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Once Below a Time: A Short Essay on *Simiya*

To read a good book is as difficult as writing it.
—Goethe

No poem, it has been said, is ever brought to completion. It is only abandoned in the end, as the poet finds its potential prodigality exceeding his resources. Closure becomes an artistic necessity. Like the universe itself, each act of creation, whether a poem, a novel or a painting, is diastolic, moving out and away. We abandon in order to see clearly. What we possess often becomes invisible through familiarity. What has been lost seems real and desirable and begins to dominate us.

Nowhere perhaps is the act of abandonment as palpable or naked as in a ghazal, with its last couplet aptly called *maqṭa'* (a cutting off). A poet signs off with a flourish. A ghazal, an embodiment of tight formation and repetitiveness, need not come to an end. It can go on endlessly should the poet so desire. Ultimately it is the poet who gives up.

The ghazal is an intricately designed genre. Even its appearance on the page has to conform to certain rules. Not only is rhyme a linking factor, sewing up the couplets together, but a further coherence is also provided by *radīf*, a pattern of words, or at times only a word, which occurs unchanged at the end of each couplet, shoring up the rhyme. In spite of so much interpenetration, with all the endings neatly tied up, each couplet stands alone, not logically connected to what precedes or follows it. The effect is rather like several trains setting off in completely different directions and somehow, eventually, arriving at the same destination. A ghazal may possess a cryptic integrity. However, it is never easy to trace the contours of this wholeness.

Both the sophistication of the ghazal and the act or state of abandonment play a pivotal role in Naiyer Masud's *Sīmiyā*, a collection of five intertextured stories.[1] Read individually, each story seems perfectly self-contained and autonomous. They share, however, a certain opaqueness. Read together they convey the impression of an organic whole, as if deep down there were a prolific intermingling of roots. At the same time their latent mystery, instead of moving toward a resolution, merely deepens. As mentioned above, there is a totality of meaning in a ghazal which cannot be grasped. It remains tenaciously elusive. Its components can be analyzed and meanings tagged to them, but seen as a whole they defy any consensus of interpretation.

It is possible that *Sīmiyā* may have been conceived as a ghazal. If so, it is a tour de force, in which the refinements of a non-linear anti-narrative traditional form have been crossed with the technique of a linear fiction, derived from Western models. One can sense Kafkaesque or Dostoevskian elements in Naiyer Masud's work. Nevertheless his ingenuity is remarkable. The synthesis in *Sīmiyā* of disparate components has generated an energy hard to match in recent Urdu fiction.

All this would be germane to a literal meaning of the word *sīmiyā*. *Sīmiyā* is a branch of the occult. It can mean, depending on the context, either metempsychosis or the art of creating illusions. Naiyer Masud has, therefore, by electing this word made his intentions clear. What he offers us is nothing, but the nothingness is papered over with a confetti of words which, as language is fraught with ambiguities and paradoxical nuances, creates illusions. The world, in fact the cosmos itself, is, in a mystical sense, illusion (*māyā*). The nothingness, in the context, seems to embrace a fathomless despair, a state of silent terror or maybe a contentment beyond speech and signification.

The brief prologue with which the book opens strengthens the argument that *Sīmiyā* is carefully designed. There is, if one may coin the word, "imagineering" at work here.

> [Imām] Ja'far Ṣādiq: "O Jābir, do you or do you not see this pattern on the wall and can you or can you not descry that it has an orderly, geometrical shape? You enjoy looking at the pattern, not

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[1]Lucknow: Kitābnagar, Nuṣrat Publishers, 1984; reprint, Lahore: Qausain, 1987; the stories are: "Ōjʰal," "Nuṣrat," "Mārgīr," "Sīmiyā," and "Maskan." —*Eds.*

> because you are versed in geometry and can perceive which geometrical shape it is; you enjoy looking at it because you find it organized, because it is a unified pattern, because it suggests symmetry as well as alignment. Even those who know nothing of geometry find it enjoyable to look at because they notice it is a systematic whole. In fact, even children would have found it fun to look at." (p. 4)

The quoted passage makes it eminently plain that *Sīmiyā* is to be seen or read as a densely constructed fictional world. What Naiyer Masud says about his technique of writing in an interview with Asif Farrukhi is another piece of evidence no one can possibly ignore.[2] His statements reveal how carefully he chisels out his prose, how methodically his fiction is plotted. One can almost be lured into assuming that a meticulous, cold-blooded mind is at work. Yes, in a sense, it is all that. But the imagination which shapes the stories is anything but calculating. It is like a natural force, beyond good and evil, driven by its own compulsions and secret agendas; even motivated by a compassion which does not discriminate.

It is not the only contradiction in Naiyer Masud's fiction which revels in opposites. These don't jar the narrative but simply melt into it. Take his prose, for instance. It is a marvel of neatness, words and sentences discreetly placed in co-relation to each other. Like a becalmed surface of water reflecting what is around and above it. The neat exterior is the vehicle of a narrative which records considerable distress continuously. It acts almost like a seismograph, noting down the dips and swells of an unassuageable anguish. The prose aspires to circumscribe a magnitude of deception. It only confirms what Joyce Carol Oates said in another context: "As dreams cannot be controlled, so the flowering of any work of art cannot be controlled except in its most minute aspects."[3] Or as Hugh Kenner wrote in his "The Politics of the Plain Style": "Plain prose, the plain style, is the most disorienting form of discourse yet invented by man"; or "the details have that mundane oddness, that slight touch of the grotesque, which usually is encountered in life but not in the

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[2]For which, see Asif Farrukhi, "Nayyar Mas'ūd sē Guftgū," in Suhēl Aḥmad, ed. *Meḥrābēṅ* (Lahore: Polymer Publications, 1992), pp. 199–217. An abridged translation of this interview appears elsewhere in this issue. —*Eds.*

[3]The article was received without proper documentation and citations. The *AUS* has supplied partial citations where possible. —*Eds.*

schematic world of the novel." These remarks shed some light on why Naiyer Masud's prose has puzzled its readers, deceiving them into thinking that what they have read is translation, an exotic bravura which does not conform to the norms of regular Urdu prose. To be able to dissimulate so effortlessly is, at least in the domain of fiction, a distinction of the highest order.

His procedure of composing a story is also peculiar, though not unique. After writing the first draft he cuts it very heavily, leaving huge gaps in the narrative. It is in adroitly connecting the scattered remains that his skill principally lies. Let us imagine that his story initially consists of one hundred pages. He proceeds to hack it down so that barely twenty pages survive. He doesn't prune, he deletes with a vengeance. Only a writer devoted to his vision would be ruthless enough to weed out so much, weed out perhaps even well-written passages, in order to let only the indispensable stand. The method is reminiscent of a film director who shoots a lot of footage and resorts to heavy editing to rearrange and modify his composition.

So he actually severs tangible connections and retains intangible or subtle ones. What we read, in each case, is not the story itself but its distillates. He believes that severing tangible connections does not matter. Their presence will somehow be felt. In the interview referred to above he says:

> Now I am not sure if I am imagining things or if there is some truth in what I say but I believe that once a thing is created and then removed from the scene, it continues to exist, even after its removal, in some way or other. For example, here you are, seated on this sofa. When you move away from it, even then, to a certain extent, your being would be there, although in a very vague or illusory sort of way. That is to say, this sofa would be somewhat different from another sofa which may have just been delivered by a furniture-maker and has not been occupied by anyone. Now obviously this difference cannot be exposed in words but it can be felt.[4]

The remarks do make sense. An afterimage can be real in a sensory way. A fiction, bristling with invisible interruptions also makes sense. If every person's life is fiction, and there are signs that indicate that it may

[4] Farrukhi, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

be so, then it is severely interrupted each night or every time he or she goes to sleep. The conscious self, for a while, is in abeyance. As we spend, on average, as much as one-third of our life asleep, our personal fiction is punctuated with big gaps, and still remains, meaningfully, a unified, identifiable whole. Therefore, while Naiyer Masud's fiction appears to be unrealistic, it, in fact, approaches reality from another, less familiar, angle.

He also dislikes conventional endings, endings, that is, which seem imposed, inevitable or are rounded off with an odd twist. His stories begin *in medias res* and end *in medias res*. Indeed, *Sīmiyā* begins as it ends: the first paragraph and the penultimate one are the same. Perhaps this accounts for the shadowy sense of interminableness which these stories evoke.

Nor do these stories have an identifiable locale and time span. One thing alone is certain: There is nothing here which can be pinpointed as belonging to the modern era. Nothing, however, is incidental in Naiyer Masud's fiction. The absence of signposts from the landscape denotes directionlessness. The predicament facing the protagonists is timeless. It also brings the fictional world of the author in line with traditional Urdu tales and *dāstāns* whose locale and chronology are largely a matter of make-believe. A connection is also established with the dream world which stages its strange and unmanageable dramas nowhere.

Everything here seems to take place in the middle of a vast and vague transition. What had once been meaningful and authentic is no longer there, although its afterimage or afterglow can be dimly sensed. What is to come remains an unknown factor. The immediately visible or accessible is no more than an amorphous discontent, tidily observed in the first-person singular. The narrators (there are two distinct narrators) act as witnesses to the unfolding of a complicated tragedy they have no means of averting.

The things that were once vital and central have become outdated and peripheral, reduced to, and stashed away as, curios and museum pieces. An incessant diminishment is at work. In the ancestral home of one of the narrators stands an exquisite replica of a great palace which once existed. A palace represents grandeur, authority and vitality. A small model, however elegant, represents nothing. It serves only to remind its owners of vanished glories or to perpetuate feelings of helplessness.

Little wonder that the young protagonist wants to escape from what is a demoralizing environment. Life in his ancestral home is safe but meaningless. Existence elsewhere would be, or so he fancies, challenging, open to sudden shifts and turbulences. What he fails to realize is that the

meaninglessness and tedium are as much a part of his psyche as that of his surroundings. What Octavio Paz says about the characters one encounters in Dostoevski's fiction applies to Naiyer Masud's young man's wanderlust also:

> But the true nihilist, as Dostoevski saw more realistically, neither dances nor laughs: he goes from here to there—around his room or, it's the same to him, around the world—without ever being able to do anything. He is condemned to go round and round, talking to his phantoms. His sickness [...] is a continual dissatisfaction, an inability to love anyone or anything, a restlessness without object, a disgust of the self—and a love of the self.

The trouble which vitiates Naiyer Masud's young man is insidious. The very idea of submission is alien to his nature. He can't go on living with his overbearing elders. They rule the roost and he must submit to their wishes, irrespective of whether they make sense to him or not. Worse still, he is unable to love. A state of being in love implies submission; submission to the beloved who is seen either as ascendant or as an equal. Both these ideas, to look up to someone or to regard him or her as an equal, are anathema to him. They represent a threat to his identity. It is one of the reasons why he contemplates murdering the girl with whom he had enjoyed moments of furtive pleasure. To yield any further to feminine wiles fills him with horror. Later on he lives with the fantasy that his lustful pursuit of the girl forced her to drown herself in a river. The fantasy is necessary, so that he can saddle himself permanently with feelings of guilt. To kill someone in cold blood is bad enough. It is much nastier to feel you have driven somebody to commit suicide.

His relations with women are brief, uneventful encounters, like someone taking a census of lust. More peculiar is his preoccupation with houses, each of which seems to him to contain a definite spot of desire as well as of fear, with both desire and fear at times occupying the same spot, as if there were nothing to differentiate between them. As houses symbolize possession, shelter, family life, relationships, privacy, the feminine, it is possible to see his attitude to life and its mysteries as voyeuristic. His obsession with entrances and side-entrances, the locking and unlocking of doors, has sexual undertones but also resembles paranoid gestures aimed at laying some ghost to rest. As far as the persistent search for the spots where desire or fear resides, the remarks of Andrei Tarkovsky, a director whose films have much in common with the

tendencies apparent in *Sīmiyā*, are much to the point:

> We live in a fallible world. Man is born free—free and without fear, but our history is but a long history of attempts to take refuge, take cover—escape, to escape from nature, and those conditions make us cower up against each other. Our contacts, our relationships with each other, do not happen because we wish them to happen, because we desire them. They do not happen because we wish to derive pleasure from those relationships, but because we are afraid.

Strangely enough, after the first two stories, women disappear from the setting of *Sīmiyā*. Only towards the end, with the tempo of the whole struggle winding down, do we come upon a young woman ministering to the needs of a schizophrenic patient. Have the women been exorcised? Or, as the quest of the protagonist to locate a point of stability where all is in a flux leads him into all sorts of incompleteness, the absence of women may be a referral to further and deeper fragmentation.

Halfway through the pentad is a story about a forest and a settlement infested with snakes, a sort of sinister arcadia. Here the storyteller grapples, in a dreamscape gone sour, with deep-seated anxieties. In the story's twilit, fatalistic atmosphere—where the dense vegetation is alive with snakes and marked by the entrances and exits of listless woodcutters and descriptions of snakebites and indigenous treatment—disorientation reaches its apex. It is the deepest layer of the book and the most primitivistic. The presence of a shaman-like master healer of snakebite offers hope of sanity. He stalks the place like a mistrustful redeemer but ultimately fails. The young man who had joined him as a helper, another voyeuristic role, learns little and cannot replace him. The indecision and uncertainty is all-pervading. When the young man asks the settlers why they are felling the trees, they have no sensible answer. An old man tries to reassure him by saying: "It is a good place to live in. True there are far too many snakes around but we also have among us a healer of snakebite." Yet a few lines later, with nothing having changed in the meantime, he remarks, "It was a good place to live in." Obviously they all live in confused times. It is interesting to note that whereas in "Ōjʰal," the first story, the young man leaves his ancestral home voluntarily, both in "Mārgīr" and "Sīmiyā," once the situation becomes disturbingly threatening, he has to flee from what amount to temporary retreats.

Sīmiyā constitutes the core of the book, encapsulating Naiyer Masud's basic concern, that is, as Muhammad Umar Memon said, commenting

on "Nuṣrat," the entire problem of *being*.[5] Although it makes no concessions at all, and is terrifyingly self-contained, tending to become more insoluble with every reading, it is, with its assemblage of a ruined palace, a river, shapes in the mist, a cemetery, clouds, quick showers, a magic bone which can make it rain, a child who was born without hands, a black dog, a black cat, surly natives and an occultist, one of the strangest and most readable stories ever written. It is conceived on a grand scale, although *conceived*, circumstantially speaking, seems the least appropriate word to describe its genesis. Not conceived but received, a purgatorial or chthonic outpouring, dammed and contained only by a mastery over prose.

The questions raised by it are straightforward enough but momentous. Has the world we inhabit been created in such a manner as to leave the impression of having been left incomplete? Is it an act simultaneously of creation and abandonment? Has man been abandoned by his Creator, left to fend for himself in a world falling apart?

The young fugitive is finally persuaded to live in a tower of the dilapidated palace. The only other inhabitant of the ruin is an occultist who pretends to own it. As the young man surveys the ruined structure he finds something odd about it which resists explanation.

> Finally I realized that I had spent a long time moving around, looking at each and every part of the collapsing structure. I had felt somewhat puzzled and imagined that careful examination of the building would put an end to my perplexity. But I couldn't quite make out what I was puzzled about.
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> "You also can't make any sense of it," I heard the owner speak. "That's the strangest thing about it."
>
> "What?" I asked.
>
> "The fact that even in its present condition the palace does not look old."
>
> He was dead right.

A little later the occultist suggests that it doesn't look old because it has been built to resemble a ruin. He cannot divine the logic which may have compelled someone to *build* a *ruin* but is certain that he who built it must be lurking somewhere around. He simply can't abandon it and go

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[5]Ed. *The Colour of Nothingness* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991), p. xxvii.

away, he avers.

> "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 said with great conviction.

Is it perhaps an admission that nothing in the world is complete,[6] neither its physical aspects, nor its creatures, man included, with an incomplete woman in every man and an incomplete man in every woman, each striving for full individuation, nor things created by man's hands or imagination? We begin to die bit by bit as soon as we are born, each body being a juxtaposition of health and illness. Nothing looks old because incompleteness is a perennial condition. A child is as helpless as an old man. Old age is a second childhood. The young man is called "the old newcomer" by the occultist.

It is indeed up to the individual, in his or her circumstances of life, to be blessed or damned. Up to him to give himself over to despair, to feel completely alone, orphaned and helpless in an absurd universe, from which God has withdrawn. Or to feel humbled or blessed because all he can sense or achieve is incompletion and there is room to look forward to a fulfillment. To love is to be conscious of one's incompleteness. There is no abandonment. To hate is to be conscious of one's incompleteness. There is a profound sense of abandonment. It is up to us to choose where we wish to live, in heaven or in hell.

The occultist should, in all fairness, be a worried man. There is a streak of callousness in him and, not surprisingly, he draws a wrong conclusion. He lives in a mandala of anxiety, fear and hate and confers on incompletion a self-centered irrevocability. When he performs a magic rite he deliberately violates the procedure but much to his horror it makes no difference to the outcome. The magic still works. The illogicality of it all literally mortifies him. His faith in everything and everyone, even himself, is destroyed. He no longer has the courage to face the chaos.

In the end, or if we prefer, right at the beginning, one of the narrators dispenses with speech altogether. Another act of abandonment. It is here that one feels helpless, confronted by an intractable quandary. Is it a case

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[6]It is not for nothing that the world is called a *kharāba* (ruin) in Persian and Urdu.

of, in Lao Tzu's words, "he who knows does not speak?" Is the silent man blessed or damned? We can't be sure. Is his renunciation of speech a gesture of defiance, an angry response to the inhuman, Godless silence of infinite interstellar spaces? Is it the most dreary of nihilism to abandon the finest human achievements—speech itself, the repository of man's history and culture, and above all, the medium through which God creates the cosmos and addresses mankind? Is it a case of absolute damnation or of absolution through damnation? Do we have to redeem the evil in us in order to survive? Or has he fallen silent so that he can listen in to the inmost voices reverberating through his soul? It is said that the stilling of one's mind, that is, getting rid of the turbidity caused by the endless to and fro of thoughts, can turn it into a mirror capable of reflecting what it normally cannot. In the same way it would be proper, perhaps, to assume that the stillness created by the absence of speech may enable someone not only to hear his innermost thoughts but also the voice of God Himself, hinting at intimations of immortality.

It is no more than a brief review of the complexities inherent in *Sīmiyā*. Each story should, preferably, be examined in detail, with cross-references to the other four stories, to extract a maximum of meaning. Much still remains obscure: for instance, the fascination with black, the color of nothingness; or the intermittent appearance of Leo, Libra and Cancer, three Zodiacal signs; or the significance of the toy-like *maḥmil* in the ancestral house.

There is no doubt that in *Sīmiyā* we come across Naiyer Masud's authorial voice at its most authentic. In his fiction's labyrinthine interiors come to maturation the seeds of anarchy and an anarchic order. There are vague historical perspectives interwoven with the distortion and loss of a whole ethos. We note the angst of an intellect assailed by a babel of voices, ancestral and visceral. We are made aware of the impetus of a vast and varied reading. We see the transformation of memory into fiction and of fiction into memory. We experience the immense burden of an exclusive, penumbral past. Perhaps one day we shall need a book modeled on John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu* to itemize all that has gone into the making of *Sīmiyā*. ❐