COLUMNS

Autobiography: Kishwar at It Again

When it first came out more than a decade ago, *Burī ʿAurat Kī Kat̲h̲ā* made waves in the country's literary circles for, among other things, Kishwar Naheed had made direct and indirect references to some known names and their antics—perceived or otherwise—that had caused her anguish.

The first edition was published in India. After a short while, the book made its debut in the Pakistani market with certain modifications in line with social sensibilities. When a few years later Kishwar Naheed recycled the stuff, brushing it up here and touching it up there, changed the format and gave it a new title, *Burī ʿAurat Kē Khuṭūṭ*, it failed to match the excitement of the first attempt.

Now, six years later, her *Kat̲h̲ā* is back on the shelves; this time it has been translated into English. This basically means that over the last few years she has generated four titles with material that was good enough for one.

Lest this be mistaken as an anti-feminist view of a celebrated feminist writer, one must hasten to nip that notion in the bud. The idea is to point out the possibility that perhaps—just perhaps—Kishwar Naheed has started to repeat herself too often in public. Stagnation would be too harsh a verdict because she is blessed with an attitude that borders on eternal youth, but repetition it indeed is.

There is no dearth of unconventional and nonconformist autobiographical accounts in the history of Urdu literature. Jōsh Malīḥābādī's *Yādōñ Kī Barāt* and Mumtāz Muftī's *ʿAlīpūr Kā Ailī* were the immediate predecessors whose accounts may have led Kishwar Naheed to come out of the closet with all her skeletons.

Those who followed her footsteps include Sāqī Fārūqī, whose Ā*p-Bītī/Pāp-Bītī* that hit the stands in recent times is just the example one needs to cite as a case of liberalism going horribly wrong. But Kishwar Naheed was the first woman to bare her soul in public and inspired at least two other accounts—Saḥāb Qazalbāsh's *Mulkōñ Mulkōñ Shehrōñ Shehrōñ* and ʿAẕrā ʿAbbās's *Kicking Up Dust*.

While among men, Mumtāz Muftī takes the cake for being honest

while still not straying from the path of decency and literary finesse, Sāqī Fārūqī surely stands condemned because of the foul language he has employed in his account.

Though growing in stature and acceptability, feminist literature in Pakistan still has a long way to go. Impressed by the likes of Kishwar Naheed, who has been in the vanguard of this specific literary genre, a host of her followers continue to aspire for a spot in the limelight.

Some make their presence felt, while others die out after a momentary glow, having failed to acknowledge the fine line separating decency from liberalism. As for Kishwar Naheed, she does the balancing act with gusto and her *Kat̲h̲ā* is a good example of it.

Born in a typically conservative family of Pre-Partition UP, Kishwar Naheed went through a childhood which raised more questions in her young but sensitive mind than the combined capacity of those around her to answer. Every time she was asked to shut up, the revolt inside her gathered a bit more momentum.

It was only natural that she was treated in the household with the contempt that a rebellious soul deserves—at least in the mind of the elders. As she forced her way into the world at large, she found it no less regimented. Her marriage, her forays into the literary world, her exposure to the work environment, her interactions with friends and so-called friends, her travels across the land … nothing changed her view that the woman was a soul condemned. Her *Kat̲h̲ā* is all about her passion to live with the "Bad Woman" tag.

Translated into English by Durdana Soomro, a graduate of the London School of Oriental and African Studies who has a couple of titles to her name as well, *A Bad Woman's Story* remains faithful to the original text without losing much of the essence that characterizes Kishwar Naheed's diction and idiom. This is an achievement in itself for which the translator deserves due acknowledgement.

Kishwar Naheed has been many identities to many. She is a poet whose collected works are spread over some 1500 pages. She is a newspaper columnist who writes on anything and everything under the sun. She is a feminist who has dared to take society by the scruff of its neck. She is a social activist who has the good of others close to her heart. She is a political activist who believes in cross-border friendship. She is also a friend people trust and approach in times of need. But, in the final analysis, she is what she is: Syeda Kishwar Jahan. No more, no less. Just that. And that is saying a lot. ❑

A Bad Woman's Story by Kishwar Naheed. Translated by Durdana Soomro. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2009. 196 pp. Rs. 595. isbn 978-0-19-547737-5.

—Humair Ishtiaq

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The Stay-at-Home Man

I've never really written anything outside of this house. I wrote a very thick Ph.D. thesis for Allahabad University, but I couldn't have actually written it there. I would collect everything and come back home to write. Suppose I have a story to write and I've gone out of town for a couple of days: not a line of it gets written. Someone said that when you go out somewhere you gain experiences and ideas, but if I lived outside Lucknow I wouldn't be able to write anything at all. Or, I wouldn't be able to write like this. There's a phrase that's used, g̱ẖar g̱ẖum̐snā [stay-at-home], as in "this is a really stay-at-home kind of man," meaning someone who never wants to go out, but just wants to be stuck at home all the time. That applies to me. If I go somewhere for a couple of days, I start missing home.

—*Naiyer Masud*

(from an interview with Sagaree Sengupta in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, 1998)

A Literary City

Shortly before I left the world of scholarly pursuits, I paid a work-related visit to Lucknow. I was at that time employed in an administrative post at a major research university and I was visiting Lucknow to look in on an Urdu program there. Since I knew I might not be coming back anytime soon, I had it in my mind to do something memorable, something aside from my administrative tasks. I put it to the "in-charge" of the program, Aftab Ahmad, himself a scholar of Urdu satire, that I would like to buy some Urdu books while in Lucknow. But not just any books. I specifically wanted to buy an Urdu collection of short stories by the Lakhnavi author Naiyer Masud,

whose work I had actually come to know via an excellent volume of English translations of his stories, *The Essence of Camphor*.

For me, Lucknow is an essentially literary city. I realize that to many people it is just another sprawling, dirty, exhaust-filled North Indian town, crime-ridden and filled with corruption. But Lucknow is the city of *Umrāʾō Jān Adā*, of *Pākīzah*; it is the home of the Hindi author Yashpal and the hometown of Urdu scholar C. M. Naim (well properly, Naim Sahib is from Barabanki, as Sepoy points out, but it's close by). The busy intersection of Haẓrat Ganj is where one goes to visit Ram Advani's bookshop to chat with the worldly and infinitely helpful proprietor who has provided a haven for book-lovers, scholars and students for so many years. When I step out into the busy traffic after having tea with Ram Advani and nearly get wiped out by the endless swirl of vehicles, I think nostalgically of a character in a story by the Hindi author Ashk who gets a terrible head cold after riding on his scooter around Haẓrat Ganj on Basant wearing a dashing, brightly-colored turban instead of a woolen hat. On the train down to Lucknow from Delhi, I always half hope that if I get drowsy and nod off, some mysterious stranger will come and leave a scented note written in flowery Urdu between my toes. This, despite all indications to the contrary in the distinctly unpoetic chair car of the Shatabdi Express, with its blue vinyl seats and smudged, tinted windows.

Book-shopping

Aftab was enthusiastic about my request and we set off to the neighborhood of Amīnābād after classes ended. My romantic notion of a day spent shuffling through richly stocked Urdu bookshops came to an abrupt halt within an hour. Aftab took me to the famous Dānish Maḥal bookstore, which a number of readers have sent photographs of. The shop is smallish with books covering three walls very high up to the ceiling. The fourth side is open to the street. We were waited upon by a very, very old man. He seemed hazy about whether or not he might have any books by Naiyer Masud, a troubling sign, and feebly scanned the shelves without really moving much. Aftab was having a hard time getting him to commit to whether or not he might have any such books. Finally, he said he thought probably not. We asked where else we might try. He hemmed and hawed a bit and finally said he thought we could get books by Naiyer Masud at the

home of Naiyer Masud himself. Both of us were surprised. I asked where it was. He gave hazy directions. Finally, Aftab got him to write the address down. He found a very old piece of paper and wrote down something that vaguely indicated the location of the house.

After this, we made a brief and fruitless try at the Khursheed Book Depot, one of those bright shiny places that stocks textbooks and stationary. The place was teeming with students and staffed by two busy people. Aftab managed to get in the question and they politely responded that they did not carry anything of that kind. We were now left with a quandary. Did we really have the chutzpah to go to the home of an eminent author and demand to buy his books? We decided we would do it. Later, as we analyzed the day, we realized that I had agreed on the basis of my assumption that this course of action had been suggested because that's how things were done in Lucknow. Aftab, on the other hand, had agreed based on his assumption that this was the sort of thing that Americans did—brashly beating down the doors of literary luminaries to ferret out the merchandise we wanted.

Recently I asked Aftab if he remembered any particular details from that part of the day that he wanted to remind me of. His answer came, *Rashoman*-like, and in its intricate observation of social details worthy of any five-hundred-page novel, something which I desperately hope he will write someday:

> I don't know if you remember that we met two girls in Amīnābād. When we were heading toward Dānish Maḥal, one of the girls came to me and said salaam to us. I introduced her to you, saying this is my cousin. She then addressed me as "uncle." Why must everyone address one another as uncle? I was feeling a little embarrassed because I had introduced her to you as my cousin. You know the complex relationships in India. I later realized that I had reflexively introduced her as my cousin (although she was not even my distant relative) because we lived in the same building and her older sister called me brother (I called her "*bẖābẖī*") and her brother-in-law I called "brother." So this girl was obviously a sister to me. But she called me "uncle" (I had never noticed this before that) because she was a friend of our landlady's daughters. My landlady's daughters called me uncle because I called her *bẖābẖī*, defining her husband as my brother. I don't know if you noticed the discrepancy then or not.

The Homebody

I now realize, when leafing through the English collection *The*

Essence of Camphor, that we had pulled up to the back door of the house. In the introduction to the collection, there is a photograph of Masud's home, which his father dubbed "Adabistān," or "domain of literature." The photograph shows a magnificent wedding-cake of a haveli, all ornate details, balconies and archways, surrounded by beautiful trees. Our car pulled up in an alleyway, and in the style of antique Subcontinental neighborhoods, it was difficult to tell where any number of houses began or ended.

As indicated in the quote that begins this post, Naiyer Masud has spent his whole life in Adabistān. From an earlier part of the same interview:

> Sengupta: You've never gone outside of Lucknow?
> Masud: True, or practically speaking, never. I went to Allahabad to do my Ph.D. in Urdu, for three or four years. I used to come back to Lucknow every month. My sister lived in Allahabad, and I stayed with her. So that didn't really amount to living "outside Lucknow." Other than that, I once went to Iran for sixteen or seventeen days. I've been to other cities, but not for more than four or five days. My whole life has passed in Lucknow, in this same house.

In the annals of authenticity, a debate I missed as a red herring last week, Naiyer Masud would be the quintessentially authentic author. If anyone were looking for an Indian writer that was indisputably authentic, who better than someone who has *never written a word outside the house in which he was born*? Despite the fact that this is a fascinating idea, and worthy of its own fictional treatment, I'm sure that Masud himself would laugh at the absurdity of the notion that always living in the same house confers a greater degree of Indianness to his writing.

Essence of Masud

In fact, in the introduction to the *The Essence of Camphor* collection, Muhammad Umar Memon, who selected and edited the volume, argues for a reading of Masud's work as not quintessentially like anything but itself. Memon's introduction, which is the kind of masterful close textual reading that is not currently in vogue in literary critical circles, offers a very rich background and basis for interpretation of Masud in only eight pages. As Memon observes:

> Entirely un-derivative and unlike anything that preceded them in the

> history of Urdu fiction, these stories stand in a class by themselves. They are different from the work of the early Urdu Romantics and Didactics on the one hand, and the Social Realists such as Munshi Premchand (1880–1936) and the Progressive writers such as Sajjad Zaheer (d. 1973), Krishan Chandar (d. 1977) and Ismat Chughtai (d. 1991) on the other. Strangely, they also do not approximate to anything of the modernist abstraction and symbolism that had swept over the Urdu fictional landscape in the 1960s and onwards with such relentless force.

Memon goes on to describe how the Urdu in Masud's stories is also unlike any other author's style:

> The shimmering but elusive quality of the stories may derive from a number of factors. Not the least of which is the terse and highly clipped prose of the writer, one that shuns even the slightest trace of hollow rhetoric, so stark in its suppression of qualifiers that it unsettles the mind. Few idioms or none, no verbal pyrotechnics of any kind. It is Urdu all right, but it does not read like ordinary Urdu….The economy, the avoidance of even an occasional exaggeration or embellishment, lend his prose an element of unfamiliarity, if not unreality.

The stories in the collection were translated by Memon himself, as well as Shantanu Phukan, Aditya Behl, Moazzam Sheikh, Elizabeth Bell and Sagaree Sengupta. That the style of the translations is uniform and quite smooth may be attributed to the fact that Masud himself worked with each translator on their individual stories, during which process, Memon suggests, Masud was quite demanding, with Memon finding that his "better judgment and patience were taxed to their limits."

The stories are elusive and difficult to grasp, being, as they are, unlike anything else, but also because they lack almost any reference to specific places, times, dates, politics or history. Descriptions can be elaborate, but they leave the reader with no bearings in terms of specific locations or historical eras. Take, for example, this passage from the title story, "The Essence of Camphor." The narrator is describing the camphor essence that he himself makes:

> In my extract, however, one does not smell camphor or any other fragrance. It is a colourless solution inside a white, square-bottomed china jar. No fragrance of any kind wafts through the jar's narrow opening when the round lid is removed. Attempting to smell it one feels a vacant forlornness and the next time round, breathing it in more deeply, one detects something in this forlornness. At least, that's what I feel. I cannot say what others feel since no one has ever

> smelled the extract in its purest form, apart from me. It is true that when I prepare an essence with this foundation those who inhale it think there is something else underneath the expected fragrance. Obviously, they cannot recognize it for there is no fragrance at all in my extract of camphor.

Here is an intricate description of something which, it becomes clear by the end of the paragraph, is indescribable. It is a camphor essence that does not smell of camphor or anything else. It has no color; it sits in a plain white jar. It does not emit fumes, and its effect is to fill one with a "vacant forlornness." Moreover, no one has ever smelled it but the narrator. One is pulled into an intimate, intricately described world that simultaneously bears no known or knowable markers, and that is as ineffable as the vaporless vapor it describes.

This ineffable, detailed world makes Masud's work simultaneously extremely difficult to understand and highly translatable across languages. With barely any specific references to cultural objects, specific customs or even family relationships (the narrator's female relations are referred to in the same story as his "women relatives"). Contrast this to Aftab's reminiscence about the Amīnābād Market. A brief encounter with two women is parsed in terms of highly elaborate habits of defining social and familial relationships. In a social environment in which Aftab's reconstruction of that moment captures the norm of everyday life, referring to characters in a story as "women relatives" is bizarre and disorienting. But in terms of translation, it works exceptionally well. Nothing is more aggravating to the translator than trying to convey such things as kinship in terms that are not aggressively distracting to the reader. In Masud's work, such challenges appear to be wholly absent.

Adabistan

It never crossed our minds, when we set out to Naiyer Masud's house on the patently ridiculous instructions of the bookseller at Dānish Maḥal, that we would actually encounter the author himself. Despite the fact that Aftab and I were approaching the adventure from two utterly different perspectives, I believe that our one shared assumption was that an eminent writer of such mysterious works would surely have a system of gatekeepers and "female relations" who would protect us from appearing foolish in our errand when we arrived at the house.

Such was not the case. Our driver pulled up at a door in a wall. We walked through the door into a small courtyard, and there was Naiyer Masud, lying in the sun, arranged upon a bench, chatting with a man I later learned was an Urdu professor at Lucknow University.

I was suddenly seized with anxiety. My Urdu was not good enough for this. I would not be able to think of refined Urdu words for literary things. I knew that Shuddh Hindi words would pop up in their place. I couldn't even remember the Urdu word for literature at that moment. My thoughts were racing through the linguistic inventory, routing all queries for Urdu through the much more secure Hindi compartment of my brain. I was mortified at the idea that I would have to speak to Naiyer Masud using English nouns strung together with Urdu grammar. The Hindi would only provoke peals of laughter, I knew from experience. But then I felt reassured. I was there with Aftab, the head of the Urdu program. He has a Ph.D. in Urdu literature!

But as I stared expectantly over at Aftab, he was totally silent. Somehow our mission was explained, but Aftab barely said a word. I ended up plunging into the Englishized Urdu I had dreaded. Masud was very gracious. He did not tell us that the idea that the only place to find his books was in his house was ridiculous. But, he explained, he himself did not have any spare copies either. He was sanguine about the matter and shrugged it off. There simply weren't very many copies. Perhaps they were available in Pakistan.

Since I had come so far, he said he would give me another book. He was ill and pulled himself up with difficulty, moving slowly over to the large metal almirah nearby on the porch. He fished about in it for a while and pulled a slim volume. It was a critical work on Ghālib he had written. He asked me my name and wrote an inscription in it, first crossing out what looked like an inscription to someone else. We talked a little about this and that. Aftab remained silent. Perhaps we had some tea.

Finally, feeling that we had already taken too much of his time, especially considering that he was not feeling well, we said goodbye and drove away. In the car, I asked Aftab why he had been so silent. I might even have expressed a bit of annoyance at being left to fend for myself.

"But I couldn't say anything," Aftab replied, "because I'm not from Lucknow."

"What do you mean you're not from Lucknow? You live here."

"But I'm from a village. I'm too embarrassed to speak Urdu in

front of real Lakhnavis like Naiyer Masud. They'll know right away I don't speak real Lakhnavi Urdu." ❑

—Lapata

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