

SAGAREE SENGUPTA

## Evocations, Obsessions, and Objects in the Fiction of Naiyer Masud

...an empty shell, like an empty nest, invites daydreams of refuge.

—Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*<sup>1</sup>

NAIYER MASUD IS SOMETIMES CONSIDERED Kafkaesque by Urdu critics, in part, no doubt, due to his translations from the German writer's work. One manifestation of this was his being asked to critique the animal-possession story, "Asp Kisht Māt" (Knight's Checkmate) by writer Qamar Ahsan for a short-story seminar.<sup>2</sup> But this only hints at one of the elements in the artistic armamentarium of such an accomplished writer and scholar as Masud. For the reader of Urdu, Masud's offerings are challenging in that his dreamy, evocative narratives nevertheless defy nostalgia.

---

The following translations of Naiyer Masud's short stories are cited by page number only in the body of what follows. They all appeared in *AUS* #12 (1997); the page numbers refer to this volume: "Essence of Camphor," tr. by Moazzam Sheikh and Elizabeth Bell, pp. 13–42; "Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire," tr. by Javaid Qazi and Muhammad Umar Memon, pp. 59–81; "The Color of Nothingness," tr. by Muhammad Umar Memon, pp. 83–94; "Interregnum," tr. by Muhammad Umar Memon, pp. 95–110; "Lamentation," tr. by Muhammad Umar Memon, pp. 125–35; "Sultan Muzaffar's Imperial Chronicler," tr. by Aditya Behl, pp. 137–54; "The Peacock from Myna Garden," tr. by Sagaree Sengupta, pp. 155–92; and "Nosh Daru," tr. by Shantanu Phukan, pp. 207–17. All other citations are listed in individual footnotes.

<sup>1</sup>Tr. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1964]), p. 107.

<sup>2</sup>*Nayā Urdū Afāna: Intikhāb, Tajziyē aur Mabāhiṣ*, ed. Gopi Chand Narang (Delhi: Urdu Academy, 1988), p. 91–101; Naiyer Masud's commentary, pp. 102–6.

Readers and critics have also complained that it is difficult to tell where a given story is leading. This reveals a context of readership where social or psychological solutions are expected. It is clear from interviews in which Masud talks of deliberately editing out endings that he struggles consciously to undo narrative assumptions.<sup>3</sup>

Forcible conclusions would upset the delicate suspension that Masud's trackings of gaze and awareness require. His carefully crafted pieces do not allow the reader to sink back into eternal verities, and therefore attract the puzzled eye back to contemplate the minutely detailed surfaces. In current Urdu fiction, the atmosphere of Masud's writing is unique: mysterious but not romantic, poignant yet not nostalgic or sentimental. What his translated stories bring into "world literature" is an aura of place, time and mind without concrete points of reference.

Naiyer Masud's fiction is populated by houses, and parts of houses. In an oeuvre imbued with evocations of memory and time, these houses stand as the largest relics of personal experience and layers of history. The Naiyer Masud house invariably has a walled garden, and sometimes adjoins another house: at least here one can take comfort in identifying a common north Indian pattern. Masud's adult narrators consider the whole house; his child characters gaze at and dwell on cornices, stairs, a doorway, a tree—in keeping with Yi-Fu Tuan's human-geographical generalization that "... [the] young child's world ... is animated and consists of vivid, sharply delineated objects in a weakly structured space."<sup>4</sup>

The world is revealed a bit at a time to a Naiyer Masud child-narrator, who glimpses through windows and doors to another house or another room. Other individuals and crowds are minimally described, but the main character's sensory awareness of his own situation is acute, even if, or especially because, his comprehension of the encountered world is limited. The motif of knowledge gained one detail at a time predominates in many stories, and as Elizabeth Bell has noted,<sup>5</sup> writing from a fictive child's point of view is one obvious means to such an end. The narrator of "The Myna of Peacock Garden" is an adult, but "not an educated

---

<sup>3</sup>See Asif Farrukhi, "A Conversation With Naiyer Masud," *AUS* #12 (1997), pp. 265–78.

<sup>4</sup>Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 56.

<sup>5</sup>"The Uncontexted Master: An Out-of-Culture Experience of Naiyer Masud," *AUS* #12 (1997), p. 279.

man” (p. 179), and thus can also lay claim to a quota of naïve wonder about the manmade wonders of *navābī* Lucknow. For either adult or child narrators, completion of knowledge is implied but never accomplished within the frame of the story.

One of several stories that center almost exclusively on the residues inhering a particular house, is *Maskan* (“Abode”). It begins:

Now I am exhausted, but I’ve begun to sense that I’ve been tired for a long time, perhaps from the moment when I was assured that I need not look for a place to live other than this house; that from now on I should just live here. But I do remember, and very well, that when I set foot inside the four walls of this house I was full of vigor.<sup>6</sup>

The narrator of *Maskan* starts outside a house and is drawn into it. In contrast, the narrator of “Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire” inspects a multitude of houses. Rather than being swallowed by one particular house, he moves from one to another trying to capture the qualities of each:

The work that I had undertaken involved inspecting houses. Initially, I had the feeling that I would fail in this profession because back then, apart from my own house, all other houses looked to me like piles of inorganic nature or half-dead vegetation. Sometimes I felt a vague hostility toward them, sometimes they looked like cheerless toys to me, and sometimes I stared at them for a long time as though they were foolish children, trying to hide something from me. Perhaps, this is why, though I cannot seem to recall exactly when, houses began to assume a life of their own right before my eyes. (p. 68)

If architectural space is obsessively framed, humanity is only sparsely suggested. The following focal character, from “The Color of Nothingness,” is not given a single line of actual dialogue, and only the most nominal action:

---

<sup>6</sup>In *Sīmiyā*, (Lakḥna’ū: Kitābnagar, Nuṣrat Publishers, 1984), p. 211. My translation.

The bad woman was there too, as part of the audience. Contrary to my expectations, she didn't look significantly different from the others. She had draped herself in several mantles, one on top of the other, and the only thing her face betrayed was exhaustion. Although she was practically buried under her clothing, a part of her belly with prominent blue veins could still be seen clearly. Her lips parted a little as she breathed, fully exposing two of her front teeth, which remained visible as she kept breathing fast. (p. 88)

Yet while the human characters in the story are typically described vaguely as “the elders” or “the bad woman,” the placement and condition of chairs in the room is quite clear.

The minutiae Naiyer Masud incorporates into his narratives can seem like decontextualized arcana. This is deliberate<sup>7</sup> to an extent. Still, a tantalizing psycho-sexual undertow is palpable:

This obliged me to scurry back and forth several times from the side door of the house to the far outer room which formed a part of the house's façade. In the space between the side door and the outer room was a courtyard, the better part of which was overshadowed by a sprawling ancient tree bearing unusually tiny leaves ... And yet I never failed, each time I passed under the tree, to raise my hand and give its branches a shake—it was an urge I could never resist, even now, when I was beside myself in all the excitement—and lift my eyes to look at the portico with the run-down roof which stood in a corner of the courtyard. The old surgeon lived in that portico. Every time I laid my hand on the branches he would call out:

“Why do you meddle with that tree for no reason at all?” (“The Color of Nothingness,” p. 84)

How are the leaves “unusually tiny”? Relative to ancient trees? Relative to trees growing in north Indian courtyards? Human sympathies are displaced onto this tree, which is described in greater detail than any character except the mysterious Nusrat, for whom the original Urdu story is named. The limited physical surroundings represent the boy narrator's state of knowledge and the harassment of the tree suggests the onset of sexual awareness. Naiyer Masud's trees are interposed between the aus-

---

<sup>7</sup>See Asif Farrukhi, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

terely described humans and their obsessively depicted houses. They also serve as decorous symbols for human bodies and feelings. Like houses, they are standing reminders of stratified associations. Had the minute description of the tree in “Nosh Daru” been of a human figure, it might have insinuated a lifetime of experiences:

At the far end from this *takht* the only tree in the courtyard stood festooned with chandelier-sprays of yellow blossoms and plump black seed pods. The skirt of the tree was matted first with a coarse layer of dry yellow petals, and then a sprinkling of fresh ones; on these lay scattered some frayed seed pods. (p. 207)

The narrator’s eye follows the tree up to “the slender parapet of the roof” where the personification of the tree is made explicit through “a few tired branches ... leaning, as though pausing briefly for a rest.” (p. 207)<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the concreteness of objects and space, words are slippery and insubstantial: “...and I, for my part, gave him only incomplete and wrong answers which confused and befuddled him even more” (“The Color of Nothingness,” p. 84). Words and things have switched places, with *telling* objects (like the not-too-real-looking carved wooden imitation clock in “Essence of Camphor”) speaking volumes, and spoken words becoming no more than jumbled and remote utterances.

In her critical essay *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart writes:

The toy is the physical embodiment of the fiction: it is a device for fantasy, a point of beginning for narrative. The toy opens an interior world, lending itself to fantasy and privacy in a way that the abstract space, the playground, of social play does not.<sup>9</sup>

Specific childhood memories, such as the hand-crafted bird in “Essence of Camphor,” are characterized by the haunting of the artificial by the real, since in the narrator’s typical indoor and internal life the “real” is intro-

---

<sup>8</sup>One wonders whether Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), with its vanished or verdant forests of trees as embodiments of national cultures, would cause our Urdu writer discomfort or delight.

<sup>9</sup>Durham: Duke University Press, p. 57.

duced and long represented by the artificial or the vestige. Mah Rukh Sultan sees the first toy clock the narrator makes in “Essence of Camphor,” and is momentarily fooled by it. The narrator later offers a second carved wooden clock redolent with the smell of the camphor ointment he uses on his bleeding woodcarver’s hands and, one might venture to say, of the impending untimely death of Mah Rukh Sultan.

In “The Color of Nothingness,” rooms and objects convey the mood: “Several curios, some of them centuries old, were added to enhance the room’s decor” (p. 83). The laws about to be enforced are musty, the weighty decorum and concerns of the elders are antiquated like the bric-a-brac that characterizes the room. Naiyer Masud uses objects the way Rabindranath Tagore uses dramatically romantic/Sanskritic nature to indicate mood, and the way Satyajit Ray uses music in his verbally sparse films to advance the story:

Eventually the hushed stillness of the extravagantly decorated room began to get to me. Bored with the delay of the guests, I felt I no longer wanted to think about the bad women, or the honorable guests either. (“The Color of Nothingness,” p. 85)

Objects and spaces in Masud’s narratives are personalities, or characters, with extensive histories; minimally depicted people are translucent ciphers through which these richly imbued objects cast their spectrum of effect. The suggestive artifact, that is, the particular *thing* fraught with associations, must not have the verisimilitude of a photograph or the sentimentality of a cliché. Even when it comes to erotically charged descriptions of women, hands and feet are dwelt on, as well as other metonymous accessories such as jewelry and other literally personal effects.

Each story typically unfolds in a tightly circumscribed space. The male narrator glimpses strangers—or strange familiars—through doorways, across the lane or on another rooftop. Especially when the person thus espied is a woman, the moment of revelation is intense. The narrator displays a longing for interior and detail which makes him into a voluntary *parda-nashin*, a sequestered soul hidden behind panels and curtains like the women in his opaquely traditional world. This is paralleled by Naiyer Masud’s express preferences (as revealed in interviews) for his own inherited dwelling.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>See interview with this writer elsewhere in this issue.

Bodies of knowledge or craftsmanship—legacies which change the way one looks at objects—are the partners of remembrance in Naiyer Masud's fiction. The writer's imagining, remembering, designing, setting down on paper, editing and so forth is paralleled by the painstaking craft of perfumers, glassblowers, stone-carvers, physicians, herbalists, jewelers or other highly skilled specialists found in almost every story. The specialist does not just have a token occupation; rather, the art or science he practices is woven thickly into the narrative. Even when the main character is not particularly skilled, as Kale Khan claims about himself in "The Myna from Peacock Garden," the artistry of the royal gardens and the Wondrous Cage is critical. The inspector of houses in "Obscure Domains," and the observer of nomadic settlements in "Lamentation" continue the motif with their respective—and compulsive—vocations.

The owners of the medicinal garden in "Maskan" cannot identify their own plants but the mysterious newcomer/narrator can. In "The Color of Nothingness," the young narrator is the ingenue whose eyes are educated by means of the old surgeon. In "Interregnum," the father is a mason and woodcarver, and another, elderly man is the teacher of letters and book-learning; both permanently alter the structure of the child narrator's vision through their teaching. It is tempting to connect all these fictitious experts to Masud's forebears in traditional medicine, and to his own interest in bookbinding and other crafts. The writer's meticulous eye and hand have contributed much to the texture of his writing—at the literal level too, one realizes after being granted the privilege of seeing his unique multicolored manuscripts.<sup>11</sup>

The time line of a Naiyer Masud short story can seem particularly complicated. It is, admittedly, one of the many challenges facing a translator. The English "at that time" is (especially upon repetition) inert and heavy compared to the light Urdu words pointing to time settings. It is really in the act of translation that one notices the complexity of Masud's narrative time, and starts wondering if it was entirely necessary. But these evocations of linked memory sequences are as necessary to the constitution of Naiyer Masud's fictional world as the painstakingly minute descriptions of artificial bird feathers or fish sculptures over Lakhnavi doorways.

Naiyer Masud's puzzles of time focus on the discovery of the *process* of remembering, or the intense involvement of the mind in situations

---

<sup>11</sup>See examples reproduced in "Appendix," *AUS* #12 (1997), pp. 225–30.

where action is not taken. Masud's art brings us to these processes and can set them in motion in the *reader*. The remembrance is more important than the things and events remembered, and is itself an intricate object to be noted, collected, and held. Looking at the first few paragraphs of "Sultan Muzaffar's Imperial Chronicler" as an example of Masud's spiraling starts, we start with a "now" time frame, in which the chronicler-narrator must write again. Preceding this, we find out, has been a period when the chronicler was not on assignment, and had perhaps even been dismissed from the royal court. But he is able to remember the first day of the period in detail like "an authoritative chronicler" (p. 137). The memory of his time away from the Sultan has burned in, and the reader must hang on to that hint until more about the Sultan is revealed further on in the narrative. Stories with domesticated ambits can operate the same way. In "Obscure Domains," one must follow the story through a long, complicated flashback, and be careful to distinguish the "little bride," who is now the caretaker of the elderly narrator, from the "She" of the first section.

Although the "centuries old" unnamed objects in "The Color of Nothingness" could suggest vastly different things to different readers depending on his or her distance from the author's walk of life, the "knowing" reader reflexively imagines a Lucknow-ish context. In Naiyer Masud's stories, his familiar Lucknow becomes a generalized traditional cityscape, but the writer also steps into purely imaginary landscapes such as the jungle of "Mār-Gīr,"<sup>12</sup> and the desert of "Sultan Muzaffar's Imperial Chronicler." His works embody a wish that Urdu literature go beyond defending *or* abjuring its sophisticated past, and well beyond obligations to be a "third-world" literature bringing social problems to the attention of its readers. Are stories which are more "to the point" than Masud's the only ones necessary for linguistic and cultural survival? Absolutely not. Given his rootedness in Lucknow in terms of both family and scholarship, and immersion in the very culture and history (i.e. "Urdu") which has become harder and harder to access in India, he can afford to envision the adventurous extension of Urdu fiction, even as far as "polar landscapes."<sup>13</sup> It is the Sultan who needs his reluctant chronicler's imprimatur in "Sultan Muzaffar's Imperial Chronicler" despite the menace he brings into the courtier's life. Naiyer Masud himself is a chronicler,

---

<sup>12</sup>In *Sīmīyā*, pp. 61–116.

<sup>13</sup>See interview with this writer elsewhere in this issue.

neither alienated nor traditional, who surveys particular regions of the modern South Asian imagination. As the frame story of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* has it:

In the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories we have conquered, and the melancholy relief of knowing we shall soon give up any thought of knowing and understanding them ... Only in Marco Polo's accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the traces of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing.<sup>14</sup>

The author's own stillness, his stubborn cultivation of his own corner of a fantastic early twentieth-century house called *Adabistān* ("The Abode of Literature"), and his elegantly austere life seem contiguous with the haunting narratives that surround the reader like a cold grainy mist.<sup>15</sup> With inspiration from Masud Sahab, other Urdu writers might yet feel the urge to explore such "polar landscapes," inducing their readers to step out wearing snowshoes. □

---

<sup>14</sup>Tr. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1974), p 5.

<sup>15</sup>Contrast the peripatetic Hasan Manzar and his almost journalistic snapshots.