reality:

> I often stood in front of the miniature palace and stared at it for so long that it began to look like the real, life-sized palace. Not only that, I even heard sounds of life filtering out of it. Then, abruptly, I would regain control of myself and the palace would shrink back down with a jolt. Later on, I resolved to build myself a real palace patterned after it.
>
> (*ibid.*)

Masud's narrators are forever resolving to build replicas of objects they find. Such self-referential moments cast the narrator as a figure created in the image of the artist. But the narrator in this case speaks also for the reader. We stare at Masud's pages and the delicate architecture dilates and shrinks by turns as we are alternately seduced by their verisimilitude and reminded of how little we can actually see.

The palanquin, the last of the curios described in "Snake Catcher," offers yet another model for the mysterious workings of Masud's miniature worlds:

> Made from a variety of metals and woods, the palanquin had layer upon layer of curtains, fashioned out of extremely fine, colorful fabric, over its doors. These were drawn back by cords with large tassels revealing a space strewn with assorted cushions of various shapes. Tiny silver and gold vessels lay beside those cushions. I never could figure out the purpose for even one of them.
>
> (2003c, 158)

The palanquin is a lynchpin holding together the various curios: "Its greatest virtue—so it was claimed, though I had difficulty fathoming it—being that it drew all the other curios to itself." As symbol, too, the palanquin draws together features of Masud's world; it is a "specimen of workmanship of the wild fellow himself" (*ibid.*). For one, the palanquin exists in both the present and the past. Like the palace in "Sīmiyā" made to resemble a ruin, or like a Masud story designed to stand outside of historical time, the palanquin appears several hundred years old, but people speculate it might simply have been built to look that way (*ibid.*). The palanquin presents an exquisitely-wrought space cluttered with beautiful objects of dubious utility. Like Masud's tales, it appears to offer transport from one place to another, but works instead as a stationary

objet d'art allowing only flights of fancy. Later, in a telling moment of reflexive, dreamlike conflation, the narrator of "Snake Catcher" wakes from an extended spell of unconsciousness. Although he ran away from his childhood home long ago, at this moment it is as if he is inside the palanquin:

> I was lying on a pile of cushions. Some vessels, whose purpose I didn't understand, lay near me. There were large doors all around and each had several curtains of some exceedingly fine fabric hanging over it. The Snake Catcher pulled back the curtains of a door. The strong light that poured through the open door appeared very strange and unpleasant to me. But I didn't close my eyes. I was expecting to see something but didn't have a clue what it might be. Whatever was on the outside wasn't visible to me.
>
> (*ibid*., 175)

Vessels contain anything but answers, light creates blindness, and clarity obfuscates. The closed loop of Masud's circularity finds the narrator coming into half-consciousness ensconced within a figure for the story itself, and, like an actor squinting in the spotlight when the curtain is drawn, blind to the outside world.

Collections of curios tie together Masud's first collection of stories. The curios in the outer room of the house in "Resting Place," the final story in the book, look back to the objects from its third story, "Snake Catcher." In "Resting Place," the owner takes the aged narrator into his house as if he is adding another curio to his collection:

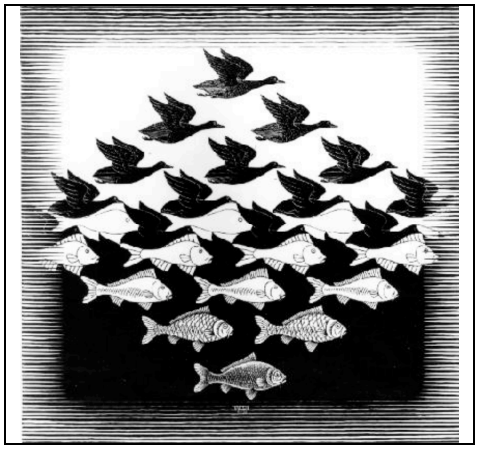
> After that they talked among themselves secretively and I occupied myself by glancing at the curios. Then they broke into a loud laugh over something and the owner turned toward me. "We want to keep you with them," he pointed at the curios, "but the trouble is you're alive."
>
> "These are priceless objects," I said, "though each one has something missing"
>
> "Even so, should you care to rest here for a few days," he said, ignoring my comment, "space could be found for you too."
>
> (2003b, 190–91)

If Masud's houses and objects often seem more alive than his characters, here a character nearly becomes an object, a relic collecting dust. Later the owner lends some of the vessels to the narrator, leaving a collection whose noticeable absences remind the reader of a Masud story: "The gaping spaces between them gave the room a somewhat strange and

unfinished appearance" (*ibid.*, 194).

In "Weather Vane" not a collection but a single object, the story's namesake, commands the narrative and symbolic focus. "Weather Vane" is a story about the death of a father, and more generally about the devious border between usefulness and obsolescence. From the very beginning, the weather vane on the roof of the family house carries great symbolic weight:

> Our weather vane, which looked partly like a fish, partly like a bird, had quit showing the direction of the wind long before, yet it stayed on our rooftop till my father's end. Now and then my father was asked why, since it no longer did its job well, it wasn't taken down, but each time he replied that it belonged on the rooftop, and if not there, where? Sometimes he added that it was the emblem of our house, and that this indeed was its true function, for who needed to know the wind's direction anyway?
>
> (2003d, 270)



Like many of Masud's symbols, the weather vane has both textual and metatextual significance. The decline of the rusted weather vane clearly parallels the father's decline; they grow stiff and moan together, and it remains on the roof only as long as the father is alive. The weather vane also evokes the amphibious position of the text between two worlds. Just as Masud's fiction seems at once submerged in realism and aloft in a modernist world of imagination, the weather vane looks from a distance like a delicate bird, but on closer inspection is actually a solidly constructed fish, or perhaps a "bird that had by some strange process turned into a fish" (*ibid.*, 271).

Like most of Masud's stories, the broken weather vane—a pointer failing to point—exists on the border between signification that means and existence that simply is. The weather vane "not pointing accurately" is a signifier decaying into a thing in itself, a symbol questioning the durability of symbols (*ibid.*, 271). The story asks, what is the use of a sign

with only occasional ability to refer? "Use? No use at all. All the same, it's not getting in anyone's way, is it?" (*ibid*., 279). Here we might recall Dillard's distinction between realism pointing to objects and modernism focusing attention on the sign pointing. In "Weather Vane," Masud's self-referential imagery short circuits this distinction: the realist language of the story accurately points to a symbol for the inability of signs to reveal the world accurately. Even more radically, Masud reverses the causal relationship between sign and signifier, suggesting the sign directs reality rather than reflecting it: "Strange thoughts came into my youthful mind in those days, the strangest being the notion that not only could the vane turn itself in the wrong direction, it was also quite capable of turning the wind in that direction" (*ibid*., 272). A weather vane directing the wind reifies the ability of Masud's objects to wrest the atmosphere into sympathetic alignment, to bring the larger world of each story in line with themselves. From the evocative essence of camphor, to a miniature palace modeling the world it memorializes, to a palanquin structuring the space around it, objects do not merely exist within Masud's curatorial world, they help construct it.

Despite the abundance of reflexive objects in Masud's fiction, the stories offer no skeleton keys. They are artful studies of disappointment and desire, in which insight alternates with confusion, leaving both narrator and reader with more questions than answers. Are Masud's illuminations too dark, or do his eclipses portend revelation? Does his attempted clairvoyance lead to befuddlement or sympathetic enchantment? Are his forgetful narrators exemplars of fundamental mnemonic limitation or are they simply aphasiac? Are Masud's translations of experience incomplete, or, in the words of Benjamin, "recognizable as fragments of a greater language"? (1958, 78) If Masud builds structures upon implied, forgotten or ephemeral foundations, how solidly do the stories stand on the memories of their amputated limbs? The stories do not yield complete answers, and their refusal to do so may be their primary insight. As the narrator of "Resting Place" understands, "… he purposely only gives me incomplete information so that I will continue to ask him question after question, and he can continue to give me incomplete answers" (2003b, 198).

The final paragraph of "Weather Vane" reminds the reader that stories need not point to answers, and proposes that we appreciate the products of craft as self-sufficient objects. This is the lesson taught to the narrator by a local craftsman who recommends mounting the weather vane indoors. Taken out of its original context, a sign, like a story, may stop referring to anything and become a curio in its own right:

> When they first come, every visitor looks with curiosity, at least once, at the odd-looking fish resting on its anchor on the small platform built in a corner of the reception room [...] and no one looking at it ever thinks that it's a bird, whose business is with the wind. Everyone thinks of it as a decorative object, so no one asks me what it's for. Nor do I tell anyone it's our weather vane, which no longer works.
>
> (2003d, 282)

One hopes we heed the advice of the craftsman behind the story, that we continue to look with curiosity at Masud's odd decorative objects, not asking what business they have or what they're for, but instead exploring the private worlds they create, and through which they continue to work. ❐

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