

ASIF FARRUKHI

A Conversation with Naiyer Masud ¹

ASIF FARRUKHI: Masud Sahib, you're a distinguished scholar of Persian and Urdu and well known among the Subcontinent's scholarly circles. I assume writing fiction could scarcely bring you greater recognition. What, then, turned you toward it?

NAIYER MASUD: Recognition! Distinction! Your words ... Well, I don't consider myself a scholar, nor teaching necessarily a source of distinction, nor writing fiction intrinsically less significant. It can and does bring recognition. Let us just say I wrote fiction out of a fondness for it, not out of a desire for recognition. I was drawn to writing short stories right from childhood. And I have read more fiction than scholarly works. My family owned a sizable collection of scholarly books, so reading them was quite natural, you might say unavoidable. But my personal and enduring passion was fiction. It kept growing. I read all the major and significant Urdu writers, the kind my age group read. Later, when the new kind of short story, with its penchant for ambiguity and abstraction, moved to center stage and was discussed vigorously in debates, I read it too. However, I didn't find it to my liking.

Even back then I used to write stories. But I didn't like them. So I didn't send them out for publication. Instead, I destroyed them. Right about that time Shamsur Rahman Faruqi started his literary magazine

¹This is an abridged and quite free—though not inaccurate—translation of an interview which Naiyer Masud gave to Asif Farrukhi sometime in the early 1990s at the former's residence in Lucknow. The Urdu text first appeared as "Nayyar Mas'ūd sē Guftū," in Suhēl Aḥmad, ed. *Mehrabēn* (Lahore: Polymer Publications, 1992), pp. 199–217. —M.U.M.

Shab-Khūn and we became friends; we would discuss the current trend in the Urdu short story and I'd tell him that I didn't much care for abstraction, which obscured the writer's meaning. At least the meaning should be clear. One could, of course, agree or disagree with this and debate it, and that was all right. But words should signify, and signify without equivocation. This and the fondness I had always had for writing had led me to write "Sīmiyā." But since it remained unfinished a later story, "Nuṣrat," got published first. Actually, "Nuṣrat" was a dream. The entire story happened in a dream. And the girl in it, she was real, a real person from my childhood. We used to play together. But that's another story ...

Anyway, I was so hesitant about my short story "Nuṣrat" that I showed it to Faruqi Sahib as a translation, not as something I'd written. He liked it and eventually published it in *Shab-Khūn*. In the meantime, I also completed "Sīmiyā." Since then I've written about eleven stories in all, at long intervals. I don't write regularly. I write because I enjoy writing. I'm fond of it.

A F : But the language and atmosphere and even the characters in your stories appear markedly different from the stories of others—entirely different from mainstream Urdu fiction. You yourself said that there was first the realist story, followed by a predilection for abstraction and symbolism, while the return to the "story" is being strongly advocated today. But your own fiction stands apart from these trends and categories. How would you characterize it?

N M : If it is different, it is not because I deliberately set out to make it so. Of course everybody wants to be different from others. I cannot deny a measure of this in myself. The days of strict and pure realism are over. As for abstraction and ambiguity—I personally don't care much for them, as I told you. I attempted something straddling both: reality, yes, but not naked. You mentioned "atmosphere." To tell you the truth, the "atmosphere" in my stories does bother me a bit. I find it somewhat dim myself, let alone what others may think. This certainly wasn't my goal. But it sneaks in—it just *does*. Carrying a suggestion of, I suppose you might call it, dreaminess. You feel someone is narrating his dream. But I don't try to create it consciously, nor do I consider it commendable. Nonetheless my readers like it. And I'm grateful to them for that. Apart from this "dreaminess," whatever else may be considered "atmosphere" in my stories comes, in large part, from the language. I pay great attention to

language. I really do. I complain a lot about the present deterioration of the Urdu language. I'm sure you realize how increasingly less attention is given these days, especially by our younger writers, to treating the Urdu language as a creative medium. A few exceptions like yourself, Qamar Ahsan, and Husainul Haq aside, most new writers show a conspicuous lack of command over their language.

I really had to struggle the most on language, on how to write precisely, on selecting words that would communicate my intent most accurately. What precise effect this has, well, you and other critics know best.

I might add that this peculiar "atmosphere" may have resulted also from the fact that my own thoughts are never entirely clear to me. The vagueness with which they occur to me imparts, inevitably, a diffuse, dreamlike quality to the words I marshal to convey those thoughts. This would explain why the atmosphere appears unfamiliar. But if you look closely, you will notice that the atmosphere is really no different from the life around us. It is the same, just as the characters are the same. I won't deny that sometimes the stories give the impression of being from another time and place. Nonetheless they are drawn from this very life. Occasionally, though, I may situate them in an unfamiliar locale, as in "Sīmiyā" and "Mār Gir" [Snake-Catcher]. I have moved the locale away from the city. Now if the atmosphere of these stories does not resemble that of the city, neither does it resemble the atmosphere of any other place with which I'm familiar, so that I could tell you the story took place in such-and-such a geographical area. If you find the atmosphere unfamiliar, I guess the reason is that it is not even familiar to me.

A F : I can see two types of unfamiliar atmosphere in fictional literature: a purely imaginary locale, as in Tolkien, none of whose physical features correspond to anything on earth; and that which pervades our *dāstāns*, where places have totally fictitious names but where the culture is easily recognizable. On the other hand, the Urdu short story of the '30s and '40s offers an unmistakable social and political context. However, no such context is in evidence anywhere in your work. Context in the sense of a specific time and place in which they could be located.

N M : Yes, that's what I'd set out to do. My effort was to suppress spatial and temporal specificity. Which is why I don't use personal names, except for perhaps three or four in all my stories. Perhaps even once or twice the name of a city has crept in. I do not refer to religion either. In "Sīmiyā," for instance, I've deliberately refrained from using the word "*qabristān*";

instead, I've used the word "*murda maidān*" [ground for the dead]. And why? Simply to avoid an overt reference to a Muslim cemetery. If my stories don't correspond to a recognizable time or place, this is entirely on purpose; that they should be beyond time and place, or be something entirely different, was certainly not my intention. The fact is that they are every bit of a piece with our own time and place. Take "Ōjhal" [Hidden] for instance. One can easily place it in the environment of my childhood, and the same is true of "Itr-e Kāfūr" [Essence of Camphor]. But the specific elements or coordinates which would immediately anchor them to that time, I have purposely not mentioned. So we're back to the dimness I spoke about earlier, one that withholds the sharpness of outline which specificity gives to atmosphere. I had to work very hard to achieve this effect. The result is that you cannot pin it down to the Lucknow of, say, the 1920s or 1940s with confidence. But that time is vividly alive in my memory. It's all there. It's just that I don't want to make it explicit.

A F : But why? People don't work nearly so hard on revealing as you do on concealing.

N M : A complicated question! But if you must know, such specificity places added responsibilities on the writer. You started out with my being a scholar, or some such thing. I'm not a scholar, but I certainly have an interest in research. Well, a researcher must live up to certain responsibilities. Once you make reference to a particular time and place, then you cannot, in principle, allow anything in your story which would belie it. For instance, if your story is located in 1920, you must ensure that all its details are consistent with that time. You cannot very well pull in details from 1925. That's what I mean by responsibility. A kind of caution, if you will, to which research has predisposed me. Call it a love of ease, if you like. Maybe I shy away from temporal and spatial specificity out of this sense of responsibility (laughs).

A F : Which inevitably ties your fiction to fantasy, or to the works of Romantics such as Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe.

N M : Perhaps. But I didn't strive for it consciously. As for fantasy, I try very hard to steer clear of it. My stories are not fantasies, at least not in the sense of the fantastic. You cannot say their events don't occur in real life. In fact, such cannot be said even of my short story "Mār Gir," which some people see as quite fantastic. I've not presented anything in it which

you might call unreal or contrary to reality. Which is also the case with “Sīmiyā.” Even a *sīmiyā*, a charm of the mind, is not something I made up. It used to be a well-known spell and people practiced it. I didn’t practice it. But I did read about it in Munshī Mēdī Lāl’s book *Majmū‘a ‘Amaliyāt-e Nādira* [Collection of Rare Charms].

Let me digress briefly to tell you something interesting, which might even sound a bit outlandish. I wrote “Sīmiyā” when I was twelve years old. And it sounded every bit like a story written by a twelve-year-old. There was a man. He kept a pet dog. The man got interested in the *sīmiyā*-charm, which he used on the dog. But the dog went mad during the course of the charm and bit its owner. When the man used his charm to cause rain, the downpour triggered a fit of hydrophobia in him, which is what happens when one is bitten by a mad dog. And the man died. And so on and so forth ... So, anyway, I wrote this story first in my boyhood, then later all over again and with considerably more details as “Sīmiyā.” I have no idea where that boyhood draft of the story might be. But I seem to have forgotten your question. This is the trouble with digressions (laughs). What was it?

A F : That your stories bear greater affinity with tales such as those of Poe than with the modern short story.

N M : But of course. They must carry Poe’s influence. Why, I like Poe a lot, for the very reason that his realism too isn’t all that concrete. Certainly this must have affected me, even if without my being aware of it. Since I don’t like a story to be a straight retelling of actual events, it is unavoidable that my work should carry something of the feeling of a tale. Well, it has to have some feeling, doesn’t it? Since I’ve read tales and also like them, it is possible that I was influenced by their style in my own writing. However, I do make a determined effort not to let my work sound like a tale, an *ḥikāyat*. And, frankly, I don’t think that it does. However, if my readers think it does, then I’m willing to concede this to them. I think a reader’s impression ought to be taken as more authentic than a writer’s own.

A F : The halting, sort of closed and stuffy atmosphere of your stories gives some people the impression of morbidity. Do you feel the same way?

N M : Apart from whether you are using the word in a positive or a nega-

tive sense, I would say yes, there is some element of morbidity in my work, partly because I know it to be true, and partly because morbidity is always there even when people under some illusion take pains to deny it. So there *is* morbidity. And, sir, for better or for worse, God willing, it will be part of my work up to the last short story I write (laughs). What's so bad about being a little morbid? Who says that a healthy story's got to be good? For that, you've got umpteen other forms. Take a look. No harm whatsoever if a little morbidity, an assortment of complexities and anxieties creep into a short story. Is there? So if you or anyone else were to point them out to me, I would of course listen, and listen with quite a bit of interest. As I've already mentioned, I'm no clearer on the matter myself, I just feel that my work does have a touch of morbidity.

A F : Please ... I didn't use the word in the meaning of something sickly.

N M : Even if you had, I certainly would have no objection. If somebody has a sickly disposition, why shouldn't he express it?

A F : Well, maybe "morbid" is not an entirely suitable word to describe your work. ... You said your stories are rooted in the time of your childhood. Even though you don't name the city, its buildings, its mansions (*haveliyān*), verandahs (*dālān*), its arches (*mehrabēn*) and pulpits (*mimbar*) can be glimpsed rising from the mist somewhere in the background ...

N M : Well, yes, they should be. It's obvious ...

A F : And this glimpsed city bears a strong resemblance to Lucknow ...

N M : It does.

A F : Well then, maybe rather than morbidity, your stories carry a glimpse of decadence, of a decadent city ...

N M : Decadence? Let me reiterate: if you see it, I cannot very well deny it. How can I belie what you see, what you feel? I should say, though, that I never set out to give you this glimpse. But it is also true that the atmosphere of my stories is none other than the atmosphere of this city. A city which concerns me a great deal. Not only because it is my birth place, but also because it is, in reality, a wondrous city. I have witnessed a lot here,

including decay. When I was born, the society was well along in its decline. It only got worse with time. You mentioned arches (*mīhrāb*). Let me tell you something. Arches affect me personally. I find them very evocative. The mere sight of an arch touches off a whole train of thought in me. I won't call it a symbol. An arch is not a symbol of anything. Nothing at all. But it never fails to exert a hypnotic pull. Countless stories lurk in an arch. Maybe I feel this way because I was in love with Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra* and their many references to arches. Something else about an arch: even when the entire building has crumbled away, the arch still stands, no doubt because of its peculiar structural properties. Formerly there were quite a few arches in Lucknow, standing hushed in a landscape of decay. Today only a few of them remain. I've seen a lot of them. If you have the time, come along with me. You'll see a lone arch, with broken brick walls stretching for several furlongs in all directions. Looking closely at the site, an entire mansion will begin to take shape in your mind. You will wonder about the original mansion. How did it look exactly? What kind of people lived in it? Since I'm knowledgeable, since I live here in Lucknow, since I've either seen buildings or heard accounts of them and their inhabitants from my elders, since I'm interested in the history of Avadh—so whenever I see an arch, a verandah, a passageway, all those things, those in the background as well as those which I was able to see before they were swept away, they all begin to crowd before me. Inevitably, those structures and their silent, ended lives begin to shine dimly through my work. But no, it's not an intended glimpse. In fact, Farrukhi Sahib, it is something I cannot very well describe. Perhaps you have felt that even though you don't explicitly mention certain things in your stories, your readers nonetheless feel that you have. You make the vaguest suggestion and the reader's imagination takes over. But it also happens sometimes that you describe two discrete objects, but their associative ambits pull in an entirely different thing for the reader which, in fact, is not described at all. This sort of thing has happened with my own work. People have reported seeing things which I have not put there—period. Take, for example, the phrase “*nīsvānī badan kī khushbū*” [scent of a woman's body] or “*qadmōñ kī āhaṭ*” [footfall]. They occur once or twice in my work at most, yet nonetheless seem to pervade it. Now these things, unstated but very much present in the writer's mind, get communicated to the reader through some mysterious process, without any conscious effort whatsoever on my part.

Consider it a trade secret, but certain things I purposely refrain from mentioning. At times I don't have the whole story in my mind. Other

times I do, but I leave out substantial parts in the finished piece. In “*Ūjhal*,” for example, if I had put everything into the story I had in mind, it would have been ten times its present length. I wrote down everything in the first drafts, I just didn’t include it all in the final story. The protagonist’s encounters with women, merely alluded to in the finished work, were originally described at great length and in full detail. Or take the father in the story “*Vaqfa*” [Interregnum]. His entire story is in my mind. I just didn’t put it all in my piece. His marriage, the birth of his son, the mother’s death and the manner of her death, the father’s travails after she’s gone—all this is very much present in my mind, but I have chosen not to describe any of it in the story itself; instead I describe only a few faded decorations hanging from the ceiling directly above the spot where he used to sit in the verandah. Not even why those decorations are there in the first place, nor what kind of decorations are they. And yet the reader feels a palpable sensation of something, some story breathing behind all this. Well, *that* story is entirely clear in my mind. Likewise, I had worked out the whole story of Mah Rukh Sultan of “*Iṭr-e Kāfūr*” in my mind and had in fact written out the account of the drowned young woman in “*Simiyā*,” which I later decided not to include. I don’t know whether it’s just a fancy on my part or whether it is true that once a thing is brought into existence, it continues to live in some form or fashion even when it is removed from the scene. For example, you are sitting on this sofa; you then decide to get up and leave. You are not on it anymore, and yet your presence will be felt, to some extent at least, however obscurely or intangibly. But that other sofa, just brought in from the store, on which no one has yet sat, cannot be the same as the other. It is necessarily different. One cannot describe this difference in words, but one can feel it, subliminally.

I thought: why not attempt this sort of thing in my work, just as an experiment, to see whether it is at all possible? What if one constructed the whole story but didn’t narrate the whole of it, not even hint at some of it—would it carry over to the reader’s mind, however dimly? I soon realized that this was possible. While I don’t think I was able to pull it off in my own work, I do believe it can be done successfully.

An example comes to mind, outside of literature, but nonetheless quite apt. There was this woman who was an accomplished cook. A certain dish that required only four ounces of *gʰī* [clarified butter] she’d cook with two-and-a-half pounds of *gʰī*, removing the extra when it was done. But the dish tasted very special and retained the flavor, the essence of the finest dish from the table of the nobility. While this sort of thing is very

useful for poetry, it works just as well for the short story, to some extent at least. I mean suppression of details pertaining to the event being described but fully worked out earlier in the mind, or even written down on paper. But this suppression, this excision, requires a lot of sang-froid. It isn't easy to delete parts of your own work, however tentative or insignificant. But I was able to excise substantial parts of my writing without compunction. All my stories were originally much longer than they are in their finished form. So this quality which readers perceive in them—that they say more than what is described, that there is something else in them which the writer has chosen not to make explicit—may result from the sort of suppression I'm talking about.

For me the hardest part of writing is deciding what to keep and what to leave out, what to describe and, more importantly, what not to describe.

A F : Suppression sometimes contributes to a feeling of expansiveness in your stories which is, more appropriately, an attribute of the novel. The reader keeps expecting prolongation and follow-up. Sometimes you end the story at a point where it hasn't yet reached its climax, its closure, and seems to beg to go on.

N M : You're right. One reason is my dislike of the dramatic ending. Even as a child I found it repulsive. A story's end shouldn't be dramatic. Which means the story should not give the impression that it has ended, that all is finished and done with, that nothing remains. The other reason could be that even after I've finalized a story, I seem to want to continue writing it, or if not it *per se*, then a fresh one along much the same lines. A novel—I've never thought of writing a novel. And I probably never will. It's a formidable undertaking. No, I don't think so. But I do intend for my story to give the feeling that it has not ended, that rather what has ended is the specific episode around which it is woven. Although the short stories in *Sīmiyā* were not written in the sequence in which they appear in the book, they illustrate my point well. You will notice a particular connectedness, a certain coherence and affinity flowing through all of them. The work sounds like a man's *dāstān* [tale], moving forward by degrees, incrementally, serially. Mahmood Ayaz even wrote to me about it: "Why do you insist on calling it a collection of short stories? It's a complete book in its own right." But I never intended to write it as a novel. I wanted the stories to be independent yet interconnected. So I ended the last story of the series, "Maskan" [Dwelling], exactly where the

opening story, “Ūjhal,” had begun.

I must confess to a limitation: new plots don't occur readily to me. I shouldn't even call it plot; what does occur is the vaguest ghost of a plot. The vagueness itself works as an advantage: it allows me to rework an earlier story, removing certain parts and nudging it forward. All the same, I have not consciously tried to make the stories feel incomplete, needing to be continued. Finally, you could call it a weakness that I'm simply incapable of ending a story with a sense of finality. Some feeling of incompleteness does remain.

A F : Tell me how you relate to the writers you've read. Which ones you like, and for what, which ones you don't.

N M : My favorite writer is Ghulam Abbas. Next Hayatullah Ansari. Then a number of contemporary writers, Intizar Husain at the top of them. If anyone has had any influence on me, it would have to be Ghulam Abbas. I've read him the way one reads the work of a master, to learn from him. He knows how to tell a story. Among foreign writers I have read Kafka, Poe, Emily Brontë, and Dostoevsky. The last two I feel can't be followed, nor should one even try to enter under their influence. However, one can read Kafka and Poe with the intention to learn from them. So while I haven't made a conscious effort, it is possible that Kafka and Poe have influenced me. A perusal of their work always leaves me wanting to write somewhat as they do.

Then there are Azim Beg Chughtai and Rafiq Husain, about whom, I recall, you've written a good article. I feel one can learn quite a bit from them too. Now I have not attempted to imitate them or follow them slavishly, but since they worked for me as good models, unavoidably I must have been somewhat influenced by them. I only tried, as most do, to find my own individual style, to be different in that sense, and avoid the general pattern of short story writing, and not because they were not good works, although I must say I have read a lot of stories specifically to learn how not to write. I'm not one who likes to pick on others, or be overly critical of them; but whether it is fiction or poetry, I read a work more for its shortcomings than for its strengths—to find out where the writer has faltered, what ruined the work, what could have saved it. So, well, this sort of negative education I've had aplenty. Even today there is no dearth of such stories (laughs). But if there has been a positive influence at all, it would be that of Ghulam Abbas's.

Mirza [Muhammad] Rusva is yet another among our own Lucknow

writers a close reading of whose works could teach one how to write well, from the point of view of both language and narration. True art is just this: how to narrate—isn't it? The choice of a style consistent with the subject of the story. These are some of the things to which I paid special attention.

And now some of the things which couldn't be considered the result of anybody's influence. First off, you will almost never find the use of *izāfat* [Persian genitive construction] in my stories, and will find *vā'ō-e 'atf* [the conjunction "and"] used only sparingly. Yet I didn't impose these as absolute and mandatory restrictions on myself. Surely, here and there an *izāfat* has unavoidably crept in. But only rarely. Likewise, I try hard not to use any idioms, which is not to say that an occasional idiom doesn't slip in. But certainly not of the sort "*āg baras rahī thī*" [it was hot as fire pouring down] or "*mūslā-dhār pānī baras rahā thā*" [it was raining cats and dogs]. Purging idioms sounded like an easy enough way of creating an element of unfamiliarity. This led some of my readers to think that I had actually translated my stories from a different language, and Dr. Muhammad Aqil even wrote to ask straight out whether "Mār Gīr" was an original work or had I translated it. I don't blame them. The absence of idioms does make my work sound a bit unfamiliar. As for the *izāfat*, I felt that Persianized Urdu ill suited our short story. Surely this is not entirely correct. One can write fiction using *izāfats*. Nonetheless I felt that the use of *izāfat* and a highly literary language would only manage to destroy the story, or at least destroy my short story, or weaken it at any rate. In principle, though, I'm not against the use of *izāfat* and idioms in fiction. In certain situations, you absolutely cannot do without idioms, as in dialogue, for dialogue is defined temporally. However, even here I've tried to avoid using idioms. Maybe this is yet another reason why, as you say, my stories cannot be pinned down to a specific time and place. I don't want my language to give away, however obliquely, the temporal identity of my characters.

A F : Good. You've already answered the question I was going to ask about your language. You've named Azim Beg Chughtai among your favorite writers. He is generally considered a humorist. In your own stories you use humor even less than you use idioms. What makes you like Chughtai? Or is there an aspect of his writing apart from humor which attracts you?

N M : He became famous as a humorist, I guess because he wrote in a

delightfully perky style. But a good many of his stories and novels are not at all humor. Take the novel *Čamki*. Hugely interesting no doubt, but humorous—hardly. I find it something infinitely terrifying, even somber. I count it among the best Urdu novels, even *the* best, if I may make so bold. *Čamki* is not humor, not by a long shot. His style is light-hearted, so here and there a humorous sentence creeps in. That’s all. The situation isn’t humorous at all. Or take “Savāna kī Rūḥēn.” I’m sure you are familiar with this work. Not a whiff of humor can be found anywhere in it. And “Čāval”—in a way it is a terrifying story. No humor here either. Likewise there are numerous other works which read rather like the abstract short story so popular among our Urdu writers these days, which didn’t attract much attention or appreciation. Only a few humorous writings of his became famous. I sometimes doubt if he was a humorist at all. I found *Kḥurpā-Bahādur*’s opening section quite humorous. But the work as a whole gives a completely different impression, that we are here dealing with a fairly serious piece of writing. *Kōltār*, too, starts out in a humorous vein but assumes a serious, indeed quite a grave tone as we go along. Some of his stories are so abstract they read like Balraj Manra’s. You will find quite a few such pieces in his *Čughṭā’i kē Afsānē* and *Mazāmīn-e Čughṭā’i*. The same goes for the short pieces he contributed to the magazine *Sāqī*. They are highly individualistic, unique. Azim Beg Chughtai was a man of high intelligence and amazing capabilities. He became popular as a humorist, so he started writing more as a humorist. One of his novels *Gōrē Kālē*—all but forgotten today, although Imtiaz Ali Taj published it in Lahore—is a work which deals with the serious social issues that inevitably arise when a *ra’īs-zāda* [scion of the nobility] goes to England, gets married there, and brings his English wife over to India. It is not at all humorous.

Then again, Chughtai is among those few Urdu writers who know how to tell a story. Indeed, I would not hesitate to put him at the top of the list. The same holds for Rafiq Husain. Now I don’t care for his fictional themes, nor consider them terribly important. The important thing is this: how does the writer tell the story he wants to tell, and what is his own attitude toward it? Well, these writers have the necessary restraint not to get involved emotionally with their characters. Perhaps they feel some emotion, it’s just that they have the control not to show it, or to show it very little. I consider it a weakness in the writer to put up a display of his feelings for the character. That the character is good or bad should become evident from the narrative, it shouldn’t be advertised.

A F : So we did eventually wander off into the territory of criticism. A hazardous terrain where we will have to tread with caution. What do you, as a writer who is also a critic, feel about our contemporary fiction criticism, a good deal of which has been produced in India by some of the most astute and distinguished critics?

N M : Well, it isn't what it should be. We still haven't formulated the critical principles and methodology required for evaluating fiction. There has been more critical work on poetry by comparison, again not entirely satisfactory. Mehdi Jafar made some initial attempts, then abandoned the field. Of all our critics, so far only Shamsur Rahman Faruqi seems to have studied fiction seriously and methodically. Although he makes no claim to being an aficionado, an expert on fiction, the fact is whatever he has written about fiction falls squarely in the realm of formal criticism. There are others too. But to tell you the truth, fiction criticism doesn't really interest me much.

A F : To wind up, there are two distinct areas of your intellectual activity: writing short stories and scholarship. We've talked about the former, and only touched on the latter. Do the two converge at some point? In other words, what is the relation, if any, between your research and your short stories? Does it help or hinder? Or is it immaterial? Do they connect at all?

N M : Of course they do. I find them mutually supportive. Being two entirely different things, they could hurt each other, but for the same reason, could also help. In my case, they help. It's a good question you've asked. Well then, in the beginning, I mean in my boyhood, I only wrote short stories, quite a few, but didn't publish them. When I later looked at them, they felt very childish. In my old papers I still have two rather longish stories. I must have written them when I was in my mid-teens. Today I feel that I should have published them. I should have been satisfied with them as a teenager. There is no question of publishing them now, for they are, in fact, quite raw. Then when it got into my head that I could also write fiction, and had written a few stories, I was, in a manner of speaking, pushed into the field of research. I worked on Rajab Ali Beg Surur. The expertise of my late father, who was a research scholar himself, came in handy. I learned the principles and research methodology from him. Research breeds a sense of awesome responsibility. I researched Surur for four or five years and was still some time away from

getting my degree when I decided to do a second Ph.D., this time in Persian. All this took nearly eight years—a time when I should have been writing short stories, instead. Anyway, I returned belatedly to what I had most wanted to do: writing fiction. But I came to it with a mind trained in research, though I must admit I found short story-writing immensely relaxing. Suddenly I felt as though I were in command. I could write whatever pleased me. This newfound freedom contrasted sharply with research, in which every sentence you write is held up to scrutiny for you are required to substantiate every statement you make: can you cite your source? your reference? and so on. The sense of release, expansiveness, and freedom that came with turning to creative writing close upon the heels of my involvement with research proved very beneficial and salutary. Another thing is this: in a research work you can only write what you can authenticate from reliable sources. Now this, obviously, places limitations on you. For instance, you're researching Surur and feel that certain important information about his biography should be given, but you are unable to establish it from available sources. So it does not get written. You feel very frustrated. And you carry with yourself a sense of incompleteness. This sense disappears when you are writing a story. If the self-same Surur were to be a character in my story, I would make up his biography at will, highlight or ignore whatever aspect of his life I pleased, write about it at length or in brief; in short, invent, lie, cheat, add, or take away if I have to. This is not possible in scholarly research. But its rigors eventually help you in creative work. They predispose your mind to a refined sense of how to make do with little, how to construct without sounding choppy. At least I feel I was helped in this regard. Likewise, creative writing can be an asset in research. It can teach you the principles of selection and organization.

I don't find the two to be mutually exclusive. Rather, I find them complementary. One can be a good researcher and a good creative writer at one and the same time. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*