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The Contemporary Urdu Short Story *A Review-Article*

I

THE TALE OF THE OLD FISHERMAN, edited with an Introduction by Muhammad Umar Memon, brings together in English translation twelve contemporary Urdu short stories by a dozen post-Partition writers whose work has been seminal in the original language on several counts but, as Memon points out, has “received little or no attention in a Western language.” The collection is part of the editor’s individual effort, and the collective effort of the nine translators involved in the project, to combat at least three distinct yet intersecting facts: that “the Urdu short story remains largely unknown in the West”; that “few good translations are available for the enterprising and discerning reader”; and especially that existing English translations which are “both good and accessible” record the development of the Urdu short story “only partially.” As Memon observes in his Introduction, the previous representations of the genre “concentrate, for the most part, on the works of a few old masters such as [Sa’adat Hasan] Manto, [Rajinder Singh] Bedi, Ahmed Ali, Krishan Chandar, Aziz Ahmad, Ismat Chughtai, and Ahmad Nadim Qasmi, but seldom venture into the hesitant, complex world of the contemporary writer” in the language. The present volume is intended “to present the texture and flavor of the modern Urdu short story, both as a daring experiment and as a more refined heir to the traditional form” (all quotations from p. 31). Although Memon does not claim to be either comprehensive or unbiased in his selection of material, *The Tale of the Old Fisherman* succeeds remarkably in acquainting the uninformed outsider with a substantial amount of brilliant Urdu short fiction produced in the past four decades.

As a matter of fact, this anthology goes much further than Memon

anticipates in his highly informative and persuasively argued historical and critical Introduction. Clearly, the book makes the recent Urdu short story eminently accessible not only to English-speaking audiences in the West, but also to a large composite group of readers from the Indian subcontinent who do not know the language at first hand, and have to rely on translations either into their various mother-tongues or into English in order to learn about contemporary Urdu writing. At the same time, and equally significantly, this anthology holds Urdu short fiction up to the scrutiny of Urdu readers and writers themselves, who can now see it in its surprisingly revealing and attractive English form, much as “outsiders” and “foreigners” tend to see it. Translation, after all, serves not only as a window through which others look at us, but also as a mirror in which we see ourselves face to face, on the outside and at an irreducible distance. To look at a familiar Urdu short story in an exciting new English version is to see it (at least momentarily) in all its freshness, to perceive its distinctiveness and achievement with greater clarity, and to experience its memorable effects again from unexpected angles.

The main reason why *The Tale of the Old Fisherman* succeeds as it does is its double emphasis on quality. As far as the material itself is concerned, Memon has exercised his taste and editorial skills admirably: each of the twelve pieces—eleven short stories and one self-contained excerpt from a novel—is energetic, innovative in its own context, and quite interesting. So far as the translations are concerned, each piece is presented in a highly finished literary form in English: although the volume brings together the output of nine Pakistani, Indian, and American translators working individually and in collaboration on twelve different writers, and faithfulness to the original stories demands a variety of voices and styles in the English versions, the collection as a whole maintains a consistently high standard of quality.

To review what *The Tale of the Old Fisherman* accomplishes as a whole, it is perhaps best to discuss the stories in some detail in the chronological sequence in which they were first published and had their original impact on Urdu readers in Pakistan, India, and elsewhere. Such a reading strategy complements the arrangement of the stories in the volume, where they are ordered alphabetically by their authors' names, as well as their discussion in Memon's Introduction, where they are taken up in various stylistic and thematic groupings so as to define a dialectic of experimentation and conventionality. In the following account I would like to reinforce Memon's historical and critical perspective on the individual writers and pieces by replaying the tension between

conservation and innovation, continuity and rupture, along temporal rather than ideological and aesthetic lines. I would thus like to indicate how and why, in any given decade of the twentieth century, the modern Urdu short story constitutes a heterogeneous “discursive space,” in which multiple authorial styles and stances coexist and interact constantly, without any one school or movement permanently displacing or erasing another along a linear historical axis. In addition, I would also like to supplement Memon’s discussion by broadening out the historical dynamics of the Urdu short story, so as to include comparisons with similar or dissimilar situations in other languages of the Indian subcontinent. A comparative study is likely to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the singular achievements of the contemporary Urdu short story.

II

The earliest story in the collection is Intizar Husain’s “The Seventh Door” (“Sātvān Dar,” 1955; translated by Javaid Qazi) and it represents, in several respects, the most “conventional” position in contemporary Urdu short fiction, in relation to which many writers of the subsequent decades seem to situate themselves. It is a polished piece of formalist fiction that focuses on the first person narrator’s childhood experience of loss of belief, confusion, and change. However, the fairly simple plot has multiple, complexly interrelated meanings which, on reflection, give the story a great deal of depth. A mother and son live in a house where once many pigeons made their home on a cornice. So long as the pigeons flocked there, the woman’s family prospered, but once they abandoned the place “misfortune and anxiety wracked our lives and the family scattered to the winds” (p. 87). Now only one female pigeon nests on the cornice and the little boy accepts his mother’s repeated claim that the bird embodies a “holy spirit.” But when the boy’s slightly older cousin Munni visits them, she mocks his credulous acceptance of his mother’s account. Munni forcefully argues that the pigeon must be a fairy, as in the tale about King Bahram who unlocked a proscribed seventh door in his magical palace to find a pool where pigeons dived in and turned into enchanting fairies. Seduced by this alternative conception, the two children decide to capture the solitary pigeon and test the myth, but their clumsy efforts traumatize and drive away the bird. The loss of the pigeon (and, with it, the loss of one or more “cherished beliefs”) alienates the

cousins from each other, and leaves the boy struggling with undecipherable forms of guilt, anguish, longing, and loneliness.

As even this partial summary should indicate, Husain's story is overlaid with several symbolic and figurative meanings, and clearly owes something to James Joyce's treatment of childhood and maturation in *Dubliners* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. At the same time, it uses myth and folk material from the subcontinental context, establishing a multivalent intertextual relationship with the Hindi, Urdu, Persian, and Arabic narrative traditions. This combination marks an inaugural moment in the historical and literary trajectory of the new post-Partition Urdu short story (which Memon identifies as the "postrealist" *jadīd afsāna*). Husain's broadly modernist and what now seems "conservative" stance as a story-teller, however, is not a personal failing on his part, as some of his more virulent critics have made it out to be. In a comparative subcontinental perspective, Husain's work often reveals a striking affinity with that of many important writers of the 1940s and 1950s in other Indian languages, such as Bengali, Hindi, Marathi, and Gujarati. A resonant and interesting parallel, for example, occurs in the work of P.S. Rege in Marathi, whose poetry and fiction (especially the novellas *Sāvitrī* and *Avalōkitā* of roughly the same period) draw on symbolism and modernism, myth and tradition, craftsmanship and aestheticism in a comparably distinguished way. In short, Husain's artistic position in the 1950s is not unique, either to him or to the situation of Urdu fiction, but is part of a widespread phenomenon across the subcontinent, which we have yet to unravel in all its complexity and detail.

The four pieces in the anthology that represent the Urdu fiction of the early 1960s stand in sharp or extreme contrast to Husain's conservative aestheticism of the previous decade. Like other major subcontinental languages, Urdu went through a phase of concerted radical experimentation, aesthetic upheaval, and discursive innovation ten to fifteen years after Partition (its first large-scale reaction to the disasters and disappointments of "postcolonialism"). In Bengali, the early 1960s saw the emergence of the Hungry Generation writers; in Marathi, the formation of a long-lasting "avant garde" (modeled on European movements) and the first explosion of Dalit writing; in Hindi, the last instances of G.M. Muktibodh's drastic experiments in prose and verse; and in Kannada, the new poetry of G.K. Adiga, the new fiction of U.R. Ananthamurthy, and the new drama of Girish Karnad. (These innovations, in turn, are not unlinked to a larger, international upheaval at almost exactly the same time—the appearance of the Beat Generation

in the United States, for example, and that of the antipoets and the magical realists in Latin America and Europe.) In *The Tale of the Old Fisherman* this crucial historical moment or phase is represented by the work of Saleem Asmi, Khalida Asghar, Muhammad Umar Memon, and Abdullah Hussein, and it turns out to be a “heterogeneous discursive space” containing experimental as well as technically, socially, and politically conservative writing.

Of the material from the early 1960s, Saleem Asmi’s “Fire, Ashes and Water” (“Āg, Xāk, Pānī,” 1961; translated by Faruq Hassan) is highly experimental in technique and form as well as in its subject matter. The story is told by three juxtaposed narrators, each with a different point of view; they are differentiated stylistically and typographically from each other in the text, but nevertheless yoked together quite violently into a montage of interior monologues. The characters include three adults (mother, father, *āyah*), and four children (Bajiya or Birjees, the elder sister; Sibbi, the elder brother; Salloo, their younger brother and one of the narrators; and Saffo, a neighbor’s daughter and Birjees’s friend). The story is a masterful, deeply disturbing narrative about aggression, exploitation, perversity, victimization, injury, deviance, and sexual incomprehension in a well-to-do Muslim household, told from the shifting double perspective of children in the act of observation and adults remembering their childhood experiences. By suggestion, if not in explicit terms, the story deals in terrifying ways with incest, cruelty, trauma, and social and sexual taboos, moving from father-daughter and mother-son relationships to sister-brother and son-surrogate-mother conflicts, mixing death and violence with desire and power. Clearly, the children’s world Asmi creates is the antithesis of Intizar Husain’s world of “childhood enchantment” in “The Seventh Door.” As Memon remarks, Asmi’s piece is an unusually successful extreme appropriation of the stream-of-consciousness technique from the Anglo-Irish modernists (the other notable instance being Qurratulain Hyder’s novel *River of Fire* (*Āg kā Daryā*, 1959, which also drew on Virginia Woolf and James Joyce). In fact, Asmi’s piece is exceptional even in a much wider Indian context: it is a *tour de force* compared to, say, B.S. Mardhekar’s attempts at stream-of-consciousness in his fiction of the 1940s in Marathi, or Krishna Baldev Vaid’s similarly failed attempts in Hindi in the 1960s.

Abdullah Hussein’s “The Tale of the Old Fisherman” (“Jalliyānwāla Bāḡ,” from *Udās Naslēñ*, ca. 1963; translated by C.M. Naim and Gordon Roadarmel), the title piece of the volume and not a short story proper but a self-contained excerpt from a full-length novel (the only excerpt in the

book), is an equally complex and disturbing narrative but far less experimental than Asmi's story. In style and technique it seems "conservative" and closer in quality and effect to Intizar Husain's story—the piece blends the literary and the folk, the realistic and the fantastic, the literal and the symbolic, without surface pyrotechnics. But at the same time it is an extremely daring narrative, for it retells the story of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 in the form of an old, illiterate, poor fisherman's rambling eyewitness account, given to a group of later visitors to the garden. Hussein captures the monumentality and tragedy of the event with impeccable precision, imaginatively accommodating fact to fiction with an intricacy that makes Salman Rushdie's treatment of the same event in *Midnight's Children*, for example, seem disconcertingly tame and superficial.

In contrast, Khalida Asghar's "The Wagon" ("Savāri," ca. 1963; translated by Memon), considered a classic modern short story in Urdu, is unmistakably experimental and "avant garde" in its narrative strategy and overall impact. It is an abstractly psychological story that has a powerfully hallucinatory effect on the reader even in translation. It unfolds as a condensed allegory of modernization and of urban experience in the nuclear age, depicting a city on the Indian subcontinent as an incomprehensible, uncontrollable, unpredictable, ominous, and ultimately primordial environment whose citizens become victims of processes which they cannot detect or name. The story, written more than twenty years before the Bhopal Union Carbide accident in 1984 and the Chernobyl reactor meltdown in 1986, imagines with terrifying suggestiveness the effects of a large-scale industrial or technological catastrophe on an ordinary individual's life and on the life of an entire city or region. It is a perfectly controlled verbal and imaginative experiment in fantasmagoric story-telling that has only increased in its "prophetic powers" with the passage of time. It is, again, a story that constitutes a narrative pole opposite to that of Intizar Husain's work in the previous decade, as well as Abdullah Hussein's prose produced at almost exactly the same time as Asghar's.

Muhammad Umar Memon's "The Dark Alley" ("Tārik Galī," 1963; translated by Faruq Hassan) perhaps occupies the middle ground between these two apparent extremes. It is a fascinating reworking of some of the themes of Munshi Premchand's most famous Hindi-Urdu short story, "The Shroud" ("Kafan," ca. 1936), as well as a tenacious exploration of the whole nexus of cultural issues that arise in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indian subcontinental situations with conflicts between religious

belief and secularism, tradition and modernity, Muslim or Hindu communitarian identity and cosmopolitan Western education, humane values and empty ritual, immediate feeling and mediating dogma. It is a sustained psychological, social, and broadly cultural probing into the nature of death and blasphemy, religious institutions and the business of living, and rites of passage and the experience of passage itself. “The Dark Alley” strikingly dramatizes the situation of secular modernity in a conservative small-town Muslim social milieu with courage, insight, and sensitivity, often unraveling problems that have become publicly dangerous once more in the three decades since the story was written.

III

The foregoing discussion suggests that during the 1950s and 1960s Urdu fiction writers came to occupy a variety of positions with regard to material, strategy, technique, and narrative construction. As Memon argues in his Introduction, each of these positions went beyond the insipid, mechanical “social realism” of the earlier Progressive writers. In my historicist reading of *The Tale of the Old Fisherman*, the dialectic of innovation and conventionality entered a new cycle around 1970, one that appears to have come full circle in multiple loops towards the end of the 1980s. Some of the repetitions, variations, and radical alternations involved in this process become visible when we turn to the more recent material in the anthology.

Two stories first published around 1970 once more define at its maximum the divergence between the “experimental” and “conventional” modes of story-telling. Of the pair, Enver Sajjad’s “Scorpion, Cave, Pattern” (“Biččhū, Ğār, Naqš,” 1970; translated by Frances W. Pritchett) is the radically innovative one in narrative strategy and authorial stance: it takes several pages out of an Alain Robbe-Grillet *nouvelle roman* in French, and transposes them with great freshness, verve, and imaginative complexity on the palimpsest of contemporary Urdu. At the other end, Iqbal Majeed’s “Two Men, Slightly Wet” (“Dō Bḥigē Hū’ē Lōg,” ca. 1970; translated by C.M. Naim) is a relatively conventional story—again, at least at first glance—about an accidental encounter between two strangers seeking shelter from unexpected rain on an ordinary city afternoon. After much resistance and discomfort on the protagonist’s part, the two men strike up an acquaintance that becomes the occasion for the protagonist’s self-definition and self-discovery. What makes the story subtle and

unusual is its quiet but suggestive interweaving of the themes of strangeness, alienation, suspicion, openness, friendship, mystery, and understanding, and generally its play on the knowledge and ignorance of social types, varieties of experience, and multiplicity of perspectives that marks any encounter between “the self” and its “Other.”

The sharp qualitative and affective differences between Sajjad and Majeed’s stories are substantially modified by Masud Ashar’s “Of Coconuts and Chilled Beer Bottles” (“Ḍāb aur Bī’r kī Ṭḥanḍī Bōtal,” 1974; translated by Memon). In my judgment this piece, along with Saleem Asmi’s “Fire, Ashes and Water” from a decade earlier, is technically and culturally the most complex and fascinating story in the collection. Ashar uses Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as a palimpsest to narrate and dramatize a group of West Pakistani men’s encounter with the landscape and life of East Pakistan (or Bangladesh). Ashar’s story has a fantasmagoric structure and quality which, in retrospect now, would classify easily as a very significant experiment in magic realism well before the genre became commonplace and fashionable in the international literary world. The men from Pakistan—careless, irreverent, inebriated, and even callous, basically out to have some boisterous fun as close friends—undertake a riverboat journey into the Sundarbans area with their Bengali-Muslim host. In the course of the journey they discover not only their own and their eastern counterparts’ insensitivities and peculiarities, but also the unnerving complexity of cross-cultural interaction within what was supposed to be the “same” (but geographically fragmented) national community called “Pakistan,” as well as the insurmountable, surreal, nightmarish hyperreality of social differences and cultural incomprehensions. Ashar’s admirable accomplishment lies in his ability to articulate and bring alive the most intangible “themes” in his narrative, and to compress them effortlessly into a narrative that has no comparable parallels for density, weight, and range in, say, Hindi or Indian-English fiction that I can think of (including such complex works as G.V. Desani’s *All About H. Hatterr* and Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*).

Toward the end of the 1970s, experimentation appears to take a different turn in Muhammad Salimur Rahman’s “Siberia” (“Sā’bēriyā,” 1979; translated by Wayne Husted, Memon, and Ursula LeGuin), which is an intricately worked out political allegory of life in bureaucratic and middle-class Pakistan under General Zia-ul-Haq’s regime. Here Rahman employs the method of constructing a systematic parallel between a relatively well-known narrative situation (say, Solzhenitsyn’s accounts, from *Cancer Ward* to *The Gulag Archipelago*) and a little-known one

(Pakistan in the late 1970s, or more generally under postcolonial military dictatorships), paying close attention to the details of daily life and to the fine-tuned evocation of circumstance and atmosphere. For readers discovering Rahman's story at a considerable distance from its location, his most startling invention is the introduction of heavy snow on a subtropical landscape, which transforms the whole setting into a bitterly cold, inhuman gulag of the imagination.

The general heterogeneity constituted by the stories of the 1970s in this collection is, in turn, altered significantly by the material from the next decade. In some respects Hasan Manzar's "The Poor Dears" ("Bēcārē," 1982; translated by Memon) is, for me, one of the most unexpected and rewarding pieces in the anthology, because it suddenly enlarges the thematic scope of the fiction represented here. It is the first-person narrative of a Muslim immigrant from the Indian subcontinent to England, who has an attractive English girlfriend, a house, and an endearing housekeeper in London. The story unfolds around his visit (after many years), not only to India and Pakistan but also, in the same imaginative stretch, to Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Thailand. In the course of his complicated and unusual journey, the protagonist experiences discovery and re-discovery, alienation and difference, empathy and engagement—from the Angkor Wat monument and Sri Lankan Buddhist *maths* to the cathedral dedicated to St. Francis Xavier and a "congregation" performing a Meera *bhajan* in Pakistan. It is a sensitive, savvy, "synthesizing" account of the kind of intellectual and emotional journey which the new postcolonial immigrants in the West constantly undertake, but which few manage to write about with so much skill in the other Indian languages. I find Manzar's fiction far "truer" and more "honest" than, say, some of Bharati Mukherjee's clever fantasies about subcontinental immigrants in *The Middleman and Other Stories* and *Jasmine*, and more nuanced, sympathetic, and agreeable than some of Rushdie's fabulations in *The Satanic Verses*. Mainly because of its casually articulated sanity, Manzar's story may well carry more weight than the dazzling and ambitious work of some of his famous contemporaries in Indian-English fiction.

While Manzar's story in the final analysis innovates on theme as well as form to produce a geographically wide-ranging narrative that covers half the globe, Zamiruddin Ahmad's "Purvai—The Easterly Wind" ("Purvā'i," 1987; translated by Memon) accomplishes much the same within the very narrow circle of domestic life in north India. It is a marvelously achieved piece of social and psychological realism, which

focuses not only on the drama of the various characters' situations but also, more rivetingly, on the effect of those exchanges on their minds. There are surprising parallels between "Purvai" and Joyce's "The Dead," which remain pleasurable because of the differences in setting, situation, and character which Ahmad plays with throughout his narrative. In this story he gives us an average more-or-less middle-class Muslim home in post-Partition India, an urban nuclear family (the couple in their early thirties, their only son not quite a teenager yet), the burden of routine household chores and family responsibilities which is carried mostly by the woman, and especially her frame of mind as a housewife held in tightly by the net of love, sexuality, and desire within a monogamous marriage. Her accidental non-encounter with an "old flame" in the town's main street (he is now a distinguished public figure in Pakistan, on a rare visit to north India) arouses her deeply and inexplicably. But her arousal and the nonfulfilment of desire are not causes of unhappiness—instead, they lead to a new subliminal self-recognition on the part of the woman, her unaware husband, and of course the reader. It seems to me that the story effectively displaces the familiar patrilineal, polygamous vision of the world in order to explore female sexuality within the possibilities of a matrilineal, polyandrous alternative vision in a bold and highly nuanced way. With Ahmad's story we move back towards the technically "conventional" but thematically innovative position we encountered much earlier in the work of the 1960s and 1970s, enacting a historical return without repetition.

In one final contrast, Surender Parkash's "Wood Chopped in the Jungle" ("Jaṅgal sē Kāṭī Hū'ī Lakṛiyāñ," ca. 1988; translated by Sagaree S. Korom) is another instance of rejuvenated high experimentalism in contemporary Urdu, although now the points of intertextual reference have changed significantly. If for Asmi around 1960 the texts and techniques of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce were a source of overflow, and for Enver Sajjad around 1970 those of Alain Robbe-Grillet were vital points of departure, then for Parkash around 1980 and later the sparks of ignition may have been in Latin American magic realism, especially Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novels and short stories. Parkash's difficult, obscure story about a crucified male reminds me of both Borges' and Garcia Marquez's "mythmaking" narratives, particularly the latter's "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World," which is itself reminiscent of modernist myths of the sacrificed fisher-king and the hanged god in *The Golden Bough* and *The Waste Land*. What is particularly interesting about Parkash's story in this context is that it has a

strong strategic and affective affinity with Khalida Asghar's "The Wagon," written some twenty-five years earlier. What is pertinent historically in a comparative Indian context is that both Asghar and Parkash reveal strong similarities with "experimental" and "avant garde" writers in other Indian languages who, during the same period (from the late 1950s to the late 1980s), have cultivated almost identical fictional terrains in terms of technique, style, theme, and form. The best parallels I can offer are, of course, Doodhnath Singh's "Chorus" (1967) in Hindi and Vilas Sarang's "Rabbit" (1969) in Marathi, which can be analyzed closely on a continuum with Asghar and Parkash's fictions. Like Asghar and Parkash, Singh and Sarang have helped give the "experimentalism" of modernity a new edge in contemporary South Asia.

IV

In conclusion, as I suggested earlier, *The Tale of the Old Fisherman* brings together a dozen remarkable post-Partition Urdu short stories in English versions of a high quality. The anthology provides an outsider or an uninitiated reader (like me) with a substantial quantity and range of material in its selection of stories, as well as a strong critical and historical orientation towards modern Urdu fiction in its Introduction. The book as a whole succeeds in achieving its stated objectives, and goes beyond them to stimulate its various kinds of potential readers into rethinking a number of vital issues raised by the modern literatures of the Indian subcontinent. Perhaps most significantly, it opens up for writers and critics in other Indian languages both a new area of literary experience, and a new domain of comparative studies, in which, say, Urdu, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Kannada, and Indian English literatures can be read and discussed critically, from now onwards, in each other's liberating contexts.