

BOOK REVIEWS

FAIZ AHMED FAIZ. *The True Subject*. Translated by NAOMI LAZARD. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988. xviii, 136 pp.

———. *The Rebel's Silhouette*. Translated by AGHA SHAHID ALI. Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1991. 101 pp.

AGHA SHAHID ALI SAYS WELL in his introduction: “To have to introduce him is frustrating because he should already be familiar” He acknowledges that the biggest obstacle for the English reader may be Faiz’s role as a political commentator: “a non-subcontinental audience . . . may begin to understand his stature as a poet *and* public figure by imagining a combination of Pablo Neruda, Nazim Hikmet, Octavio Paz, and the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish.” And even if the name is familiar to many of us, Faiz is one of those poets whose name has travelled farther than the poetry. The appearance of these two collections of his poems, both with the Urdu text on the facing pages, is indeed good news.

Some elements of Faiz’s poetry are eminently available without an insider’s knowledge: in a prison poem which Naomi Lazard translates as “My Visitors” we hear of evening, midnight, morning and noon as visitors to his cell. It is clear that the prison cell cannot shut out everything.

But the heart and the eye are impervious
to who comes, and when, or who
leaves.
They are far away, galloping home.

Whatever Urdu music was lost, the point of the poem has survived in English through the powerful figure of thought which juxtaposes the two balanced ideas: the catalogue of intangibles creeping into the cell and the contrary motion of the imagination sneaking out, figures which shelter a delicate nostalgia between them.

There are poems in which the formal effects present a greater challenge for the translator, and we don’t need to know Urdu to glimpse

them. Just piecing together loan words in the Urdu facing texts and following the rhyme schemes down the page, the reader used to Persian or Arabic can see *ġazal* or *maṣnavī* forms underneath. Even in English you can watch the restricted lexicon of *ġazal* themes mysteriously rewoven to let through a list of harsher reveries.

Is one of the translations better news than the other? It is clear that they have defined their tasks differently. Agha Shahid Ali's observation about the *ġazal* is characteristic: "Because translating a *ġazal* is just about impossible, I have adopted loose, free verse stanzas to suggest the elliptical complexities and power of Faiz's couplets." He designs forms which display the component parts of the poems and leaves us with an implicit demand to read sympathetically. This has the advantage that the particulars show through, as in those traditional verses in which he allows the cloven Urdu *bait* to break into its four or five semantic lobes—one English line each—letting indentation and stanza shape the two-part pattern. In contrast, Naomi Lazard tends to personalize. When, for instance, she says of one translation, "I need to make each image specific and to heighten the diction in order to make the poem dramatic in English," the reader senses an utterly different translator's aesthetic. Her translations tend to emphasize the individual and introspective. "Evening," a poem (in couplets) which pursues Faiz's characteristic theme that time has stopped passing, opens in Lazard's version with a meditative rhythm that makes the trees seem evocations of a mood:

Every tree is an ancient, dark, deserted
 temple
 whose walls are split open, the roof
 caving in.

The lines end according to the logic of a reformed English line and the verse curves around for an interior state. For Ali the trees are more nearly self-contained actors:

The trees are dark ruins of temples,
 seeking excuses to crumble
 since who knows when—
 their roofs are cracked

And when the theme of time emerges, again, Lazard makes it seem a private emotion:

Night will not deepen, daybreak will
 never come.
 The sky longs for the spell to break,
 for the chain of silence to snap

We feel that the sky's longing is simply an image of the poet's, whereas Ali brings the political dimension into the foreground:

Now darkness will never come—
 And there will never be morning.

 The sky waits for the spell to be broken,
 for History to tear itself from this net . . .

The word Ali has rendered as *History* with a capital *H* is simply *vaqt* (not Arabic *dahr* with its implications of fate, not *tārīx* with its overtones of intellectual history), a relatively neutral term which needs context to make it political. Ali has given the poem a nudge which is justified the moment we see how many of Faiz's poems of waiting (Faiz's recurring theme, appropriate to a writer of prison poems with an urgency that goes beyond that of traditional erotic poetry) take their elegance from a comparable turn. The characteristic brilliance which emerges from these translations is Faiz's exquisite dialogue with his literary past—whether he is reworking famous lines from the poetry of Iqbal, or reframing tradition in broad strokes, so that the alienated lover of tradition, haunted by ecstatic visions of reconciliation in a landscape of hopelessness, finds himself in a political context. Flowers, wine, the moon: all the stage setting winds up mysteriously transformed by that deepening of context.

If we take into account Victor Kiernan's *Poems by Faiz* (Oxford, 1973), which includes not only sensitive verse translations but literal versions and transcriptions in Roman script, in addition to the facing Urdu text, as well as his marvelously detailed, personal introduction, the English and American readers now have a considerable body of Faiz texts at hand. Lazard's versions seem more nearly self-contained English poems; dimensions of the original survive in Ali's which draw us, seductively, into the cultural context. Together with Kiernan's they fit together to constitute a single piece of good news.

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SHAMSUR RAHMAN FARUQI. *Še‘r-e Šōr-angēz: Ġazaliyāt-e Mīr kā Intixāb aur Muḡaṣṣal Muḡāli‘a*. New Delhi: Taraqqī-e Urdū Bureau. Vol. 1 (*radīf alif tak*, 1990). 712 pp. Rs. 64/-. Vol. 2 (*radīf bē tā mīm*, 1991). 517 pp. Rs. 64/-. [Vols. 3 and 4 are forthcoming soon.]

VOLUME 1 of this new *intixāb* (selection) and *šarḥ* (expositional commentary) of the poetry of Mir is introduced by passages from Todorov, Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, Tomashevsky, Anantlal Gangopadhyay, Siḥr Badāyūnī, Culler, Derrida, Ašraf ‘Alī T^hānvī, Mallarmé, Bēdil and Coleridge. Under this eclectic array of banners, the first words of the introduction set forth the purpose of the volume:

1. An exemplary *intixāb* of the *ġazals* of Mir which can be set without hesitation beside the best poetry of the world, and which will also be a representative *intixāb* of Mir.
2. Recovery of the poetics of the classical *ġazal*, by means of the classical *ġazal* poets, especially Mir.
3. Analysis, commentary, interpretation, and judgement about Mir’s poetry, in the light of eastern and western poetics.
4. Consideration of Mir’s place from the viewpoint of classical Urdu *ġazal* and Persian *ġazal*—especially the “*sabk-e Hindī*.”
5. Discussion of necessary points about Mir’s language [1:15].

A two-hundred-page introduction then proceeds to cover some of the ground laid out in points 2 through 5. It is organized into topics as follows: “Is Mīr or Ġālib the ‘Xudā-e suxan?’” [1:26–42]; “Ġālib’s ‘Mīrness’” [1:43–61]; “Mīr’s language—idiom or metaphor?” [1:62–109]; “The poetry of human relationships” [1:110–148]; “‘Čūn xamīr āmad badast-e nānbā’” [1:149–171]; “The great ocean” [1:172–188]; “Mīr’s meter” [1:189–202]; and “‘Še‘r-e šōr-angēz’” [1:203–226]. Readers of the author’s other works of literary criticism will not be surprised at the general approach taken in the introduction, but they will surely be impressed by the elegance and subtlety of the discussion.

After the introduction, the selection and expositional commentary itself then extends for about 475 pages, followed by an index of names and terms [1:700–712]. The author explicates Mir’s *še‘rs* (couplets) not only by discussing them, but also by juxtaposing them to a remarkably diverse array of other, more or less similar couplets. Some of these latter are by classical Persian poets, some by other classical and (occasionally) modern Urdu poets, and some by Mir himself. This *tour de force* of

comparison leaves the scholarly reader wondering at the almost total absence of footnotes and citations. How good it would be to know where to find some of these superb verses! The author, however, in this as in his other works, sees himself as a critic rather than a scholar: he has drawn the verses from a variety of sources over his years of reading, study, and personal note-taking, and is confident of their general accuracy. In view of the richness and depth of the material he has given us, it would be churlish to demand more.

In short, the work effectively accomplishes its stated purposes—and other purposes as well. I know I am not the only reader to have learned more about classical Urdu criticism and poetry from these two volumes than from almost any other work I’ve ever read. For Mir is one of the two great pillars of our poetic tradition; yet he has been, alas, not only much less studied than Ghalib, but also much maligned in our criticism. For Mir, as Faruqi irrefutably shows, is far from the naïve, sentimental, lachrymose poet of pathetic emotion whom he is all too often taken to be. In the beginning of the introduction to Volume 2, Faruqi makes an amply justified claim: that after reading Volume 1, it is *not* possible to say that Mir’s is “the poetry of despair and disappointment, the bitterness of failure, pain and grief and sorrow,” or that it is devoid of “worldly pleasure, wit, repartee, human relationships on an everyday level” [2:37]. As Asif Aslam Farrukhi puts it in his own review, to the reader of *Še’r-e Šōr-angēz* Mir becomes an entirely new presence: “If I were asked to name the newest poet on the literary scene today, the poet who has given me such a sense of discovery, then I would say, Mir Taqi Mir” (*The News International* [Karachi], Sept. 24, 1991).

The riches of this work are so numerous and complex that it is hard even to select which of them to present in a brief review. To illustrate some of its delights, I will translate in full the discussion of one of my own favorite verses from Volume 1:

āvaragān-e ‘išq kā pūčhā jō main nišān
mušt-e ġubār lē kē sabā nē urā diyā
 When I asked for a sign of the wan-
 derers of passion,
 the breeze took up a handful of dust
 and flung it into the air.

Jur’at too has used this theme (*mazmūn*), in this rhyme-scheme (*qāfiya*), to some extent:

kyā dušmanī t̄hī tuj̄h kō ṣabā us galī sē jō
akṣar mirā ḡubār b̄hī tū nē urā diyā
 What enmity did you feel for me, oh
 breeze, that from that lane
 you often carried even my dust away in
 the air?

But in Mir's verse, the whole world is different. Mir has used the breeze's taking up a handful of dust and dispersing it in the air in one other place as well:

intihā ṣauq kī dil kē jō ṣabā sē pūc̄hī
ik kaf-e xāk kō lē un nē parēṣān kiyā
 (Dīvān-e Suvvum)
 When I asked the breeze about the limit
 of the heart's passion
 it took up a handful of dust and
 disturbed it.

Here the theme is different, and the breeze's explanation is only artificial. By contrast, in the verse under discussion the explanation is meaningful, because it is appropriate to ask the breeze, who wanders through street after street, about the traces of the wanderers of passion. In Jur'at's verse, the theme has only one aspect: that the breeze feels something like enmity for the wanderers of passion, such that it doesn't let even their dust rest in peace. In Mir's case, there are a number of aspects in addition to this. (1) The wanderers of passion end up as merely a handful of dust. (2) The wanderers of passion are nameless and trace-less in the same way that a handful of dust is nameless and trace-less. (3) The real essence of the wanderers of passion is merely a handful of dust. In the wide and great workshop of creation, they have no status whatsoever. (4) The wanderers of passion wander as does a handful of dust; they find no rest anywhere. (5) The breeze knows nothing about the wanderers of passion ("*xāk xabar hai,*" that is, "I know nothing at all"). (6) The breeze has no interest in what has become of the wanderers of passion—it goes around kicking up dust. (7) When I asked about the trace of the wanderers of passion, the breeze blew dust into my face, as if to say, "Who are *you* to ask about them?" (8) The breeze is so grief-stricken that it flings dust

on its head. (9) The inquiry might not have been addressed to the breeze. It's possible that the question was asked of someone else, or the speaker asked himself, "Where have the wanderers of passion gone, or what has happened to them?" No answer came from any other quarter; but the breeze picked up a handful of dust and gave a reply. This is hardly a verse—it's a carved, faceted jewel [1:457–458].

Še'r-e Šōr-angēz is a worthy setting for this and innumerable other jewels. We owe the jewels to Mir, and the setting to Shamsur Rahman Faruqi. This is a book we have needed for a long time, to help correct and enhance our perspective on the classical *ghazal*. Readers of Volumes 1 and 2 will eagerly await the publication of Volumes 3 and 4.

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ABDULLAH HUSSEIN. *Downfall by Degrees and Other Stories*. Edited and translated from the Urdu by MUHAMMAD UMAR MEMON. Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1987. 197 pp. \$11.95.

THE RELATION OF TIME, events, and human life; the burden of the past; the agony of exile and alienation; and the role of the writer are some of the themes explored in this collection of five rich and complex stories. The characters cross the span of Pakistani society at home and abroad, ranging from educated urban intellectuals to working-class villagers. The style ranges from mostly dialogue in "The Rose" to largely description in "The Journey Back," and the author often provides an epigraph or opening statement that suggests a point of view from which to approach the story. This practice has its own ironies, to which I will return later. Often the significance of these openings is not clear until the end of the story, as, for example, the " 'More?' the woman asked" at the beginning of the first story. More of what? we want to know. Tea, of course, in the immediate situation, but more understanding of the inner dynamics of their relationship is what the two characters need in the end. In a sense, this "More?" could also stand as an epigraph for the whole collection of stories.

"The Rose" introduces us to the major theme of alienation, as we are

given contrasting views of a relationship by the man and woman involved. The ambiguity of fulfilled desire here hints at parallels to come in other stories. "The Exile" opens with a quote from Stephen Crane which suggests that while we can view with detachment the hell of others' exile, actually we are all in the same hell together. In this story is another recurring theme, namely, the burden of unresolved questions from the past. At the end of the story when the narrator sees an old exile, he experiences a profound sense of relief as he understands the longings of the alienated chief clerk of an office in which he had worked many years before.

An unresolved question from the past forms the basis of "The Refugees," which opens with a short meditation on time, events, and human life. The ironic situation of the writer is introduced here with the explicit mention of "this story." The story involves a father, his son Aftab, and Aftab's own son. The parallel situations in the lives of Aftab and his father lead to opposite results as each tries to understand a life-changing moment in his own past. The father is driven to suicide when he realizes that his supreme moment of happiness can never be recaptured; Aftab realizes that it is memory itself that gives meaning to life by uniting the past and the present. As present and past come together and Aftab understands that he can indeed go back to his own city, the meaning of this exile's return is ambiguous and not entirely satisfying. "Something was found, but something was lost too; something was revealed, but something had also become forever hidden" (p. 61).

Irony is the mode of the title story. It ostensibly concerns the life of Ayaz, a brilliant lawyer who abandons his rigid standards of rationality for intuition. It is equally about the narrator, an old friend of Ayaz and a writer of some success, who abandons his career as a writer and begins writing only in his diary. The murder case that changes their lives seems of minor importance in Ayaz's career, but when the parallels in the lives of the murderer and the lawyer start to become apparent, and the narrator's story-within-a-story begins, the ironies reach the foreground. Through the diverging viewpoints of the narrator and Ayaz, Abdullah Hussein probes the role of the writer and the limits of writing itself. When the narrator-writer realizes that his power to control reality is really a fraud in that it operates only in his fiction, he abandons creative writing for recording events in his diary. Writing for himself alone, he thinks, will become truly a form of knowing. But Abdullah Hussein has already said in the opening paragraph of "The Refugees" that events exist only in time and are related to "the great unknowns that flank them on either side" (p.

35). In that story Aftab has to tell his story to his own son to make sense out of it, i.e., he must select and order the events in a certain way to make a narrative out of them and thus give them meaning. Writing in one's diary is also an attempt to control reality by selecting and ordering events in a narrative. But if all events are related to other events, in the end how much control does the diary-writer have? Is all writing then a fraud, or at best only an illusory way of knowing? How successful can the author's epigraphs be in attempting to control the reader's understanding of the stories?

The final story, "The Journey Back," begins enticingly enough: "From our relations with women we learn about ourselves." Narrated by a male who also participates in the events, the story is set in Britain and stresses the force of fate, the gulf between British and Pakistani culture, and the exile's longing for home. As with the other stories, the past here is a burden that the characters carry with them and sometimes it seems more real than the present. "In exile, you have no identity," says the narrator, and this seems to sum up the basic message of all the stories. With no identity, you are hollow inside, whether you are exiled from your fellows and colleagues by the alienating forces of modern society, or exiled from your country and living among foreigners. The irony in this story is that while all the characters long for their homeland, the only one able to return is sent back because of his insanity. Because he is closed in his own world and not bothered by problems of identity, he has not suffered in exile and would seem to be equally cheerful about staying or going.

The translation reads very well. There is no sense of palimpsest with the Urdu showing through the English, and the diction maintains an even quality. We should be grateful to Professor Memon for bringing us these excellent stories in such an appealing form.

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NASEER AHMAD KHAN. *Urdu in Two Weeks*. New Delhi: Urdu Mahal Publications, 1990. 111 pp. Rs 35/-.

BEFORE I CAME ACROSS THIS ASTONISHING BOOK, I was not aware that: (1) Urdu was "derived" from *Kharī Bōlī*, and precisely in the 11th century; (2) the Constitution of India "protects" sixteen "national languages;" (3)

Urdu has a “sub-standard” form called Hindustani; and (4) Urdu is the “second official language” in Himachal Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, several districts of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, and the Union Territory of Delhi. (If the latter is the case, I wonder what the Urdu-*vālās* complain about.) The author also claims that the “Urdu script is one of the three most widely used scripts in the world,” but he can’t be certain about the exact number of the letters in the Urdu alphabet and the basic shapes he would postulate for them. On page 6, he says the alphabet has 37 letters and 20 basic shapes, but on page 82 he writes that there are 36 letters and 19 basic shapes. On page 84, he again goes back to the earlier count! He, however, is most certain about the purpose of his enterprise: “This booklet is exclusively meant for Hindi-knowing people interested in reading and writing Urdu and the Urdu speakers who may not be able to read and write their language.” No wonder he wrote his book in English! The author is an associate professor in the Center of (sic) Indian Languages, JNU, and no less could have been expected of him. Unfortunately, he didn’t show his manuscript to some English-knowing colleague; the result is that his English makes sense only if one is fluent in Urdu.

The author has “spread” his “program of learning” over 22 units, of which “16 units are basic and the rest are informative.” (The distinction is subtle, indeed.) Let’s look at Unit 1. It begins with a section entitled, “Observations and Instructions.” It introduces three letters: *alif*, *lām*, *mīm*. Why the three are put together is not explained. Native speakers of Hindi are told that these letters represent sounds “as in *calm*, *look* and *moon*” respectively. Then we are told that “Alif remains the same in all position (sic)—initial, medial, final—of a word but occurs with a sign called MAD which is placed over the letter initially.” Forgive me if I take that to mean that Alif always has a *madd* over it when it occurs initially. But that is absurd. For one, how does one indicate initial short vowels? The absurdities keep piling up as the author rambles through his “basic” and “informative” units, ending up with a book that is basically disinformative. His explanations of the script are confusing and often erroneous, his transliteration of Urdu words is often idiosyncratic, and his taste in sample Urdu sentences given as reading exercises is much too peculiar. I can only hope that the book doesn’t fall into any student’s hands.

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ANIS NAGI. *Sa'adat Hasan Manṭō, Ēk Muṭāli'ah*. Lahore: Maqbool Academy, 1991. Rs. 150/-.

ALTHOUGH ITS TITLE would suggest otherwise, the book has not been authored by Dr. Anis Nagi. In fact, it is a collection of personal and critical essays on Sa'adat Hasan Manto, written by different people at different points in time, put together by Dr. Nagi with the help of a photocopier.

As the learned Dr. has elsewhere received the thrashing he rightly deserves for unauthorized and unacknowledged use of materials produced by others, it would be pointless to dwell on this here. To me at any rate, this is merely an extension of Manto's Post-partition existence, when he was forced to let himself be exploited by greedy publishers on the one hand, and by critics with an immediate political agenda like Muhammad Hasan Askari and Mumtaz Shirin on the other.

All the material collected between the covers of the present volume has appeared earlier in literary journals and books. There is no compiler's introduction or preface to enlighten readers about the criteria, if any, used in the selection of pieces or in the format of the book. Consequently, the justification of—or indeed the need for—the seemingly formless compilation remains obscure till the very end. Further, the word *muṭāli'ah* in the title would also appear inaccurate, if not downright wrong, as the selected material fails to constitute a sustained critical study of Manto's work.

Not all the pieces included in the collection can be called “critical,” as a good number of them are merely personal impressions or reminiscences by people not necessarily known as literary critics. Full of interesting anecdotes from Manto's quite picturesque life, the pieces, with the single exception of Bari Alig's account of the writer's early days in Amritsar, offer hardly any insights into his creative personality.

Even most of the critical pieces in the book do little more than point—by default, of course—to the fact that a proper critical appreciation of the greatest Urdu short story writer has yet to be accomplished. After the obsolescence of the progressive and anti-progressive polemic, critics seem to have reached a near consensus that Manto was a great writer, but that's about it. Apart from stating the obvious, there has hardly been a fitting effort to analyze the characteristics of Manto's writing, its aesthetic and social significance, and, above all, Manto's legacy to the fiction that followed him. Traditional Urdu criticism does not, to this day, seem to have sharpened its tools well

enough to embark on this long-overdue undertaking. So deep-rooted is our poverty in this regard that such naïve statements as “Manto’s characters are neither *nūri* nor *nāri*; they are just *xākī* human beings,” or such terrible misreadings as “woman in Manto’s stories is temptation personified,” not only pass as authentic critical judgment but are indeed highlighted by the publishers in blurbs on the back covers of authorized and unauthorized editions of Manto’s works.

Among all the critics who were writing when Manto was alive, only Askari seems to have had the intellectual capacity to undertake a suitable critical study of the story writer who remains unequalled to this day. But Askari did not go beyond briefly mentioning in several of his pieces the fact that since Manto was writing at a juncture when the Urdu language did not have a fully developed prose, let alone a rich tradition of fiction, he had to start from scratch. But in all fairness to Askari, he hardly had much time for elaborating on Manto’s literary merits. First of all, his acquaintance with Manto was fairly recent. Although Manto had been writing for more than a decade and had already established himself as an important fiction writer, Askari appears to have been as comfortably ignorant of his existence as was his disciple Mumtaz Shirin, until Manto landed in Lahore after Partition. Then in the initial years of Pakistan as a separate state, Askari was too busy defending the dismissal of the elected government of Dr. Khan Sahib and the imposition of Qayyum Khan’s rule in NWFP, and justifying the Public Safety Act, to care much about his function as a literary critic. Incidentally, this Act—one of the first pieces of repressive legislation in Pakistan’s political history, duly adopted by our first representative assembly—had Manto as one of its first victims. Even on the literary side there were more pressing items on Askari’s agenda. One has the feeling that the time he spent trying to establish his mentor, Firaq Gorakhpuri, as a great poet and critic, or, in the later years of his life, importing Islam from France, would have been better employed had he responded to the need for a critical appraisal of Manto’s contribution to modern Urdu fiction.

Although Manto never claimed to be a critic himself, he had a fairly accurate idea of the limitations of Urdu literary criticism. This is perhaps why he treated the critics with positive contempt, which, considering their bankruptcy, does not seem too harsh or unjustified. The critical articles included in the volume under review do not get beyond the familiar level of Urdu criticism and add next to nothing to the reader’s appreciation of Manto’s work. One of the most recognizable characteristics of Urdu literary criticism is that it has little, if anything, to

do with the text it claims to analyze. This freedom from the text allows the critic to indulge in the fine art of theorizing in the air. The criticism included in the volume provides numerous examples of this art.

One remarkable exception is Iftikhar Jalib's analysis of one of Manto's finest short stories, "Mōžēl," which stands out as a model of an approach entirely unknown to the regular critical writing one comes across in Urdu. Jalib has applied the same approach in a couple of his earlier pieces on Manto's individual stories, but, I must say, he has never been as successful before in his appreciation of the linguistic devices employed by Manto. He tries to read the story on the level of the personal creative usage of the language, amply substantiating his case with examples from the texts, and finally comes up with a totally new, but largely plausible interpretation. This new reading of Manto's text does not rule out, but rather complements, other, equally valid, readings of "Mōžēl," the most obvious of which is the political interpretation.

What is true for "Mōžēl" is generally true for all of Manto's successful short stories (including those that are conveniently classified as erotica) in which the content—political to the core—comes to life through excellent use of formal devices. Perhaps it is this superb formal treatment which endows Manto's stories with a layer of accessibility and makes it difficult for simple-minded readers—and even more simple-minded critics—to try to approach his texts on a deeper level. On the other hand, Manto's biting political and social commentary has proved too unbearable for our "hypocritics" who want to be able to uphold both Manto and the Public Safety Act with the same facility. The political aspect of Manto's writing, and its close relationship with the æsthetic and linguistic devices used so masterfully by him, has yet to receive the critical appreciation it deserves. Jalib's article is a step in this direction, but it is just a single step. What is needed most is a whole body of critical work, undertaken with precision and courage, in order for readers to come to grips with the most outstanding fiction writers of Urdu. This study, if and when it is undertaken, would have to analyze Manto's art in its proper perspective, together with the work of his contemporaries, and ultimately address basic questions like these: Why is that such powerful writers as Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Ismat Chughtai, and Ghulam Abbas seem to have left no heirs at all? What happened to our fiction after Manto? And what have we done to our society since 1947? Avoiding these urgent questions will lead us nowhere except to the empty, meaningless announcements of literature's inertia and death.

—AJMAL KAMAL
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GOPI CHAND NARANG. *Urdu Language and Literature: Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1991. 244 pp.

GOPI CHAND NARANG has been writing on Urdu literature for nearly thirty years and this book is a representative sample—“a cross-section” in the author’s words—of his work. Fifteen English-language essays have been culled from his prodigious writings. The book does not serve as a kind of miniature model of Narang’s work, faithfully reflecting every detail and texture; however, it does indicate some of his general concerns and methods.

As English-language essays, most were written for an audience not well-versed in Urdu literature; they were designed as introductions to topics, as overviews and surveys. A reader with some familiarity with Urdu literature is not likely to find much new or unique here. None of Narang’s Urdu language essays has been translated for this collection. The basic messages of the articles are fairly commonplace and can be succinctly expressed: Urdu poetry has been greatly influenced by Sufism (chapter 2); *maṣnavī* writers have drawn upon Indian tales and customs (chapter 4); many Urdu poets contributed to the anti-colonial movement (chapter 5); Faiz Ahmed Faiz utilized traditional poetic conventions while adding a new political content (chapter 8); Urdu short stories have moved from the period of realism and naturalism with overt political commitments to a more symbolic, metaphoric, and abstract style (chapter 10).

But even the novice might become disappointed with these essays since they fail to confront the problematics raised within the essays themselves. In general, Narang would like to provide a strictly *literal* reading of literature and to wall off the real from the “symbolic.” He believes that it is perfectly possible to distinguish between a literal meaning and a metaphorical one:

When the ‘signifier’ is used at the surface level then there may be the relationship of one to one between the word and the meaning. But when it is used beyond the visual to signify the super-real or the other, then the metaphor is evoked (p. 199).

Such a theory of meaning and reading is less than crude for it finds the entirety of the “real” and “concrete” upon the *visual*, upon what can be seen. Narang does not even bother to include the other four senses to make the more traditional (Humean) argument that the real is what our senses tell us and that a one-to-one correspondence exists between our sensual experience and the external world. Narang states that “in creative writing the ‘signified’ is simply not amenable to any definition” (p. 199), but then goes on to state that he (somehow) is able to fix the definition and to determine when the meaning has exceeded its permitted quotient of realness.

Narang not only claims to know the difference between literal and symbolic definitions of words, he also claims to precisely know the symbolic definitions. His all too brief discussion of symbol, metaphor and allegory is very confused and frequently degenerates into trivialities (allegories “have sharpened our insight and added to our pleasure”; they have “provided a creative stimulus” [p. 200]). Nevertheless, his point is that the Urdu (and Indian) tradition has been one of allegory, that Indians have had “a deep-rooted subconscious drive” for allegories (p. 202). Narang wishes to limit the metaphorical character of language by forcing it to follow the logic of the allegory and to justify such a reduction on the basis of a quasi-genetic Indian trait. He desires words to have a one-to-one correspondence with another set of other words that can be identified with equal ease.

Narang is obviously uncomfortable in probing his methodology of criticism. The above quotes are from the sole passage in the book addressing the problem of signification and this problem was forced upon him in the process of writing about the “new Urdu short story” (e.g. the work of Intizar Husain). But we might wonder whether his methodology, if inadequate for comprehending the relentlessly metaphorical character of the “new story,” is at all adequate for comprehending the “old story.” Let us take his essay on the poetry of Faiz. Here Narang offers an allegorical reading, a decoding of Faiz’s words. He lists eighteen common words in Faiz’s poetry, gives their lexical meanings and then their allegorical equivalents within Faiz’s supposed ulterior narrative of revolution. So for instance, *raqib* literally means a lover’s rival, but allegorically it stands for “imperialism and capitalism” (p. 103). When Faiz is writing of gardens and wine shops he is simply providing a cover story for an underlying narrative of the struggle for communism.

This reading clearly mistakes Faiz’s poetry for some sort of secret code. As just one instance, to decipher *raqib* as a symbol for “imperialism

and capitalism” hardly helps us understand those lines where Faiz sympathizes with the *raqīb*. The novelty of Faiz in this case was not his use of *raqīb* to mean capitalism, but rather his treatment of the *raqīb* as a fellow sufferer, pained by the beloved’s rejection. What that might mean in the logic of a communist narrative is unclear but one doesn’t have to resort to a hidden code book to understand the idea it conveys of sympathy for those who suffer. That is not exclusively a communist idea.

Narang’s allegorical reading seriously limits the metaphorical reach of Faiz. In one poem, Faiz wrote that the “true subject of poetry was the loss of the beloved.” Should we infer then that his poetry is ultimately about a defeat of the revolutionary movement (cf. p. 103)? The concept of love in Faiz is hardly amenable to being reduced to either a clear allegorical or lexical meaning for it becomes part of a general human experience, open to a world of analogies, multiple correspondences, and shifting metaphors. Faiz wrote about love in subtle, complex and ambiguous ways, but Narang, who immediately desists wherever ambiguity exists, refuses to explore them. Narang’s allegorical reading, moreover, can say nothing about Faiz’s overtly political poems which do not seem to hide a hidden code.

Narang has recently supplemented his interpretation of Faiz in an Urdu-language essay by arguing that this political allegory in Faiz accounts for his popularity. (Cf. “Faiz kō kaisē na Paṛhēn: Ēk Pas-sāxtiyātī Ravaiya” [How Not to Read Faiz: A Post-Structuralist Approach], *Sauḡāt* 1 [new series; September 1991], pp. 303–316.) He writes that the aesthetic effect of Faiz’s poetry has been heightened by people’s expectation that there is a political meaning to seemingly innocent lines about gardens and wine shops. Once those expectations are taken away and Faiz is read for the “obvious meaning” (*ṣarīḥī m’ani*), then he is merely an average poet. Narang is halfway correct in saying that the public’s knowledge of Faiz’s life has helped to elevate his status, but to prioritize this idea of a political allegory in Faiz is a reductionist reading. Narang’s essay itself is a prime example of the difficulties in the concept of an “obvious meaning”—a concept that is inherent in every essay in the book under review—for, in direct contradiction with its title, it presents the antithesis of a post-structuralist reading: it posits an unambiguous “obvious meaning” to poetry and then attributes any additional meaning to the ideological structure of the economic system (borrowing from Althusser). If one is searching for a label then this perhaps would be termed “Marxist positivism.”

The difficult and yet fundamental problems of literary criticism are

not broached in this collection of essays. The book is divided into sections according to the divide between classical and modern Urdu. The reason for this divide and its validity are taken for granted by Narang. The essays intend to discuss only “good” literature (cf. p. 59) and yet Narang offers no explication of his aesthetic standards. The major theme of the book and Narang’s entire work is the “indigenous base and syncretic qualities” of Urdu which allow it to play a “syncretizing role in a pluralistic, secular and democratic India” (p. vii). These are nice-sounding words but there is an enormous number of questions surrounding such a position which Narang does not even address. It is not at all clear that having people speak the same or a similar language will help reduce religious or political violence. If Narang wants to promote the syncretic qualities of Urdu, then one would expect him to explain how and why Urdu and Hindi came to be split in the first place. Narang is offering a cure, but what is the disease?

—JOHN ROOSA

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Pakistani Literature. Chief Editor: GHULAM RABBANI A. AGRO. Managing Editor: IFTIKHAR ARIF. Guest Editor: MUZAFFAR IQBAL. Vol. 1, No. 1. Islamabad: Pakistan Academy of Letters, 1992. 214 pp. Rs. 100/- (\$12.00, £6.00).

THE PAKISTAN ACADEMY OF LETTERS seems to have set a mission for itself: to open up the domain of what it refers to as “Pakistani literature” to English-speaking audiences both inside and outside the South Asian Subcontinent by producing volumes of translations. Not too long before the appearance of the present journal, the distinguished Academy had already published *Selected Short Stories from Pakistan: Urdu*, and stated there in a publisher’s note that the next volume in the series would comprise translations of short fiction in Panjabi, Pashto, Balochi, and Sindhi. While we still await this promised volume, the first issue of *Pakistani Literature* includes translations from all of these languages, demonstrating the Academy’s resolve to display to the English-speaking world Pakistan’s literary wares.

The journal itself is attractive: 15 x 24cm., sturdy paper, glossy section dividers, clear typeface, and virtually no typographical errors. The various

sections are laid out according to original language: Urdu first (and foremost—130 of 214 total pages), followed in order by Panjabi (10 pages, all poems by Bulleh Shah), Pashto (14 pages), Sindhi (16 pages), Balochi (12 pages), and English (6 pages). Several authors are admirably introduced with concise biographic sketches, and all contributors are at least mentioned in the notes at the end of the journal. There is also a brief editorial by Iftikhar Arif, a short piece tantalizingly entitled “Raison d’être” by Muzaffar Iqbal (more on this later), and a long essay on Abdullah Hussein, also by Muzaffar Iqbal. In all, this first issue of *Pakistani Literature* is a nicely balanced production. The English of the translations is never worse than readable, usually quite good, and in several cases (especially Shelah S. Bhatti’s rendering of Ahmed Nadim Qasmi’s “A Lament” and Faruq Hassan and M. Salim-ur-Rahman’s translations of Majeed Amjad’s poems) nothing short of wonderful.

So, concerning the translations themselves, this reviewer has no major objections. This is not the case, however, when it comes to many of the fundamental editorial decisions that must have preceded the appearance of this journal in the first place. For instance, what exactly *is* “Pakistani literature?” What makes it *Pakistani* and not, say, “northern South Asian?” Is literature (*a* literature, *any* literature, *all* literature?) to be categorized in terms of the political state that lays claim to the geographic birthsites of its authors? How, for instance, can the Academy claim Bulleh Shah as a producer of “Pakistani literature” when his birth in the Panjab predates the existence of Pakistan by well over two centuries? When we turn to Muzaffar Iqbal’s “Raison d’être” we find the only passage in the entire journal that even approximates a response to this consideration:

Unlike the literature of many European countries, Pakistani literature preceded the emergence of the state by many centuries. Its early development took place in a highly cosmopolitan atmosphere which had emerged after the arrival of the Muslims in the subcontinent. The interaction of Islamic civilization with the local traditions gave birth to a unique synthesis of historic importance; Pakistani literature is the product of this organic development. [...]

This historical development is unique in many respects and can only be understood in its proper context. Its uniqueness stems from the fact that the literary heritage of Pakistani people is not necessarily defined by the geographical boundaries of the present day Pakistan. Instead, like the ideological basis of the state, it

reaches out to its ancestral roots for its nourishment and growth.

If “Pakistani literature” does indeed “precede the emergence of the state by many centuries” (a questionable claim at best, simply untenable at worst), and if it is the case that “the literary heritage of Pakistani people is not necessarily defined by the geographical boundaries of the present day Pakistan,” then the question “What is Pakistani about ‘Pakistani literature?’” is not thereby answered, it is *begged*. One question then becomes two: (1) What *is* the ideological entity “Pakistan” that precedes the emergence of the state “Pakistan”? (2) How does such an ideological entity substantiate a comparative literary category? As asserted by Mr. Iqbal, political statehood and its attendant geography are not to be the criteria for inclusion in the literary category “Pakistani;” and this rationale allows the inclusion of Bulleh Shah. But apparently, neither is the Urdu language itself a sufficient criterion, even though it is precisely one of those Islamic/indigenous “developments” cited by Mr. Iqbal in the historical prefiguration of “Pakistani” literature. Were it a sufficient criterion, the editors might have seen fit to include someone like Qurratulain Hyder, an acknowledged master of Urdu prose, who just happens to live in India. Given the logic Mr. Iqbal’s discussion of “Pakistani” literature, we thus have one rather predictable inclusion, and a very questionable exclusion. Obviously, literary taxonomy is tenuous business, and to base the existence of an entire journal on the promulgation of an inadequately conceived “Pakistani” literature is even more tenuous. Rather than propound inflated and ultimately vacuous claims regarding what amounts to the cultural—indeed, the ontological—bases of a regional literature, the editors at *Pakistani Literature* would have done much better simply to have selected some more concrete limiting criteria and stuck to them, warts and all. In essence, grand claims like those made by Mr. Iqbal in “Raison d’être” function as little more than capricious and *ex post facto* aggrandizements of a political state that seeks to include a literary tradition among its cultural assets simply by saying that it is so. Frankly, one is forced to wonder just how autonomous the Pakistan Academy of Letters is from the official Ministry of Education that established its charter.

The second objection this reviewer has pertains specifically to the Urdu works selected for this first issue of the journal. Why, so soon after the publication of *Selected Short Stories from Pakistan: Urdu*, which includes many works by the “first generation” of Pakistani Urdu writers, did the editors of *Pakistani Literature* see fit to include so many more

works by this same generation? One can perhaps understand this logic if one supposes that the primary concern of the editors was to introduce new audiences to the established canon of Urdu literature—Iqbal, Faiz, Manto, Ghulam Abbas, Intizar Husain, Meera Ji, etc. Clearly, there is sense in this, for several of these, being poets, could not be included in *Selected Short Stories*. All of the prose fiction writers, however, did appear in *Selected Short Stories*. Would not an even greater service have been done by including some of the younger and more experimental prose writers Pakistan has to offer? We await the second issue of *Pakistani Literature* to see what kinds of editorial decisions are made there.

—G.A. CHAUSSÉE

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The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dāstān of Amīr Hamzah. Translated, edited, and with an introduction by FRANCES W. PRITCHETT. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. xii, 272 pp. Illustrations. \$35.00.

THE INDO-MUSLIM *dāstān* tradition was one of the most widespread and enthusiastically received genres of popular literature in the Subcontinent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Originating in Persia, *dāstāns* probably went to India with the Muslim conquerors led by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna. They were popular in the Mughal courts and in the Deccan, and no doubt among the common people too, although we have records only of written, courtly literature. *Dāstāns* were written and told in Persian until the decline of that language in India in the nineteenth century, and they existed in Urdu at least from the late eighteenth century in Deccan. In North India they appear in print at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and as printing spread, so did their mass appeal. What are these tales that had such a long life and warm reception among the elite and commoners alike?

Dāstāns are generically romances and share a number of characteristics with the Western romance tradition. Their heroes are human beings who are sometimes larger than life. Magic is a central part of the Persian and later the Indo-Muslim romances. Some, such as the romance of Alexander the Great and that of Hamzah, may have a tenuous connection with the life of a historical character, but for the most part the heroes are fictional. Generally they tell of the maturing of a hero from callow youth to

responsible adult ready to assume the duties of marriage and public life. As the hero experiences challenges that help him mature, he is often shown to embody some of the social or moral ideals of his class, and thus romances have a didactic purpose. Generic boundaries are never firmly fixed, however, and each new member modifies to some degree the limits and shape of its genre. The romance of Hamzah is no exception, and the late versions of it extend generic borders considerably.

In formal terms, *dāstāns* are extended, episodic tales, in prose or verse. Their written form derives directly from their oral form, and even newly created tales that have no oral ancestors follow the generic conventions. This means that for *dāstāns* that exist in both oral and written forms, there is no single, authoritative version. They exist both in performance and in whatever written versions we have. This fluidity is well demonstrated by the printing history of the Hamzah romance in Urdu. *Dāstāns* have a main plot and may have elaborate subplots weaving in and out. The action is fast-paced and tends to focus on what excites people most: fighting and erotic adventures. The texture of the prose is simple and straightforward except at predictable points (e.g., conventional opening phrases, descriptions, descriptions of beautiful women or the armor of heroes) when it becomes very elaborate with lengthy *izāfat*-compounds, learned vocabulary and allusions, inserted verses, images from high literature, and the like. Some of these sections will be almost set-pieces, and this suggests another prominent characteristic of this style, repetition. Repetition appears on various levels, from epithets and descriptive phrases to set-piece descriptions such as the *sarāpā* (head-to-toe description of a beauty), and repeated scenes such as single combats and battles.

The characters of *dāstāns* show little introspection or psychological development, and are often types that reflect certain moral values. This is not to say that they lack individuality or that they are not memorable, but only that we know them much more through their actions than through their thoughts. Socially the characters are kings and queens, princes and princesses, *‘ayyārs*, wizards and sorcerers, *parīs* and jinns. There is much interaction, often sexual, between humans and supernatural beings.

The action takes place within the known world and in the supernatural world as well. This is in keeping with the requirements of the genre of these tales, where the hero must spend some time outside the human world as part of his maturation.

The various written versions of the *dāstāns* of Amir Hamzah fit well into this generic description. The most popular version has proven to be that written by Abdullah Bilgrami and first printed in Lucknow in 1871

by Naval Kishor. This version has been reprinted many times thereafter, and Professor Pritchett uses the eleventh edition of 1969 for her abridged translation of about one-fourth of the Urdu text. Through a judicious selection of passages to render into English, and some thoughtful editorial decisions regarding the translation of personal names, paragraph divisions, punctuation, section headings, and summaries of untranslated parts, she has managed to convey an excellent sense of the liveliness and color of the original. Professor Pritchett has chosen representative kinds of scenes and incidents to translate, and thus has avoided repetitiousness and at the same time has preserved the continuity of the story. Many of the characters have meaningful names, and she has succeeded very well in rendering some of these. “Hell-cave Bano,” for Saqar Ghar Bano is particularly felicitous.

Professor Pritchett has provided an extensive introduction which discusses the *dāstān* tradition in Persia and the Subcontinent, the evolution of the tale of Hamzah, and the history of the printed versions of it. The book is attractively produced, containing many illustrations from the 1871 Naval Kishor edition including the beautiful title page. It is a pity that the most charming picture of all, that of Hamzah and Amar Ayyar, appears only on the dust jacket.

Histories of Urdu literature, like those of Persian and Arabic literature, have tended to focus on the high, courtly literature and to ignore popular literature, both oral and written. Printed *dāstāns*, like much of the literature that appears in chapbooks, represent literature that appealed (and in many cases still does) to the majority of the population. This popular literature, as Professor Pritchett makes clear, interacts with high literature and each influences the other. For this reason alone, *dāstāns* and other sorts of popular literature should constitute an important part of future literary histories of Urdu, Persian, and other languages of the area. By publishing this translation and its excellent introduction, and through her earlier research on South Asian popular literature, Professor Pritchett has drawn attention to this unfortunately neglected part of South Asian culture. In clarifying its place in the larger literary spectrum she has helped to illuminate the high literature as well as the popular. It seems time now for literary scholars to take more account of these stories which enjoyed such a wide circulation and close attention among the people of the Subcontinent.

—WILLIAM L. HANAWAY
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Urdu Letters of Mirza Asadu'llah Khan Ghalib. Translated and annotated by DAUD RAHBAR. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1987. xlv, 628 pp. \$48.50.

Why don't you write me letters independently? It is as simple as this: write the letter and have your man take it to the post office. Send it *postage-paid* or *berang*. You don't have to write the address in such detail as to include the location of my lodging. The post office is near my house, and the postmaster is an acquaintance of mine. (Letter 110: Ghalib to Hakim Ghulam Najaf Khan, February 3, 1860; p. 193)

MIRZA ASADU'LLAH KHAN GHALIB was the greatest Muslim poet of the nineteenth century who enjoyed much patronage at the *fin de siècle* Mughal Court, and then fought prolonged official battles with their British successors over his lapsing pension. Although he wrote a great deal in Persian, which is important in its own right, he is considered to be the greatest Urdu poet of the nineteenth century; and, incidentally, by virtue of his Urdu letters written during the last twenty years of his life, he also became the father of modern Urdu prose. Letter-writing was then helped by the Indian version of the Victorian penny-postage and, certainly, the general cultivation of a very high level of conversation, thanks to the absence of the telephone. All correspondence, however, was not of a kind; and Ghalib's letters are unique. Wit, intellectual substance, a certain informal decorum coupled with a portly courtliness, and a sprightly conversational style set them apart as a model of Urdu prose, the like of which could not be produced even in writing factories like the Fort William College (c. 1800).

Although Ghalib was much distressed by the destruction of Delhi in his time, an objective detachment was the other side of his deep love for the city and its culture. Thus to Nawab Anwarud Daula Shafaq:

Let me tell you of an established rule of thumb about Dilli, namely, that the Power of the Creator has made it so that any human being, male or female, born within the walls of this city is automatically endowed with a nature tending towards hysteria and hypochondria. . . . (Letter 106, p. 188)

How much he appreciated a warm, responsive and directly communicative correspondence—transcribing life almost to the extent of

substituting it—is easily seen from what he wrote to Mir Ghulam Baba Khan on April 3, 1967:

. . . Your affectionate letter which came earlier was a reply to one of mine, so a reply to it was not written. The day before yesterday, a letter from Miyan Saiful Haq arrived. More a feast-platter than a letter! From it I helped myself to delicious viands, delicacies, and fruits, and through it saw a dance-show and heard songs. . . .
(Letter 133)

After all, the letter is not television, but such pleasure in correspondence would require an accomplished and well-orchestrated mode of communication. The Urdu letter had developed into that mode by the time Muslim civilization itself had declined in India, and official correspondence was being conducted increasingly in English. Ghalib signified, in every sense, that break with the official culture of British India.

Daud Rahbar has chosen about half of the letters in Maulana Ghulam Rasul Mihr's Urdu edition and, assisted by an American linguist and a word-processor, rendered them into a most readable English translation which manages to convey both Ghalib's genius and his unmistakable voice. The 170 letters, sent to various people at various times, discuss and reflect the many engagements, affairs, issues and moods which the master poet conveyed movingly, and with so much ease, in his prose; so that they also "afford the Western reader hitherto unfamiliar with Ghalib's substantial contribution to world literature a broad view of the artist as poet, master of prose, linguist, teacher, historian and friend" (Introduction, p. xlv). Even Ghalib's Shi'ite interests are noted by the translator in the introductory pages. The selection is made with care generally. Letters 53, 63, and 97 provide interesting, if contrastive, comments by Ghalib himself on his letter-writing style. Several others discuss Urdu and Persian as languages, as well as their literary traditions; or mangoes. The long shadow of the Mutiny of 1857 and its aftermath overhangs the text of many. Ghalib frequently inserted his Urdu poems and Persian verses in the letters. These also have been reproduced as part of the text in Rahbar's own calligraphic hand and faithfully—if somewhat literally—translated.

While the letters reveal the many aspects of Ghalib's personality, and something of those to whom he wrote, the arrangement by addressee, though chronological within the respective addresses, sheds more light on

relationships as such than on the general milieu, and cannot really suggest the actual line of Ghalib's own development of thought from day to day. For the latter, a general chronological ordering of his letters, by the year rather than the addressee, may have been more to the point. But that was not the translator-compiler's intention; rather, it is Ghalib's "circle" which has been the ordering principle, so that Letter 133 (to Nawab Mir Ghulam Baba Khan) of April 3, 1867, quoted above, is followed a few pages down by Letter 139 (to Miyan Dad Khan Sayyah) of July 31, 1860. Thus the earlier selection in *Ghalib: Life and Letters* (by Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, 1969) will remain useful, though it is superseded by the present volume in that, instead of preparing appropriate excerpts as in the 1969 volume, full text of the selected letters has been given.

Scholarly annotation is abundant and helpful particularly to the Western reader; more than half the book (pp. 308–628) consists of notes. The system of transliteration used is explained (pp. xlv-xlv). But the main regret is that the publishers have not matched the effort of the book in terms of production and just reproduced the typewritten copy. Annemarie Schimmel's remarks about Ghalib in her Foreword are appropriate, although her breathless style (see pp. xii-xiii) has certain meaningless locutions: "In him [Rahbar] we have a scholar who has lived outside Pakistan for many years . . ." (p. xiv). That, I suppose, will be the least mentionable of a translator's qualities or qualifications, i.e. to approach Ghalib and ask him if he would please speak to us in English. Rahbar, of course, is prudent in referring to his childhood "privilege of being in the company of many elders" whose "style of conversation echoed Ghalib's culture" (Preface), which authenticates the translator's familiarity—besides the bases of an academic dealing—with his material. On seeing the work that follows, one is sure that Ghalib's English audience will no longer complain of being underprivileged.

—ALAMGIR HASHMI

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Hasan Shah's The Nautch Girl: A Novel. Translated, and with an Introduction by QURRATULAIN HYDER. New Delhi: Sterling Paperbacks, 1992. 104 pp. Rs. 45/-

THE NAUTCH GIRL is a fascinating piece of South Asian literature, but not for the reasons one might perhaps at first suppose. It is not, for

instance, a very good story. In the mechanical terms of plot, character, and narrative, *The Nautch Girl* is for contemporary readers unexceptional. The plot is utterly simple: man loves woman in socially impossible circumstances, they marry in secret, they carry out their relationship from a distance, the marriage remains unconsummated, she ultimately dies, and the reader is left with the impression that the man lives out the rest of his life hardened and unfulfilled. The characters are only slightly more interesting. The man is the author Hasan Shah himself, an overworked *munṣī* in the employ of Ming Saheb (the translator—Qurratulain Hyder—speculates that this name is a local corruption of ‘Manning Saheb’), a British official living the good life of expatriot wealth in late eighteenth century Kanpur, a burgeoning city steeped in the high Mughal culture of Oudh. The object of Hasan Shah’s desires is Khanum Jan, the “nautch girl” of the title. (The original Persian title is *Naṣṭar*, “the surgeon’s knife,” which, according to Ms. Hyder, is a conventional metaphor for the cutting pain of separation from one’s beloved.) Khanum Jan is certainly the most robustly wrought character of the novel: predictably beautiful, but with a wit and sophisticated worldly wisdom that both belies her youth and leaves the narrating Hasan Shah seeming in comparison like something of a boob. The narrative itself is strictly linear and involves very little authorial reflection, leaving external event and recounted dialogue to order the text. In the most basic technical sense, *The Nautch Girl* is an example of the novel genre *par excellence*: character based, episodic, and temporally sequential. That this literary form spontaneously occurred in eighteenth century India, apparently independently of any European models, does make the text exceptional.

According to Ms. Hyder’s foreword, *The Nautch Girl* was originally translated from Hasan Shah’s 1790 “Hindi-ised Persian” text into Urdu by Sajjad Hussain Kasmandavi and serialized in the journal *Oudh Punch*. Soon thereafter, in 1893, it was published in Lucknow in book form. The original Persian text no longer exists. Although Ms. Hyder claims that she has been “strictly faithful to the [Urdu] text” and that she has “not anywhere modernised either the narrative or the dialogue,” still her otherwise adequate translation of this very classical text slips at times into careless and disrupting modern English colloquialisms. Witness: “After their retrenchment the troupe had been very despondent. But ever since they had started searching for a boat they had become quite hunky dory.” Or: “‘So, I went haywire and wanted to kill myself.’” Still other passages are marred by incorrect grammar: one character, having gone to the bedside of the ailing Khanum Jan, “blowed” the Benediction of the

Prophet on her face; earlier in the novel, a boat is praised for the fact that “it has fast speed.” The responsibility for such glaring mistakes ultimately lies with the editors at Sterling Press. Especially in light of the fact that *The Nautch Girl* is proclaimed as the first novel of South Asia and is therefore of such obvious historical import, one feels that much more care should have been taken in the preparation of the translation.

Its privileged role as the first South Asian novel brings up another objection to Ms. Hyder’s translation, and that is her decision to abridge the Urdu text. (It is also something of a shame that one can no longer observe the relationship Kasmandavi’s Urdu translation bears to the lost Persian original.) In her foreword, Ms. Hyder states that she has “only cut down the ornate passages and [has] also omitted most of the *ġazals* of Hafiz quoted in the narrative. . . .” She has “also shortened the lengthy love letters exchanged between the hero and the heroine.” From the present reviewer’s point of view, *The Nautch Girl* is far more intriguing as a literary historical artifact than it is as a diverting “page-turner” marketable to contemporary audiences. To sacrifice whole sections of the text in the attempt to make it somehow more “readable” is a judgment beyond the legitimate purview of Ms. Hyder’s role as a translator. Her responsibility is to the text, not to her readership.

Taken as a document, *The Nautch Girl* becomes important when we consider some of the history that accompanies it. Originally composed in Persian in 1790, it seems to have languished in obscurity until Kasmandavi translated it into Urdu in 1893. Its reclamation by Kasmandavi near the turn of the twentieth century is remarkable, for only twelve years later we get what is generally recognized as the first novel composed in Urdu, i.e. Ruswa’s *Umrā’ō Jān Adā*. The similarities between *The Nautch Girl* and *Umrā’ō Jān Adā* are immediately striking: both are stories that revolve around witty and refined courtesans, both fairly overflow with *ġazals* and the urbane air of Lakhnavi culture, and both narratives find their motor force in a kind of asymptotic erotic approach to unattainable objects of desire. One is compelled to ask why *The Nautch Girl* was translated into Urdu when it was (indeed, why it was translated at all), what it might be about the turn of the twentieth century in Lakhnavi society that called forth narrative structures that both assume the form of the novel and ground themselves thematically in the elegance and piquancy of courtesan culture.

On the surface of it, the several years in question seem to embody a deeply rooted social and cultural tension which is nonetheless productive in literary terms: on the one hand, there is the waxing of British

colonialism and its attendant social technologies, and on the other hand there is the waning of the high Persianate culture emblematic of Mughal society. Judging from the contemporaneous appearance (in Urdu, at least) of these two novels, and looking at the central role desire plays in each, it seems as though desire itself gets caught up in this tension: thematic desire for an object redolent of familiar anxieties and assurances, and the irreversible form of desire desiring its own imperfect, constrained, and in this case, utterly new expression. When tracing the history of discourse on desire, all the way from Plato's *eros* to Freud's *libido*, we can observe the operation of a singularly important trope: the *pharmakon*. For Plato, the *pharmakon* was at the same time both that which remedies and that which poisons. Apropos of desire itself, we might formulate this as a strategic pun: *desire desires its own end*—it desires its own completion and fulfillment, in which case it is no longer desire, and so it also desires its own annihilation. Paradoxically, then, desire is a threat to itself. All this is of the essence of desire. If we may speak of the poetics of desire, we might then formulate the hypothesis that the contemporaneous appearance of these two Urdu *novels* bears historical witness to a shift or rupture in these poetics. Threatened by annihilation under the crushing weight of its own tradition, threatened by irrelevance in the face of an encroaching and inexorable constellation of new and disruptive social technologies that can do nothing but point out its weary romanticism, the classically expressed poetics of desire begin to give way to a newer and more epochally adequate form of expression, thereby allowing (or forcing) desire to project its familiar end, but as and within a new system of textual means. Threat remains the essence of desire, but desire is constrained to express (or at least point to) its end in ways that had been heretofore quite literally unthinkable. Several years after its advent, the works of Premchand mark the completion of this shift or rupture, betraying not only the new narrative technologies of expression, but also the rethinking of desire's end itself.

Obviously, this is a wide-sweeping hypothesis and cannot be substantiated on the basis of only two texts. The relationship between desire and narrative itself has yet to be explicitly investigated in this context, and this would necessarily entail examining not only the advent of prose narratives like the novel and the short story, but also the situation of the *dāstān* at this time, the role of the drama in nineteenth-century Urdu, as well as more general and properly historical accounts of the north Indian cultural milieu. Clearly, much work remains to be done, but equally clearly, *The Nautch Girl* marks something much more significant

than simply “a good read.”

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