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Cages in Search of Birds: Preliminary Reflections on Naiyer Masud*

Subjective reflection, even if critically alerted to itself, has something sentimental and anachronistic about it: something of a lament over the course of the world, a lament to be rejected not for its good faith, but because the lamenting subject threatens to become arrested in its condition and so to fulfil in its turn the law of the world's course.

—THEODOR ADORNO

A feeling of forlornness, then the revealing of something in this forlornness, is now induced merely by inhaling the camphor essence, but whatever is revealed in this forlornness already existed before the extract's conception. Indeed, the preparation of the extract relies on its existence.

—NAIYER MASUD

IN THE DEDICATION of *Minima Moralia* (1951), Theodor Adorno stages the anxiety to evaluate the philosophical legacy of critique, which, as he identifies, bears marks of the violence of the Holocaust and the Second World War. A pithy, aphoristic, paratactic, and constellated style marks the aesthetic composition of 150-odd commentaries on matters historical, political, philosophical, cultural and literary that Adorno considers

*I am thankful to Professor Muhammad Umar Memon for introducing me to the literary opus of Naiyer Masud, for his excellent translations of Masud's writings, and for his comments on this essay. I am neither an expert on Urdu literature nor on Naiyer Masud. My reflections are "preliminary" in many ways, and the responsibility for shortcomings therefore remains entirely mine.

For discussions on Masud in English, see *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 12 (1997). An excellent account of the development of Urdu prose is provided by Memon (1991, 5–30). For an insightful analysis of Urdu literature in the context of postcoloniality, see Mufti (2007, 177–243).

between 1944 and 1947. The significance of Adorno's commentaries, however, lies not only in the diversity of themes and the intensity of engagements. The scale of human suffering, displacement, and dislocation witnessed by his generation signals for Adorno an investigation of his exilic condition in the United States. As the end of his dedication reveals, the investigation is carried out in the form of a "*dialogue intérieur*" with his friend, intellectual collaborator, and perhaps the supposed first reader Max Horkheimer. Adorno prefaces this interior dialogue by acknowledging an interruption of "[their] work together" due to "outward circumstances" (18). The circumstances remain unmentioned; access to the circumstantial evidence that led to the interruption of collaboration therefore stays in the limited space between the dedicator and the one to whom the book is dedicated. The interior dialogue decidedly sidesteps the manifest exteriority of a direct address through the act of writing. The dedication thus doubly predicates—it affirms *and* denies—the reader's easy access to an interior dialogue between a writer and his supposed first reader.

The doubleness of predication provides clues to Adorno's fraught relationship with sentimentality, which casts its long shadow over the philosophical legacy of critique. As discernible in the epigraph to this essay, Adorno registers his suspicion toward subjective reflection; even when the reflection is preceded by critical alertness that is auto-directed ("alerted to itself"), the sentimental in the subjective seems to interrupt the critical/intellectual engagement with the collective, thereby affecting the very "*dialogue intérieur*" that Adorno imagines with Horkheimer. The realization that an intellectual collaboration has been interrupted necessitates a critical admonishment to sentimentality, specifically, to the expression of lament. Furthermore, this peculiar nature of subjective reflection prompts Adorno to imagine it through anachronism: representation that is incompatible with time-period and space. The awareness of a resurgence of anachronism accompanies the upsurge of the lamenting subject. Following this line of thought, it seems that for Adorno, the idea that the lamenting subject will gain any possibility of assertion of liberation, emancipation and autonomy through subjective reflection is at once lost. The cognizance of a simultaneous loss and gain overrides the project of subjective reflection itself. Subjective reflection manifests itself as a fulfillment through confirmation of the "law of the world's course" (16). In other words, the possibility of being legitimized again through exteriority signals the return to the interior dialogue.

Inaugurating a reading of the Urdu author Naiyer Masud by unpacking a passage by the German thinker Adorno might be considered

historically inaccurate, culturally inappropriate, or worse, literarily inadequate. Precisely such inaccuracies, misappropriations, and inadequacies, I confess, shape and inform the reflections that I am about to offer in this essay. Consider this essay an attempt on my part to develop a language that can *begin* to register *an* experience of reading Masud. At the heart of this experience of reading is my struggle to understand my own sentimental attachment to Masud's writings parallel to an intellectual curiosity about the nature of subjective reflections in Masud's writings. This curiosity extends itself to the symbiosis between aesthetics and politics in Masud's fiction. My reliance on Adorno can be attributed to a search for such a language for reflecting on Masud's short stories, which render discernible multiple series of subjective reflections of the narrator with the narrated—persons, objects, actions, and phenomena. Masud stages multiple conflicts between the critical and the sentimental, the interrogative and the affirmative, the irreconcilable and the reconcilable. These conflicts force a reconsideration of the efficacy of subjective reflection through an interrogation of the “reader-ly” subject who—alongside the narrator—laments his/her own displacement and dislocation. The recognition of such a conflict opens up the possibility to explore the dialectical exteriority of the interior dialogue by reading a work of literature.

In the following pages, my predicament will be to release this curiosity through a discussion of two short stories by Masud: “Essence of Camphor” (1999, 1–37) and “The Myna from Peacock Garden” (*ibid.*, 123–70). I have decided to focus on these two stories from the vast creative corpus of Masud's writings for two reasons: each of these stories, in its own unique way, has challenged me as a reader to evaluate my own thinking through critique and sentimentality in a work of art; each of them subtiles the performance of my own subjective preliminary reflections on Masud. The discussion that follows is neither exhaustive nor authoritative—in fact, the incomplete nature of my readings will hopefully reveal the fragmentary vulnerability that marks the creative prowess of this great writer.

2

“Essence of Camphor” is a masterpiece that brings together narratives of simultaneous creation and destruction by focusing on the instability of two principal imperatives: appropriable nomination and equitable desire. The epigraph to the story—a device used very often by Masud—rehearses the question of “essence” through a dialogue between Edgar Allen Poe, the nineteenth-century American writer, and Amir Khusrau, the thir-

teenth- and fourteenth-century Indian Sufi poet:

*For on its wing was dark alloy
And as it flutter'd—fell
An Essence—powerful to destroy
A soul that knew it well.*

(Poe, qtd. in Masud 1999, 1)

*Gar nau-babar ayad-o-pursad-ze-dostan
Gu ay saba keh an hame gulba gayab shudand
(If Spring comes asking after friends, sweet Breeze,
Say that the blossoms—ah, the blossoms turned to straw.)*

(Amir Khusrau, qtd. in *ibid.*)

Masud places Khusrau—who shares with him certain identitarian markers of language, culture, and religion—adjacent to Poe, who does not. Thus on the one hand, Masud's epigraphs serve their traditional artistic purpose—they contain the thought or thoughts that is/are yet to be released in the narrative. On the other hand, due to their specific translinguistic and transcultural compositions they necessitate the consideration of the native with the foreign, self with the other, (cultural/linguistic) inheritance with willful inhabitation, thus granting Masud's writings an interventionist dimension that is distinctly cosmopolitan.¹

However, as the epigraph itself reveals, it would be erroneous to describe Masud's stories in registers of their "obvious," "natural," or "essential" cosmopolitanism; central to the epigraph and story that follows is the necessitation of the de-essentialization of essence through acts of creation and imagination. In "Essence of Camphor," this necessitation is carried out by the first-person narrator through two significant moves. The first, located in the present, acquaints the reader with the narrator's subjective reflections on his art as a maker of perfume; and the second, located in the past, performs the archeology of the narrator's life-experiences in art and creation through a story of desire and destruction.

The story begins with a confession, a declaration, and a description centered around the art of perfume-making. The confession pertains to the narrator's lack of training in the art: "I never learned the intricate, tenuous art of perfume making" (1); the declaration to the lack of the author being "privy to some rare formula" (*ibid.*), and the description of the fact that the narrator "prepare[s] common fragrances on a base of camphor extract" (*ibid.*). The passages following these lines document

¹For a detailed discussion of cosmopolitanism and literary inheritance and inhabitation, see Mani (2007, 1–43).

the narrator's descriptions of perfume-making and his use of camphor extract "concealed behind a familiar scent" (*ibid.*). The narrator explains his previous experimentation with a range of aromatic items, their dizzying effect, which compelled the deployment of other senses such as sight or touch to identify the original. Camphor, however, stands out, as the narrator explains, because it "evaporates along with its odor: it is not possible for its substance to remain after its scent has vanished; though it is possible for the camphor to evaporate and the smell to remain" (1-2). Before the narrator describes the method and procedure with which he prepares his perfume, he shares with the reader the fact that only he has access to the essence in the purest form; however, as the reader finds out, accessibility is not necessarily a privilege. The composer's access limits his abilities to determine with authority the effect of the final product on the user. The user might surmise that "there is something else underneath the expected fragrance," however, the narrator knows for sure that "there is no fragrance at all in my [his] extract of camphor" (2).

Following this, the narrator moves to a meticulous description of the steps of distillation, amalgamation, and evaporation that accompany the centripetal and centrifugal processes of the creation of the perfume. In conclusion he confesses again to a feeling of "forlornness" at the completion of the process, one that he says "already existed before the extract's conception" (3). This section will not end here, however, as the narrator must ascertain the dissemination of the following aphorism to the reader: "Indeed, the preparing of the extract relies on its existence" (*ibid.*).

The "forlornness" that precedes and follows the process of making perfume bears traces of the anxiety that characterizes Adorno's lamenting subject. Admittedly, the narrator's forlornness is not caused by the violent historical event of the magnitude of the Holocaust; it can be argued successfully that "Essence of Camphor" is in no way a *direct* dedication to a supposed first reader. However, an attempt to find "essential" correspondences between these two texts might mar the very project of de-essentialization that Masud seeks to undertake in his creative processes. The interior dialogue that I mentioned at the beginning unfolds in Masud's story as a dialogue with the art (of perfume-making), of its medium and central ingredient (camphor extract), as also with the associative embodiment—the characters, that emerge in the narrative following the discussion of creation.

Most importantly, the sense of "interruption of collaboration" that Adorno identifies with a friend, acquires a very different form in Masud's story.

The art of perfume-making is left behind as the narrator starts

reflecting on the various and sundry creations of his childhood. The narrator takes the readers to his early childhood, when he

would put together ill-assorted pieces of things picked up here and there, and then ask people to guess what it was. My family would name something or other, and I would really believe I had made what they said I had, even convincing myself that it was, indeed, what I had set out to make all along.

(9)

This sudden, but by no means undue transition doubly predicates—affirms and denies—the composer’s exclusive privilege to the base-ingredient of creativity and creation. It formulates the very question of the nomination of a work of art in its primacy. In stark contrast to the meticulous art of perfume-making with which the reader has just become acquainted and familiar, the random, serendipitous, and haphazard collection of “ill-assorted pieces picked up here and there” instantly disrupts the reader’s familiarity with creation. Moreover, the insertion of an exterior agent (parents) as the authoritative nominator of the work of art prompts the reader to immediately question the work of art that he/she beholds and experiences through the act of reading.

From this point on, the narrator leaves behind the making of perfume and turns to associative interpretations of a dead sparrow with a “camphor sparrow” that adorns the family’s living room. The narrative now turns to the arrival of new neighbors, with a number of daughters, and presents many more small stories of creation that nurture the narrator’s desire for the beautiful and ailing daughter Mah Rukh Sultan. The story ends with the death of the object of desire and affection, the end of what is slowly created through the narrative:

I was sent over again in the afternoon with the message that all my female family members were coming to the house, but I had scarcely reached the door when I heard voices wailing the name of Mah Rukh Sultan, and turned back.

(37)

The interruption of desire becomes the source of the lament for the lamenting subject, a lament that can only be expressed through “turning back.” Parallel to the creation of the perfume, comparable with the fragrance of the extract, the story transforms the very meaning of lament. As the essence of camphor changes, so does the desire of the narrator for his object of affection. By the end of the story, the initial ingredient transforms itself as entirely as the narrator’s account of the transformation of the initial ingredient: the essence of camphor.

3

While issues of creation, association, and destruction placate and upset the reader's aesthetic affiliation with the art of storytelling in "Essence of Camphor," the dramatization of human vulnerability during a transitional moment of colonialism prompts an investigation of the reader's political affiliation with the act of storytelling in "The Myna from Peacock Garden." The effect of this story can be best explained through the semiotic duality of the German word *geschichte*—meaning both story: a genre of literature where events and characters are fabricated, fictionalized, and presented in a narrative; and history: the branch of knowledge and discipline where purportedly "real-life" events and characters are supposedly de-fabricated, de-fictionalized, and presented in a narrative. Before I turn to a discussion of the story, let me share a few notes on the source of thinking through this duality in the context of history and historical writing. Dipesh Chakrabarty's insights offer useful critical impulses.

In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty emphasizes the idea of "writing into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it" (43). Provincializing Europe, a history that "does not yet exist," Chakrabarty points out, is a history that will "deliberately [make] visible within the structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices [...]" (45). "This is a history," he conjectures,

that will attempt the impossible: to look towards its own death by tracing that which resists and escapes the best human effort at translation across cultural and other semiotic systems, so that the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous.

(45–46)

The ambition of history that Chakrabarty offers changes the very perception of the discipline from retrospective to prospective. History—the discipline and branch of knowledge engaged in the uncovering of and reflection on past characters, events, processes, and tendencies through narrative, must acknowledge and confront the anticipatory, the upcoming, the not-yet-happened (*noch-nicht geschehen*) as the narrative is created. The attention to vigilance within the narration of history that Chakrabarty calls for—a vigilance indeed that will render visible repressive strategies and practices—demands attention to moments and techniques that will in turn be vigilant toward the structure of narrative forms. Chakrabarty opens up the possibility of reflecting on narrative signs that can accrue significations in multiple ways: through their origins, but also through departures from those origins; through appropriations,

approximations, but also through reciprocations; through re-presentations or re-interpretations; indeed through transplantation or transposition.

The upsetting, unsettling, ambiguous moments that fracture the systemic illusions that a narrative might offer or purport to offer serve as my point of entry into “The Myna from Peacock Garden.” This is a story about the fragile relationship between the narrator Kale Khan—a lower-class wage-worker for whom credit becomes a means of sustenance—and his child, a young girl named Falak Ara. The story documents the vulnerability of a single parent who, in the pursuit of assuring happiness for his child—the source of which as we learn is a myna that he cannot afford to buy—performs the unethical act of stealing. On the one hand, the story gives expression to the sentiments of lament, self-loathing, and remorse that accompany the ethical burden that the protagonist faces as a consequence of stealing. On the other hand, through the spatial and historical situation of the fiction, the story brings to the fore the crude political drama that unfolds in the northern Indian city of Lucknow in the mid-nineteenth century. It is the time of acquisition and conquest of political and territorial power by the British, facilitated by the slow degeneration of the last bastions of the Mughal Empire. The Badshah Sultan-e-Alam, ruler of the province of Awadh, commissions the construction of an elaborately decorated aviary, termed the “Wondrous Cage” in the story:

Cage? This was an entire building! The frame was made of rails some four fingers wide. They were red when seen from one side and green from the other. [...] In the spaces between the rails, flowers and birds had been shaped from thick silver wires, and between the wires there was a delicate netting of gold metal threads, with tiny doors and windows set in on all sides. The main door of the Cage was higher than a man's head, and on its lintel, mermaids held aloft the royal crown of Lucknow. A huge crescent moon was placed above the bulbous spire of the dome.

(131)

Residents of this opulent structure are the very special “hill mynas.” Bestowed upon each one of them by none other than the King himself is a special title based on the bird's personality: “Lady Feisty,” “Bashful Bride,” “Dainty Steps,” “Gazelle Eyes,” etc. (133–34). One of them is called “Falak Ara” (Ornament of the Sky) (134). While Kale Khan does not understand the exact reason for her having acquired this name, the bird reminds him of his daughter Falak Ara. He renames it Falak Myna, steals it, and gives it to his daughter. Later, experiencing both guilt and the threat of punishment from the King, he takes the bird away from the daughter on the pretext of taking it to the hospital, and places it back in the Wondrous Cage.

What follows in the story can be dubbed an act of imagination that—through its political ambition and literary abstraction—emerges as one of the most astounding examples of magical realism within the colonial discourse. One day the King visits the Cage in the company of some English officers. The mynas (all but one) welcome the King in “crystal clear” (Urdu) and recite in unison:

Long live King Akhtar, Beloved of the World!
Solomon of our times! King of the World!
(148)

Moments later, in a “heavy voice and masculine intonation they recite in English:

Welcome to the Peacock Garden.
(*ibid.*)

The joy and pleasure of display and performance comes to a sudden halt when Falak Myna recites in a childish voice:

Falak Ara’s a princess sweet!
Milk and Jalebis is what she eats!
(149)

Kale Khan’s theft ceases to be a secret. More importantly, through one received speech act recited by a creature housed in an opulent aviary, an entire truth of accession of colonial power is revealed. Following this spectacular incident are a series of negotiations, petitions, and declarations of forgiveness. The story ends thusly:

My not taking to life in the city of Lucknow again, my coming to live in Benaras within a month, the war of 1857, the Badshah Sultan-e Alam’s imprisonment in Calcutta, Chote Miyan’s clashing with the British, the destruction of Lucknow, the British overrunning of Qaisar Bagh, the hunting of the royal animals inside their enclosures, a certain tigress’ wounding her British hunter and escaping, the British in their rage shooting Darogha Nabi Bakhsh—these are all other stories, and there are stories within those stories as well.

But the story of the Myna from Peacock Garden ends right here, with little Falak Ara sitting on my lap, telling me the latest tales of the bird’s antics.

(170)

As the narrator declares the end of his fictional narrative, he makes the reader aware of the presence of *other* historical narratives—of colonialism, oppression, destruction, cruelty, and suppression—that occur

coeval to the fictional one. These narratives do not form part of the “happenings” of the story; the fact that they emerge at the end encapsulates their anticipation throughout the story, much as a final transition to British colonial power in the city of Lucknow is anticipated in a story set in pre-1857 Lucknow. The signs of the growth of British political power in Lucknow are visible throughout the story; however, the semiotic universe that undergoes transfiguration and transposition through this transfer of power is alluded to only in the end. The reader never gets to know what happened to the Peacock Garden or the mynas. What the reader can safely surmise is the conversion of the King into a peculiar exotic “hill myna,” who would, for the rest of the political life of British rule in India, have to recite his submission to the colonial power. All this because of one myna who failed to, or chose not to, recite in English: “Welcome to the Peacock Garden.”

4

Physical movements of human beings and the import and export of labor and goods from one part of the world to the other have been at the core of critical reflections on migration in the second half of the twentieth century. The first decade of the twenty-first century marks a shift, and renders questionable the widespread imagination of migratory trajectory from Asia, Africa, and South America to the metropolitan centers of Europe and North America. Instead of being uni- or bi-directional, migration—physical and virtual—acquires multi-directionality and multi-dimensionality, calling thereby for a revised understanding of the movement of ideas among Europe, North America, and Asia. In the visual arts, manifestations of such multi-directionality can be identified through multiple channels and fora for distribution and exhibition; in the field of literature, through acts of translation.

As Franco Moretti (2000) and David Damrosch (2003) have argued, works of literature written in one language find readerships beyond their points of origin through translation, circulation, and distribution. Extending their arguments, Rebecca Walkowitz locates literature and books in a transnational space, suggesting, “Books are no longer imagined to exist in a single literary system, but may exist, now and in the future, in several literary systems, through various and uneven practices of world circulation” (2006, 528). The unevenness of these practices might be related to the uneven contours of commerce. Indeed it would be naïve and irresponsible to neglect the fact that through habits and practices of reading, translated works become alibis for cultural nativism, cultural

relativism, cultural pluralism, and, as the history of colonialism reflects, cultural subjugation. However, thinking along with Damrosch, Moretti, and Walkowitz, it would be equally naïve to suppress the curiosity about new forms of reading practices that form, and are in return informed by, the multiplicity of literary spaces created and inhabited by books. Books, novels, and other artifacts of print culture, when located in the multiple spaces they inhabit, immediately call upon us to consider the parameters of what is shared and what is perceived as unshared. Furthermore, a parallel consideration of power differentials created by the uneven contours of commerce and the circulation of books as readable objects brings us back to the question of shared reading—as a practice, as a strategy, but also as a space. What constitutes that “shared space?” This question is in many ways central to this essay, in which I have tried to illuminate certain partially overlapping and partially shared spaces through associative interpretations and reading in translation. I began with a reflection on my invocation of Adorno in reading Naiyer Masud. I want to end by sharing three personal reasons that will help locate my own position as a reader.

First, perhaps due to my own disciplinary training—and despite having grown up in northern India and having received my formative training in literacy through Hindi and Urdu literatures—texts from German literature often emerge on my “reader-ly” horizon as directive and referential markers. In the absence of claims of expertise in Urdu literature, I seek to hold on to what seems more familiar.

That the formulation of this first claim itself seems jarringly absurd brings me to the second point. Reading Masud over the past few months has been an exercise in a “reader-ly” process of identifying and collating marks of immediate and simultaneous familiarization and alienation. Admittedly, due to accident of birth and interest in Indian literatures other than those in English, the degree of my accessibility to Masud’s language, content, themes, and the characters of his short stories is greater by an order of magnitude than, say, Goethe’s *Faust* (to give an extreme example). However, this very familiarity is at once rendered unfamiliar when filtered through certain uncomfortable privileges acquired through training in German and Anglo-American theory. In fact, neither the object of disciplinary study, nor that which has not yet emerged as an object of such a study, becomes doubly distant.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the consequence of this simultaneous linguistic and cultural familiarization and de-familiarization accentuates in a reader such as myself a sense of displacement and dislocation, if not necessarily exile. Masud’s writings prompt me to interrogate my own

sense of emancipation through the act of reading. Any semblance of “reader-ly” autonomy is diminished by moments such as those I have highlighted in my readings—the transformation of ingredients, essence, creation; the transfiguration of history as the not-yet-happened narrative of *other* stories.

In the absence of such an emancipation, is the end-effect merely a servitude to reading? Let me try and parse that with a last detour, this time through a speech-act (not a recital!) by the noted American writer Susan Sontag.

Every year on the second Sunday of October at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the Association of German Booksellers confers the Deutsche Friedenspreis—the German Peace Prize—on an author or a scholar whose work contributes to the promotion of international peace and understanding. The choice of the award-recipient—as with any other award—is often a subject of debate, if not explicit controversy. The reason is simple. The recipients of the award are courageous human beings who promote peace and understanding by nurturing and sustaining the power of critique. The German Peace Prize acknowledges and salutes individuals who stand up against popular belief in times when the din of bombs and grenades render the voice of dissent inaudible, in times when the quiet hum of state apparatuses destroys entire populations because of their religious difference, or in equally dangerous times when a particular state uses its own voice to deny the existence of major human tragedies and massacres.

In her acceptance speech from 2003, a few months into the Second Gulf War, Susan Sontag refutes the former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s now infamous categorization of “old” and “new” Europe to distinguish U.S. allies from those who willingly refused to join the coalition of the willing. Sontag outlines varying forms of political, intellectual, and emotional engagements between Europe and North America as part of a “fragile alliance” between the two worlds. From Alexis de Tocqueville, all the way to George Bush, Sontag documents laudations, exclamations, objections, and criticisms that form and inform this fragile alliance. As she receives the award, she speaks to a primarily German audience as an American, as the daughter of Polish and Lithuanian Jewish émigrés, as a political activist, but above all, as an essayist, critic, novelist, and playwright. In her characteristic literary style, Sontag offers the following pithy statements:

Literature can tell us what the world is like.

Literature can give standards and pass on deep knowledge, incarnated in language, in narrative.

Literature can train, and exercise, our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours.

(2007, 205)

Sontag's conjectures on literature serve as an apt point of departure for me to think about Masud's literary contribution to our thinking about the world. Masud's stories tell us what the world is like—as Sontag states—and they help us understand our own dissimilarities with the world around us. In other words, Masud's writings effectively communicate difference and an understanding of difference. He gives us standards and passes on deep knowledge in language and narrative. He helps us understand when and where those standards were obfuscated or compromised, at what historical moments the incarnation of standards and knowledge in language and narrative was difficult, or close to impossible. Masud trains and exercises our ability to weep for—but also weep with and laugh with—those who are not “us” and “ours.”

Literature can offer us the courage and imagination to transcend the pronoun “us,” and its possessive “ours.” Literature can foster in us the capability to responsibly traverse parts of the world that belong to others. Literature can assist us in understanding that “we” and “they” do not constantly need to exist as antagonisms. These three aspects of literature, help me parse the effect of reading Naiyer Masud: the sensitivity to experience what others have experienced, the sensitivity to relate to the experience of others in similarity or difference, and the sensibility to critically evaluate and carefully articulate opinions about the experience of those who do not belong to the communities that we call “ours.” Transcending the categories of “us” and “ours” does not mean transgressing into “they” and “theirs.” A particular idiom or a phrase from one language might not exactly translate into another—that hardly means that the experience or knowledge that the idiom or phrase conveys ceases to exist in another language.

Reading Masud offers the experience of the “other” precisely in teaching us the limits of what is “ours.”

The aesthetic and thematic spaces created by Masud defy easy analyses through registers of cultural nativism. An effort to read him as an “essentially” Indian author would, in my opinion, be rather restrictive. The differences between the “Indian” and “non-Indian” worlds that Masud creates are not just marked by the worlds where his stories originate, but also by the worlds into which these stories enter, indeed the worlds in which they travel through acts of translation. The linguistic, cultural, and political spaces written into Masud's stories, when translated, that is, when borne across—going by the Greek etymological root of the word—

transform other spaces by an order of magnitude. Semiotically and symbolically, what offers itself in transformation is the house of books—the *bibliothek*—as well as the virtual bibliographic space, a space that writes (*graph*) itself through books (*vivlios*). The inventory of this *bibliothek* at the end of the twentieth/beginning of the twentieth-first century bears marks of human migration, and signals the necessity to reflect upon the meanings of bibliomigrancy: the bearing across of books. Thinking through this bibliomigrancy, might give us some insight into the varied worlds that Masud creates for his readers. It might assist us in a new kind of inventory of books which create new shelf-spaces for themselves in the libraries of “others” in the readers’ many “elsewheres.”

However, it would be simplistic to expect that through this transcendence of self and other this masterful storyteller would guarantee a reader emancipation or autonomy through the act of reading. That possibility is instantly interrupted through a language that accentuates—to express with Adorno—sentimentality of critique and critical dimensions of sentimental self-reflection. Unlike the other hill mynas, the reader himself becomes Falak Ara—reciting statements unworthy of the occasion. The order of narration itself is disrupted. A fragrance goes looking for an essence; and, as Kafka himself wrote, “a cage goes looking for a bird!” (1917–18, 41). □

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