SAGAREE SENGUPTA

An Interview with Naiyer Masud

The following is an edited (with Naiyer Masud's blessings) translation of a long, informal interview taped on April 2 and 3, 1996. Information already present in other recent AUS *pieces has been omitted, except when new significant details (such as autobiographical anecdotes) surfaced. Major deletions or gaps are clearly indicated in the text.*

The conversation begins around the story "Ṭā'ūs Čaman kī Mainā" (The Myna from Peacock Garden), which the present interviewer had just begun translating. We sat in the front room of the house known as Adabistān *(Abode of Literature) built by Naiyer Masud's father in an old section of Lucknow known as Turiya (i.e. "Victoria") Ganj.*

—S.S.

NAIYER MASUD: People liked "The Myna from Peacock Garden." Sometimes adults wrote to me saying that they'd read this story of mine and it made them weep for hours. They think that my stories are written with a deliberate purpose in mind, but I'm not in the habit of doing things like that.

SAGAREE SENGUPTA: It made adults weep?

NM: Yes, it did make adults weep, but I don't think it had the same effect on children who read it! If I had any purposes in writing "The Myna from Peacock Garden," they were two. First, I wanted to offer a corrective to the bad reputation Vājid 'Alī Shāh had acquired. Certainly, he had weaknesses but he had good qualities as well. I wanted to deal with him, Lucknow, and the culture of Lucknow in a story, and then go from Lucknow to Avadh, from Avadh to Muslims, and Hindus.… A way of treating these topics [and this period] has developed in India which

gives people the impression that the characters in question were always backwards and decadent, and if they hadn't been, why did the government end up in British hands?

Our children had no idea that there were positive aspects about life in those times as well, and thought instead that the people of those times were completely ignorant and undeveloped. I thought I would write an interesting story so that children could get a bit of a notion about what the earlier traditions were, and gain a kind of empathy with their own past by reading it. I had written two stories already with regard to this idea, and intended to write a third one, the "Myna" one.

As I've said, "The Myna of Peacock Garden" was a story about a man who stole a bird but the Badshah remembered his name and he got caught, but later the Badshah gave the bird back to him anyway. Then Maḥmūd Ayāz and Memon Sahab wrote to me saying that [for a change] these were very straightforward stories [I was writing] and no one would question me about what I was really trying to say. So I thought that I'd rewrite "The Myna" for adults in greater detail. Much of it comes straight from history. The main event, centering on the myna and its theft, the apprehension of the theft, is real. As for the rest, Darogha Nabi Bakhsh was in fact the Captain of the Badshah's animals; and it truly was the case that when the British got to Qaisar Bagh and captured it, a tigress from among the royal animals wounded an Englishman and then escaped. The British shot Darogha Nabi Bakhsh. That's also in my story, isn't it?

Then, there's an Aḥmad 'Alī Khān, who was the first photographer of India. He assembled his own small army and fought against the British, and was probably killed himself. In Munshi Naval Kishore's history it says that this man was a photographer and the English respected him because of that, but that, "regrettably, in spite of all that he raised arms against the British." Vazīr-e A'ẓam 'Alī Naqī Khān and others [from the story]—these are certainly historical references. The background is definitely historical, but the pieces weren't written to be historical fiction as such.

As for the cage itself that's in "The Myna from Peacock Garden," I had read somewhere that the Vazīr-e A'ẓam, [i.e. the minister] had had a huge cage made for birds, and then among my own documents I found a handwritten draft by a poet in which there's a description of an *ījādī qafas* [wondrous cage], and a statement that Vazīr-e A'ẓam had had it made and that the Badshah used to come to see it. The piece is actually a small *maṡnavī,* but it's not mentioned which Vazīr-e A'ẓam and which Badshah. But in one other place it says that there was this fine big cage that had

been built, but in my story the Vazīr-e A'ẓam is shown to be this same 'Alī Naqī Khān and the Badshah is Vājid 'Alī Shāh. In that *maṣnavī* too, there's a description of the cage. I wrote the story mostly following the *maṣnavī,* and expanded some things on my own.

The Peacock Garden has also been described in much detail—the Badshah was very fond of planting gardens! There were several whole gardens such as the Peacock Garden, the Tiger Garden and so on. There was a garden in which there were shapes of cows and bulls made out of topiary, and it used to be called *Ṣaur Bāgh* [Bovine Garden]. Qaisar Bagh has been described, and I've written a long feature article about it too. But you'll find that you don't get a lot of details about any particular thing in my stories, because my intention was not to use the story merely as an excuse to give exact descriptions of things in those times.

After "The Myna" was published, people really liked it and some said I should make it into a novel. Now I don't think a novel is just a short story made very long. A novel is some other thing, and I couldn't even tell you what the conditions and requirements of a novel are. I just don't think it's possible for me to write a novel. Then lots of people said that from now on you should just write this way. There was a particular style to " 'Iṭr-e Kāfūr" [Essence of Camphor] and that was all right then, but now write in this straightforward way, please. But at least for me, it's not easy to deliberately write in a particular style. So I tried to write another story, trying to keep it really straightforward. But when I sent it to the journal *Saughāt*—it will be coming out soon—the editor Maḥmūd Ayāz Ṣāḥab said he couldn't figure it out at all. [*Laughs.*]

SS: What was the name of that story?

NM: It was called "Shīsha Gʰāṭ." Now I didn't think there was anything convoluted about it but it's true that it's not straightforward in the same way as "The Myna."

SS: "The Myna" may have been straightforward but it never occurred to me that it had just one layer of meaning.

NM: That's true. The political situation of Avadh at the time comes into "The Myna."

SS: The atmosphere….

NM: The thing about the atmosphere is, as people have said to me, it seems as if we have gone back to those very times. And I said, I never [went out of my way] to write what people wore—when there's a historical feeling to a story, isn't it made up of things like that? What costumes people wore, what the streets looked like, what the shapes of the buildings were, what they ate, what the customs and manners were—but I didn't put any of these things in that story. In other words, there's no mention of anyone's costume at all in there. Whether someone was wearing an *angarakʰā,* or a *qabā,* none of that is there.

SS: But the mental atmosphere is clearly different.

NM: Yes, one gets the feeling that the setting is a different time, one somewhat prior to ours. There's something to the idea that if something is completely clear in the writer's mind, it will somehow be conveyed to the reader.

Once I was talking with Asif Farrukhi and I was explaining the details of this, that I have experienced this myself, that when you have a very complex, long personal experience and you describe it in a plain and straightforward manner, with no details, but with everything present inside your own mind as you are writing, somehow it reaches the reader. Why it reaches the reader, through telepathy or something else, I can't say. For instance, if I say that I am somewhat anxious today, or I don't feel interested in anything today. This is a statement that …

SS: Isn't that what art is?

NM: I don't know what it is.

SS: But isn't that the magic of …

NM: This happens in writing especially, that for no apparent reason, those very words, "I don't feel interested in anything today," may seem on one instance like a standard statement of fact or in another an entire story might come into my mind. So, the matter of "The Myna" is somewhat the same, that when I wrote it I didn't write it with any special kind of detail about how people lived in those times, but it's obvious that I had known about such things from childhood, and I was interested in the history of Avadh so I also studied it, and all that is somehow inherent to the story and is somehow conveyed to the reader. On the other hand,

if you said that you wanted to use "The Myna" as a source, an authority, and cited passages from it to write about Avadh of those times, it wouldn't work on a single count. Historical information, as such, has not been provided in the story. When you read it becomes obvious that it isn't set in modern times, but is from courtly times. Now there are some mysteries of nature, that some things are understood even when unexpressed.

SS: You were talking about a third story?

NM: It's not finished yet. Two were for children, and the third was this one, "The Myna." This one was for adults, even though several people have said that children could read even the [expanded] version with interest. I still have it very much in mind to write further in the vein. These few were connected with Vājid ʻAlī Shāh, but I wanted to write the rest having to do with interesting events of Avadh and Lucknow that reveal the special character of this place. I had the desire to write little stories about such things. Now let's see if that's possible—there's no particular difficulty also, in writing such small stories.

SS: You've never gone outside of Lucknow?

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

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

home.

When I went to Bareilly to teach in a college for a couple of years, it seemed like my real life in the world had finally begun, the one in which you earn for yourself. I kept missing home. My mother had wrapped some cloves, cardamom, and such in a little piece of paper. After I had been gone for two or three days, I noticed that bundle among my things where I was staying, and ate a little bit of it. I don't quite know what the effect of those cloves and cardamoms was [*laughs*], but I started missing my mother immediately, and I just got up and headed out for Lucknow on foot, leaving all my things right there! I walked for about fifteen or twenty minutes thinking, "I'm going back to Lucknow," and then I thought, "What am I doing? Where am I going empty-handed like this?" I came to my senses and settled down [for the time being] in Bareilly, but I've never had a desire to travel and see places the way other people do. I don't really like being anywhere other than home. There have been many opportunities, but I shy away from them. I avoid traveling as much as I can. This is all probably an effect of the secure life that my father used to want. Faruqi Sahab advises me often "just to go somewhere without any money, we'll keep track of you and not let you get into any major difficulty. But this is something you need to do. This secure life is ruining you. Or else you should take a very small amount of money and go somewhere very far away." He told me to "go to Kalimpong [a hill station near Darjeeling]!—with just enough money to get there and eat for a couple of days. And go with the decision already made that you're going to stay for ten days! Even if you have to fast. After that, we'll come get you, if you're good for nothing there!" In this respect, I am truly a weak man. If I have to go away somewhere, I can't figure out what to do, where to stay.

SS: There's an atmosphere in your stories….

NM: This atmosphere leads to familiarity, but the atmosphere outside leads to confusion.

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NM: There is no nostalgia in my work. I don't like nostalgia.

SS: [For nostalgia to exist] you have to feel like something's been left

behind.

NM: And that's hardly the case. Like I've said, I've spent my whole life sitting in this very house. Of course I have memories, of many things that are no longer, but there's no feeling that all those things were good, and that now everything is bad. I don't feel that way, but I do see that things are changing very fast and that there were many things that have not lasted.

SS: But there's no regret.

NM: That's right, no regret. There are things that aren't around any more, but the workings of the world are such that things come and go. Like you said, there's a certain advantage to being outside of a situation in order to write about it, and so in that way a particular period passes and you come out of it. Suppose we take childhood—now we are outside of it. And it's not as if we're always thinking, "Oh such wonderful times those were and we're caught in such affliction now," but rather our point of view has changed. For instance, I don't think I could write stories about my present life. Or if I could, they'd be of a different sort. Let it pass a little, and then when it is mentioned it takes on the status of memory, and a light dreamlike state overtakes it. Things that have already happened have a dreamlike quality about them.

I also don't consider an absolutely clear conclusion a good thing. Now this story, where it is finished—I can't explain why there.... But you have seen that characters die a lot in my stories, but no one's death is mentioned so clearly that you think, "Aha! He's dead!"

SS: They just disappear.

NM: Yes [*laughs*], and you suppose that they must have died. Such as in "Nuṣrat," I didn't write that "She was lying there dead," but the idea comes across that she died. Or in the story "Mār-Gīr," it's obvious that he got himself bitten by a snake and died, but.... In "Sīmiyā," when someone used the magic spell and had a fit of hydrophobia, he lay there all wrapped up and his voice faded out as he talked.

SS: So you consciously create such scenes?

NM: As far as I can understand it, the reason I do so is that it doesn't

seem right to state in a completely direct way that "he lay there dead," or that "he died." It's quite apparent that he has died.

SS: Why? Is that too much drama?

NM: That's right, a dramatic ending doesn't seem right. I have edited out the last sentence in several stories if the ending seemed too forceful.

SS: Maybe if you hadn't edited them out people wouldn't write letters to you saying that they didn't understand the story.

NM: [*Laughs.*] Yes, I'm sure that's the case. One thing is that those times are past when a whole story would depend on the last line. Those stories may have seemed interesting to read, but I never liked them. The way people say about films, for instance, "Please don't tell me the ending, or it won't be any fun to see it." It doesn't seem right to me to have a story work the same way, that if you already know the last sentence you won't enjoy reading the rest of it. There's a story by Daphne duMaurier about which much has been written, even in Urdu, in which a gentleman is talking to his beloved, and for the times it was quite a frank story with things in it such as "Go away, I don't want to talk to you," and "She came and sat in my lap and started rubbing her cheek to mine and I told her, 'You torment me too much,' " etc. It seems like a really erotic scene is going on but in the end you find out that all this is about a pet cat. Daphne duMaurier also wrote a story of another dramatic type, in which there were a husband and wife with two children, and the husband kills the wife. In the end it turns out that that story was about birds, some kind of water fowl at the seashore. It's only from the last sentence that you figure out that it's a story about animals when all along you thought it was about human beings.

SS: It's a riddle.

NM: And if you know the answer to the riddle, the charm in reading the story disappears. Just as in detective stories the last line reveals who the culprit was. But literary short stories shouldn't be like that, or like the ones where you're always thinking, "Now what's going to happen?" The story should just go on, without necessarily a lot of dramatic events.

Rather, I would want my readers to like the story, not necessarily that their minds be completely confused by it. It's just that it doesn't seem

right to write anything too directly—nothing should come across as flashy. I remember an example of this, from "Mār-Gīr." Animals which kill other animals do it out of need—it's the law of the jungle that an animal that is hungry hunts down another one and eats it. It's obviously not true about human beings, that they hunt only when they're hungry or that they'd go hungry if they couldn't catch anything. They eat their prey for pleasure. And many other people have written about this too, wondering what kind of animal is this that sheds blood as a recreation! I wanted to write something about it, and the Snake-Catcher [i.e. the Mār-Gīr of the title] mentions dragons and the hunting of dragons. This isn't exactly a grand and unique idea, so I had the Snake-Catcher start to say, "Like every hunter…. The dragon only hunts when it's hungry." He says "Like every hunter…," and after that, he stops. Then he corrects himself and says "Like every animal which hunts, the dragon only kills when it's hungry." It's just the difference between those sentences that expresses the difference between hunting by humans and by animals. You could ask, why obscure things deliberately? Just that things shouldn't be stated directly, in "discourse"—not that I want to obscure them so much that one wouldn't be able to understand the story unless you really studied it. To state things openly …

SS: …Is not the job of fiction.

NM: Right, I don't think it's the job of fiction. Sometimes there are comments about the characters as the story is going along…. I don't try to be obscure. I've tried not to write a single obscure sentence, but if someone asks me, "Why did you write this story?" sometimes I can answer and sometimes I can't. But I don't consider it my responsibility to do so, either.

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NM: I do make the effort that there should be something to each story. Two stories were also written so that nothing would stand out or be unique in them—often in a story there's something to cause amazement, a strange kind of a person, or strange incident. The most difficulty I've had with such a thing is in the story "Murāsila" [Letter]. It's the first story in *'Iṭr-e Kāfūr*. I didn't want any artificial dramatics in it, nor did I want the usual sort of main character, nor any intriguing event. So I went

ahead and wrote it, but I didn't hear much said about it afterwards, and so I felt regretful about it too that …

SS: You've said that you don't want to give in to typical expectations in your fiction, and if you oppose them so strongly …

NM: I wrote it with the idea that neither I nor you would be able to describe exactly what was written in this story. It's pretty straightforward in that the narrator's mother tells him that he's not well, and to go to a household of relatives which happened to be a family of *ḥakīms* [traditional *yūnānī* (Greek) physicians], to go get himself cured there. So he heads off there, the women of that household invite him in and they talk, and so on. Then he comes back. There's no plot, and there's nothing unusual about it, but I worked very hard to write it even though it seems so plain a story. It got published, but no one has ever mentioned it since. I assumed that I had not accomplished what I had set out to in that story, but then Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman, who's in Lahore, wrote in praise of especially this story, and then I felt a bit of satisfaction. After that Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar wrote a column as well in which this story in particular was praised. Muẓaffar ʿAlī Sayyid as well, and then some other people, praised "Murāsila" in particular. I was most pleased about all this because I felt that my effort had been successful to an extent. He wrote that this trip [the narrator takes] was written up like a forgotten childhood memory, and everyone recognized the actual family that was written about. The family is still there, the house is still there, although everything has changed completely by now. In this story and in another, "Rē Khāndān kē Āṡār" [Remains of the Ray Family], I tried to write about a daily scene from ordinary life without any unusual or amazing events, and people didn't particularly like that one either. It was translated by Aditya Behl and included in [the collection of] Katha Prize stories. This made me happy and brought me some satisfaction as well, that a story could be written this way as well without anything particularly "story-like" about it and without anything particularly "worth saying" in it, but that it could still be a good story. But it felt like a difficult task to do and that's why afterwards I didn't write any more stories of that sort, in which someone describes a completely flat sort of event and that creates an effect. I had to work very hard to accomplish that. There's also the risk that most people will say, "Where's the story in this? He's just reported on a visit." Dreams have played a great role—in my entire life, dreams have played a great role. I've had some dreams which are complete coherent stories, and I've

had some very long dreams.

SS: Couldn't the long dreams become novels?

NM: [*Laughs.*] No. I wasn't even able to see them in installments! I have dreams repeat many times—that happens with everyone, there will be one or two dreams which someone has over and over. "Sulṭ̤ān Muẓaffar kā Vāqi'a-Navīs" [Sultan Muzaffar's Imperial Chronicler], which is in *'Iṭ̤r-e Kāfūr,* is one of those. A certain *ṣaḥrā'ī muhim* [desert campaign] is mentioned in it. The sultan built a fort in the desert and there were battles and such with the desert dwellers. I saw the whole story of this *muhim* [campaign] in a dream, and the amazing thing is that I myself wasn't any of the characters in the dream—it was as if a film were playing in front of my eyes. And it was a strange and obscure kind of story. I told Faruqi Sahab the tale, and he advised me that I should be put in a mental institution and be examined by brain doctors! I wrote that particular dream down, and for a long time thought that a story should be made out of it, but if I had presented it unchanged it would have really seemed that I was trying to produce deliberate symbolism. But it was all a dream, just like that.

SS: Ready-made.

NM: Ready-made.

SS: Tell us about your family background.

NM: My family is one of *ḥakīms*—doctors of the *yūnānī* system of medicine—on both my mother's and father's sides. And both my maternal and my paternal grandfathers were the last *ḥakīms* in their respective lineages. After that, the *ḥakīm* profession disappeared from both sides. My paternal grandfather didn't want to make my father into a *ḥakīm*; rather, he wanted him to become a religious scholar. From the beginning he was taught to read Arabic and religious books. But when my father was ten years old my grandfather passed away. But right before his death a kind of insanity seized him—he had prepared a medicine for someone that he mistakenly took himself. It was a very strong medicine.

He was a very generous man, and if anyone asked for anything, he'd give it to them. Several times my grandmother would give away household pots and pans because there was nothing else left to give. When he

died, there was pretty much nothing left in the household. My grandmother had to sell some of her pots and pans and got by somehow, but my father was left completely without support. He was ten years old when my grandfather died. He got an education through his own efforts, and even got scholarships of one or two rupees each. He kept studying and made quite a bit of progress from that state of affairs. He had this house built. The funny thing is that he'd tell us stories about his own struggles, how he had grown up without any help, and how he had accomplished everything on his own, but he didn't want his children to have to struggle. He felt that none of them should have to accept a bad job.

However, that didn't seem right to us. I had received my M.A., and had completed my Ph.D., but up to that point he'd never agreed to let me go somewhere else to work. A position was available in a college in Bareilly, and without telling him I went and took it up for three or four months. He found out from others, and became very upset. He said, "Wire him and tell him to come back," but in the end he didn't force me to. My father didn't want us to endure the hardships he had to, and that marked our lives. We would protest that we should also have a chance to go out and see the world and work our way up as well, like he had. But to no avail.

So my childhood was very comfortable and secure. We had both parents with us, and their social and economic status was good. We don't have the energy or capacity for fighting that most people have—I in particular have none at all. And then I got a job in this very university, and that's completely…. I live in my own house, and have work of my liking. I didn't have the kind of experience a person should have in life with regard to such things. Now, I did get a chance to meet many kinds of people, but everyone gets that. But how one would live and make one's way in the "outside world"—of this I had neither experience nor any occasion to acquire any.

In my childhood, our household was considered a very cultured one and my father was a scholar of Urdu and Persian. There was a very genteel atmosphere at home of the kind there used to be in some households. When I entered school afterwards, I encountered a completely different world. Suddenly there were all kinds of freedom, such as that of uttering verbal abuses, of which there could never even be a question at home. For instance, the word *sālā*—it's such a common term of abuse, people say it a lot, but it was never spoken in our house. Not my father, nor my uncle—no one would have ever uttered such a word. When I entered

school I would jabber such abuse constantly, among my own friends, but never at home.

School gave me great freedom. You could say that I fell into rather bad company there. I wasn't friends with nice boys, but with definitely the wrong sort instead. All along I had the sense that I was the son of a gentleman, who was a famous man at that, so although I never adopted their habits or their way of joking and teasing each other, I used to wander around with those bad boys. In those times courtesans used to live in [the still existing] Chowk Bazaar, and it was forbidden for us to go there. Children from nice families weren't supposed to pass through Chowk. I used to go there a lot, and many sons and nephews of courtesans were among my class-fellows. Really young boys, say of ten or eleven, would put on airs among their friends as if they were grown-up men of pleasure, and would relate their romantic adventures as if they really visited courtesans and had their own sweethearts among them.

I took it into my head that I too would go and see a courtesan for myself, and see what she was like. I had a friend who was related to just such a courtesan and he said, let's go, I'll show you. There are certain kind of courtesans known as *khānagī* who do not ply their trade in the market. They stay in their own homes like gentlewomen, but carry out their profession there. I believe that was a *khānagī* family which I visited with him. It was a small house—there were several women present and there was no sense there at all that this "profession" was being practiced. There was just a harmonium in one corner.

The boy I went with introduced me as his classmate. Among themselves the women kept asking about my relatives and family. I was very shy and sat there quietly. When we were about to leave, one of the women, a younger one, put a hand on my shoulder and quietly said, "Sir, you shouldn't come here anymore." It made me feel really bad, as if I were being turned away from someone's door, and I felt humiliated. But later I understood that they had taken me to be a boy from a good family who had been inveigled into coming to their house.

That school is close to my house here, and is called Girdhari Singh School—Old Lucknow starts immediately beyond it. So a lot of boys from Old Lucknow families used to attend it. First of all, there were many Kayasth families there, and second, Rastogis. And thirdly, the sons of old Nawabi families of Lucknow attended it. I witnessed a classmate who in the beginning would come in a buggy along with a servant to wait on him; an entire banquet would be sent over for him at break and the servant would stand there to chase flies away and take deep bows. I saw

this same person later in a state close to beggary. The decline of Lucknow wasn't just beginning then; rather, it had already happened in full measure. I saw many nobles become poor here. My father had come to Lucknow at the beginning of this century, and he used to tell us stories about how entire families from here were ruined, how much wealth they had had, and how they had wasted it in wrongful ways and finished it off. Thus an interest grew in me about people like that and the destruction of whole lineages.

All the while life at home and life at school were two entirely different things. At school I was numbered among the really mischievous and wicked boys. Everyone knew me to be a troublemaker. I would run away from school. Several years it happened that when I finally showed up close to examination time, the teacher would ask, "Have you just been newly admitted?" There were complaints about me several times too, about me wandering aimlessly around Old Lucknow.

This particular period would be from … '44 to '49. In '51, I arrived at high school. By then I had become a very sincere and nice boy, but from '44 to '49 my interests lay in wandering here and there and loafing around town. But along with that, I was very fond of reading, which I used to do at home. I had three or four friends and we'd just sit and read all day, especially during the hot season or during the rains when we couldn't go outside. Most of the books at home had to do with [literary] research or the history of Avadh, or criticism. My father had no interest in fiction, so there was a relatively small amount of it in the house then. When I felt like reading I'd read what was there. When I look at how things are these days, it's hard to believe that I had read *Āb-e Ḥayāt,* the book by Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, by the age of five! If I didn't understand a particular word I'd pronounce it out loud several ways until I decided what it was. But *Āb-e Ḥayāt* by the age of five, and several others by the age of ten, such as *Darbār-e Akbarī,* etc.—big fat books!

SS: That's amazing!

NM: Yes, it amazes even me to think about it now. But Urdu was such a dominating thing among us then that if one felt like reading and there weren't any children's books around, we'd just read books like those.

Then there was a family in our neighborhood—Sayyid Rafīq Ḥusain, a very famous short story writer, came from it. He had two nieces, Alṭāf

Fāṯima [1] and Nishāt Fāṯima. They are both in Pakistan now and became quite famous. Nishāt Fāṯima passed away a few months ago. Alṯāf Fāṯima is still alive, and I still get letters from her. They had very good children's books at their house. I used to go over and read them.

They were in Urdu, and they were children's books. There used to be an institution in Lahore by the name of Dāru 'l-Ishā'at which published very beautiful books for children. A translation of Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra* by Ghulām 'Abbās, an abbreviated version of *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza* for children, a magazine called *Phūl* [Flowers] used to be published weekly from there. So they had a great stock of such things there. *Phūl* is very famous—Aḥmad Nadīm Qāsmī was its editor, and so was Ghulām 'Abbās for a while. When these people started to go to Pakistan in '47 and '48 their household belongings were auctioned. Alṯāf Fāṯima et al. had already gone to Pakistan. Their things had been left with someone close to them. That cupboard full of children's books was among the things, looking just like that cupboard over there [points to one in his own living room] but a little bigger, and with many glass panes. The books could be seen from outside. They were very refined people, so every book was in good condition. When it was put on auction I asked my mother to buy the cupboard for me. She asked my father. My father was the sort who would never buy the property of anyone we had known. And if they were being sold because of economic difficulties, he wouldn't buy it no matter how cheaply it was being sold. He said, "No we won't buy it. We don't think it is a good thing to buy from those people who are going away and are forced to sell their possessions." I insisted and begged, I cried a lot, but he never agreed. I didn't actually have the courage to ask him directly—fathers commanded a lot of fear in those days. I still remember that scene.

There was a low wall between the two houses. There was a guava tree and I climbed up it and then up to the wall—I watched the auction going on at their house with my chin resting on top of the wall, until the turn of the cupboard came up. The bidding started, and that whole cupboard along with all the books was auctioned off for just four rupees to somebody. To this day I remember the call, "One, four rupees—Two, four rupees—Three!" Of all the major sorrows in my life, that must have been the very first one, that something slipped out of my hands.

But after that, lots of magazines used to come to the house, and fic-

[1] [A story of hers appears elsewhere in this issue. —*Eds.*]

tion that people used to send to my father for review. So fiction started to be available at home, but adult fiction. We never had children's books at home, we had only gotten children's books from their [the neighbors'] place. Then, I felt like I wanted to write myself. And who knows why, all children first want to write poetry. I used to compose poems, and I wrote a couple of plays, some stories which got published in children's magazines. After that I started writing short stories, but I'd scrutinize them intensely and they never seemed good enough to me, so why … I'd throw them away instead. There was a great number of those—they weren't all completed stories. After a very long time it seemed like I could write, and that it would be proper to publish. At that time I had finished my M.A. and my father said, go do your Ph.D. in Urdu. The temperament of research is completely different, and I spent five or six years in it—first in Urdu, then in Persian. I ended up doing my thesis in Persian. For five or six years I was completely cut off from fiction.

Then in 1971 I started writing again. That's when my first short story is from. I had written a lot before that, but I never kept any of it. Even the story I wrote in 1971, I thought maybe it wasn't good but I sent it to Faruqi Sahab for his journal *Shab-Khūn,* telling him that I had liked a Persian short story that I had read and had translated into Urdu. I put a false name on it, saying this was the name I found on it—I didn't know what the original language of composition had been, but I had read it in Persian translation and then had translated it into Urdu. Faruqi Sahab said, yes, this is good, we'll publish it.

SS: It was translated? What was the false name?

NM: I just said it was a translation because I was afraid. I remember the false name—it was Rōyā Nasīj. Rōyā Nasīj came about this way: *rōyā* means "dream," and *nasīj* is the weaving of cloth. So the name means "fabric woven in dreams." That was the name I gave the author, Rōyā Nasīj. And the story itself was a dream I had had which I wrote up as a story. Faruqi Sahab was intrigued by this because the name sounded like it could have been Polish, but the style of the story certainly didn't seem to be. After a long time had passed I told him that I myself had written this story, and he laughed a lot and was also quite surprised. The story is "Nuṣrat," which Memon Sahab has translated as "The Color of Nothingness." This was the first published story, but I had started another story even before this, called "Sīmiyā," after which the first collection was named. I'd actually written this story at a very young age, around twelve.

It's a very simple children's tale, which I later lengthened to almost ninety pages. It was expanded enormously, but the original idea came to me when I was a child.

There are these spells you can put into use, such as "recite such-and-such a prayer, it will have such-and-such an effect; make a design and repeat it at night," etc.—I've been very interested in these things since my childhood. There are regular books you can get of magic spells—they're called *tantras,* aren't they? They're a very cheap sort of thing, but we had those at home too. In one of those I had seen a spell, a very complicated one called "Sīmiyā," which is also in the story, that goes like this: kill a crow, feed the crow to a cat, then kill the cat and feed it to a black dog. Then starve the dog and boil it alive in water and when its bones come out, place those bones in the open air, and it will start raining immediately. This was a spell that was written down already. In childhood it occurred to me that if someone went ahead and did all these things, but in the middle the dog went mad and bit him, then what would happen? Would it still rain? And isn't it true that when someone has hydrophobia and it starts raining, that person goes crazy and has a fit? The story I wrote in my childhood was like that—that a man tried to perform this spell, but the dog went crazy and bit him and he became a latent hydrophobic, and when it did finally start raining a fit overtook him. Now in "Sīmiyā," it's the same spell, though it's not completely clear; but the story I wrote when young was very straightforward.

As for the stories I wrote after that, a topic or a plot that I think I should write about doesn't just come into my head. The hardest thing is to figure out the plot; when I get a dim outline of what it should be, I start writing. Or—and this is the easiest—I dream something and it seems like it can become a story. Just under half of my stories are based on some dream or another. It seems really easy to write if I've had a dream, but I also fear that the dream might be—for instance—actually a story I read in childhood. But this hasn't happened yet. A lot of people have thought often about my stories that they are probably translations from something or other. In fact, they have written me letters asking if I had written a particular story myself or if it was a translation. This has frightened me even more, but I haven't been caught stealing yet. Probably the dreams I have are my own, and I write on those.

SS: You kept teaching?

NM: Yes, my profession was teaching in the university. Since my father

was a very great scholar of Persian and Urdu….

SS: Did you learn Persian at home?

NM: Yes, I did. It wouldn't be easy to make someone believe that I didn't begin Persian until my B.A. program. I hadn't studied it until then. My father wanted me to go into the Administrative Service, and Persian used to be considered a good subject to study for that. There was no Urdu course back then. He had me enrolled in the Persian program, and when I said that I didn't know any, he said, "I'll teach you." We'd sit right here, in the same places [you and I are now], with me here and him over there, and in three hours he taught me Persian. Now no one would believe this.

SS: I've always felt that Persian was easy in comparison to Urdu.

NM: Yes, it is quite easy. But the way he taught me, it was especially easy to comprehend. There's so much from Persian in Urdu-Persian constructions, entire lines of poetry, and I already knew those. He wouldn't explain any grammar. He'd just take a proverb, such as *"rasīda būd balā'ē bakhair guzasht."* He'd ask me what it meant, and I'd tell him. Then he'd explain that *rasīda būd* meant "had arrived," In the same way, he'd explain that all the [past perfects] in Persian would be written the same way, for example *"āmada būd," "rafta būd,"* etc. Then he began to recite the most famous verses from Persian. Then he said, "You already halfway know Persian. And the other half…, there's a system called *moẓāreh.* You'll have to work a little to learn the *moẓāreh,* but you'll get the idea of that soon enough." So that's how it happened that after a three-hour session, I could write Persian. Not anything colloquial, perhaps, but I could write an entire commentary.

After that I had the confidence to start reading things in Persian. My father was truly exceptional in the way he taught texts, both in understanding poetry and then in explaining it to someone else. He would often ask us to read a poem and then think about its virtues. Appreciation of poetry is something I got because of him; there are many difficult verses, which I can understand if I examine them closely according to the principles he taught. My friendship with Faruqi Sahab was also special in this way because he was so fond of analyzing poetry. We'd sit down with very difficult verses we'd collected and argue about them. My father's scholarly propensities were of a cautious nature, and he trained me, and

after that I then became friends with Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, who was a completely modern man. It was because of him that I developed an interest in and knowledge about new literature.

SS: Maybe that's why people say that your stories seem like they're translated from another language. It does seem to me that you live in a special world of your own. You translate that into stories.

NM: Yes.

SS: It's constituted of poetry and dreams.

NM: Yes these things are mixed up together. Dreams especially have a special role. And as far as suspicions of these being translation, I don't use language tagged with straightforward [cultural] identity to the extent that one could. I did write "The Myna from Peacock Garden" in idiomatic language, but in my other stories you won't find a single idiomatic expression. No one could say after reading one that the story was about Lucknow in particular. It'll be correct language, you won't find mistakes in it, but you won't find an identifying Lucknow temperament in it, or the language of a critic, or the language of a very emotional man. I've worked very hard on that language, especially so that it not have a set identity, so no one would be able to recognize who was writing, and of which place and time the story was written.

Because of this, the language seems a bit strange, and some people have gotten the idea that it's translation. But there are many difficulties in that—I've shown you my drafts, and how much I edit and rewrite. If I see a characteristic idiom, I edit it out. Even after that, it's clear that some idiomatic constructions will remain. I don't have any particular fondness for writing stories the way some people have—a kind of enthusiasm or restlessness from inside to write. I don't have that. Usually, when I start a short story, I'm sure that it will never be completed. But it slowly takes shape. In my childhood, it was completely the opposite. I loved to write when I was young. Especially, for instance, when I would come down with a fever. I wouldn't be able to rest until I wrote. My father said that that's how it was with him as well, that if he had a fever his mind would be somewhat disturbed. It's obvious that the products weren't great things, but when the mind became heated, one felt like writing. I had written a play for children while lying in bed with a fever, which I later fixed up a little, and the whole thing got published. It's called *Sōtā Jāgtā*

[Asleep and Awake] and the Urdu Academy has published it in the form of a book. It's Abu 'l Ḥasan's story of *Alf Laila.* But this phenomenon came to an end, or else it might have been a good thing, to come down with a fever, get your brain overheated and just write something.

SS: Did you write a lot after finishing your degree?

NM: No, not a lot. Even during my student days, I wrote very little. A few things were published in children's magazines. After that, I felt I wasn't a child anymore but was a grown-up and should write for adults. I didn't have enough confidence in myself. You can assume that to be true until 1971, when I was thirty-five years old. From the age of four or five I had begun to write this and that, poems, etc. By the age of eleven I had written a whole play. My father used to have a kind of salon which met in this house, and he had me read it out to them, and he was very happy that his son had written a play. By the time I was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, quite a few stories were published. After that, for nineteen or twenty years, I didn't publish anything. I just didn't have the confidence.

SS: You didn't?

NM: My father liked what I was doing very much. Although fiction was not at all his field, he gave me much encouragement. As I just said, when I wrote that play, he had me recite it—the best literary people of Lucknow in those times had gathered here. I was in a bad state due to nervousness, but I read it out loud to them. And after that, this *Sōtā Jāgtā* I had written, he read it over himself and then told me to show it to 'Alī 'Abbās Ḥusainī Ṣāḥab to get advice. I showed it to Ḥusainī Ṣāḥab, who made some improvements as well, so in that sense I can be considered a student of Ḥusainī Ṣāḥab because he advised me on that play, at least. But I myself lacked confidence and felt that whatever I wrote wasn't ready for proper publication.

But when I finished my Ph.D. in Urdu, I first published a few pieces from the dissertation in the form of essays in 1965. I didn't have the nerve to write short stories; I wanted them to be good. I thought at least I could write differently from what was being written. In those days abstract short stories were a trend, and I liked them too. Then I wrote "Nuṣrat," "Sīmiyā"—the attempt was to write something different from the stories that were coming out. There are two justifications for [writing] something, that it either be good or that it be really different. In this

"different" kind of story I didn't have the nerve to write from actual experience—I wanted to write the way our traditional stories are written, but with a little difference. I used to argue with Faruqi Sahab about this. Every once in a while he threatened to quit writing poetry, and I would stop him, saying that he was interfering with a good thing, and that his poetry didn't consume all that much time that he should have to give it up! But he'd say the same thing about his poetry—what's the justification for it? And I would say that its justification is that it's different from what others produce. It seemed quite good to me, his poetry, but suppose it wasn't actually good? I think it would be justified as long as it had something unique about it. The same goes for my stories, that they be somewhat different. Now I don't really know to what extent they are.

* * * * *

NM: Faruqi Sahab has written somewhere about the character in "Essence of Camphor" that, "If I ran into such a character somewhere, I'd beat him with a stick." There can be no bigger compliment to a writer than that the reader develop such hatred or attachment to a character. That means it must have been written very well indeed. But that's not the idea people got. What Faruqi Sahab had to say was that whatever I was trying to say through the story was not clear. There's the feeling that something major is being signified, but when you scrutinize the story no such thing comes out. This is a big problem for me, that lots of people complain that they don't understand what I'm trying to say. I've just told a story—what's there to understand or not understand? The same people don't praise other writers by saying how clearly they've told their stories! Why ask me what I "said" in the story? What I said is right in front of you on the page!

On the other hand, the reason for writing "The Myna from Peacock Garden" was to a great extent complaints like this. There are especially two people because of whom this story got written. The first was the editor of the magazine *Saughāt* in which it was published. He had written to me that I created a world in my stories which is a bit different from the normal world. He said that one or two of my stories had been about the familiar world that surrounds us, and he wanted me to write some more stories like that. On the other hand, Memon Sahab had told me to give my narrator a vacation and send him to Kashmir for a little while. In other words, the narrator in all the stories seemed to be the same type of

man. Most of the stories are in the first person. And it was true that while the stories were all different, the teller was the same. So when both Memon Sahab and Maḥmūd Ayāz Ṣāḥab were asking…, I wrote "The Peacock."

I even announced to Memon Sahab that I had written a story in which the narrator was not the one of the previous stories. I didn't know if it was bad or good, but it was different. The new narrator was very dark in complexion, and an uneducated kind of man. It's a true story associated with Vājid 'Alī Shāh. He had amazing powers of memory. He'd see someone once, and he'd remember that person's face and name forever after. So I wanted to make a whole series of stories about the kings, called *Ākhirī Bādshāhōṅ kī Kahāniyāṅ* [Stories of the Last Kings].

* * * * *

NM: But when it comes to the activity of writing stories, I think a lot of erroneous things are said about it. As we were discussing, some writer might go "Abracadabra!" and begin to write just like that, and not go over it time and again, or edit it down at all, and, in a way, he thinks of that as a thing to be proud of!

That can work to an extent for poetry. There are two terms in Urdu, *āmad* and *āvurd,* with *āmad* meaning "that which has come," and *āvurd* meaning "that which has been brought in." So, *āmad* is considered to be a good thing, especially in poetry, if a *she'r* or poem "comes to you" entire. Or, you read many poems and get the feeling that it is absurd poetry; in other words, that certain things have been expressed only after a lot of wrenching and yanking. It's true that you can read something and straight away sense that something spontaneous is being described, but that "spontaneous" doesn't necessarily mean that you just spontaneously think it and write it down right away.

SS: In other words, some labor is necessary.

NM: You'll have to produce it with labor. For instance, you are writing a poem which should read as if it were written by someone in a state of extreme rage—if you really are in a state of rage when you write the poem, it won't come out well. Nor would that expression of rage be very effective. But if you think carefully and with a calm mind about how someone speaks when he is angry, it will turn out to be more effective.

Similarly, if you want to write about grief, you go about things the same way. It's obvious that you have to think it through many times, revise it many times until it sounds right. I've spoken with a number of poets, and confirmed that if a dear person has died and one is trying to write an elegy, it can't be done immediately. It has to be edited and corrected carefully, to make sure that the sorrow is well expressed.

SS: You said that there are shortcomings in Urdu writing, for instance all the things that aren't written about. For instance, there isn't writing featuring different aspects of this country, various classes of people, or different registers of speech. These gaps must be filled. But my question is, Why [must all the ground be covered by Urdu], if most of the readers of artistic Urdu fiction read another language anyway?

NM: Yes, there are those who read other languages, but there aren't too many of them. Among Urdu readers, you will find plenty of people who read English; you'll find some who read Persian; you'll find very few readers of Arabic, especially among writers of Urdu. The rest—it's rare to find readers of French or Russian, say. Most Urdu litterateurs are bilingual, in other words they know Hindi as well, or trilingual, when you consider the ones who know English as well. But they don't take any particular advantage of this.

SS: A lot of them seem to know Panjabi.

NM: Yes, those who have come here from Panjab, and Pakistanis as well, often know Panjabi. But they know Panjabi as a language to be used at home, and sometimes [in their writing] they will use a Panjabi word or two, but other than that there's no particular difference [in their work] that would let you know that "This person is a Panjabi." He may be from Panjab, and then Panjab itself will certainly show up in his stories, but there won't be any particular influence of the Panjabi language. There's the idea of received or *ṭaksālī* Urdu that has arisen—for a period Lucknow was considered the standard, and every hapless writer of Urdu tried to write language of the Lucknow variety. They more or less wanted to forget their own Urdu. For instance, if he lived in Bihar, he would take pains to make sure that no Bihari-ness showed up in his language. People from Panjab were also very careful that no influence of Panjab come into their Urdu. The best Urdu was thought to be one that would come across as belonging to U.P.-wallahs or Delhi-wallahs. A lot of harm has been

caused by this, and by the fact that the city has been dominant with us, and anything rural is looked down on. If a single regional word came into the speech of an otherwise perfectly good fellow, people would right away say that he never got over his bumpkin background.

SS: So the image of Urdu is still the same, that of a sophisticated urban language.

NM: Yes, that image has remained and has been very dangerous.

SS: You regret this?

NM: Yes, this is cause indeed for regret. It's true that a sophisticated, effective, fluent language had developed. But it would have developed all the same even if the effects of regional language were put into use. Two things happened: one is that, in a way, Urdu writers were afraid of other languages, i.e. they didn't want to be identified as, for instance, "Bihari," from their writing, "Panjabi," or "Hyderabadi." That can't make a language fluent, if there's no courage to come outside the language used by urbane speakers, i.e. the received version of the language! And the people who were from the region of standard Urdu had a distorted sense about themselves, and especially about their home language. They had the feeling that this is the language of the nation and that there was no use for any other.

Then, language is affected very much by content. As we were saying before, if we don't have ice and snow, glaciers and snowy mountain peaks, we won't need to use a large stock of words for things like that. If there are no ships, we don't need terms for them. Although Muḥammad Ḥasan ʿAskarī did translate *Moby Dick.* In *Moby Dick* there are words for every single part of the ship. He not only had to translate them but explain them as well, such as "the lower side of the ship," "the right-hand flank of the ship," "the point of the bow in front"—these things don't exist in our language. There's a dictionary in Urdu, *Farhang-e Iṣṭilāḥāt-e Jahāz-Rānī* [Dictionary of Nautical Terms], because there used to be Indian ships traversing the oceans, although we people from U.P. haven't even seen the ocean, let alone a ship! The centers of the language are Delhi, Lucknow and to an extent Patna. The people from these regions had nothing to do with ships but the people in Bengal certainly did, and the same goes for Madras, so this dictionary exists, but it's useless for me because neither am I writing stories about a sailing ship nor do I have to

pilot one. But if such stories were to be written, and written with some care, the author could take advantage of that book. He could also ask someone—not here, but in Bengal—ask some fisherman for instance what the different parts of a ship are called, and what the names for the different states of the ocean are. But no one has made such things subjects for their stories.

SS: It seems that you're demanding a lot. Fiction featuring ships doesn't exist, and you want Urdu writers to write about the thirty-two kinds of snow that fall on the North Pole!

NM: They should write about such things but …

SS: One can't even distinguish between ice and snow and …

NM: I've written about that, actually. When I wrote a travelogue about Iran, I wrote that very thing, that we don't make a distinction between ice and snow, but in Iran it's absolutely clear. There's *yakh* and there's *barf.* They use *yakh* for "ice" and *barf* for "snow." So even if we haven't had occasion to make the distinction, where these things exist the words are absolutely clear. If Urdu writers decided that they wanted to write about such things, or if they have experienced certain things in life already—for instance if one was a peasant in his youth and then came to the city and became an Urdu writer, he should write about that old life in full detail, but [such a person] won't. And if he does, he'll write in that same sophisticated urbane language, and all of this seems false.

SS: It seems that Urdu fiction has come a certain ways and stopped. Why is this especially true about Urdu?

NM: The domination of the urban in Urdu has prevented rural culture from coming into the literature. A culture was created which is called the "shared culture," but only the most élite and sophisticated elements were taken from both Hindu and Muslim sides. I avoid words which come under the heading of coarse language and words which wouldn't be thought to belong to cultured speech. I don't know about other languages, but at least in Hindi or Bengali it seems to me that the notion of correct language is not so strict. People don't question the usage of words at every turn like they do in Urdu, even if in a particular situation that word might express just the right thing.

S S : In other languages too people had to fight for the right to write in regional styles, such as Phanishwarnath Renu and others …

N M : Yes, but here what has happened is …

S S : …The situation of Urdu is so delicate that perhaps writers don't want to fight among themselves.

N M : Urdu has never been a means to earn a living.

S S : Which Hindi certainly has become.

N M : And Bengali too. You'll find many people who just write and pretty much all their expenses are covered by that. But the system of writing for money has never existed in Urdu. It really wasn't a part of the tradition here. It's started to happen a little bit now. There are certain people who do, and you'll find plenty of them, especially in *mushā'iras* [poetic gatherings], where you can make a lot of money. But generally, even now, except for government-published journals, no writer gets a fee. […] If arrangements could be made for someone to bear the expenses for a trip to Kashmir, then it would be possible for Ashfāq Ṣāḥab [sitting] here to go off! He'd go and spend five or six months at the North Pole, and write a novel there. But that system hasn't developed. So writers write about what they see right in front of them. It happens only rarely that someone goes to live somewhere else just for the sake of writing a novel. This is why the circuit of Urdu fiction seems very limited. And that's not true about other Indian languages—there's variety as well as depth.

S S : It seems that this problem has only one solution, and that's money.

N M : That's right. The thing about money is not just that different things would appear but good things as well. People don't like it when I say this and protest that a true artist has no use for money. My answer is that "true art" in fiction or poetry amounts only to ten per cent; ninety per cent is pure craftsmanship, work in other words—examining, writing, rewriting …

S S : …Reading …

N M : Yes, reading as well. A person may have a lot of originality and be

able to write, but originality is not enough, you have to work. If he could have payment then he could write much better than he might be writing right now. If someone could spend ten days writing a story and know that he could send it to a journal and that it would get published, and if he knew that if he wrote three such stories that he would not need to earn anything for five or six years if his stories were selected, then he certainly would write with more effort and it would be much better than what is being written these days. Because of the unavailability of money, Urdu short stories are not finding the space to expand nor the possibility of attaining greater heights.

SS: Do you have any suggestions for publishers and lovers of Urdu who may have money?

NM: No, it's not like that. There's a kind of lack of sensitivity … The easiest suggestion would be for people to buy Urdu books and get a little bit into the habit of reading, and that's what doesn't exist. There are ten million people who can read and buy Urdu books. If they set aside a small amount from their budget especially for this, even ten rupees a year, you'd sell a hundred million rupees' worth of Urdu books every year. But there's nothing being planned like that over here, and no one is interested.

SS: And in Pakistan?

NM: The situation is pretty much the same in Pakistan. They have money, but they don't buy books. The print run of books is very small. The same six hundred copies, and if it's a very popular author, one thousand. And new editions don't come out very often, either. Except for a few authors, it's the same situation there in that one edition is printed and then lies around for years. Who knows, maybe it's not in the nature of Urdu itself. In Bihar at least, it's said that people buy books to read, and they do in Hyderabad as well. In the South and to an extent …

SS: They just don't in north India?

NM: That's right, they don't in north India. And this U.P. area of ours is especially bad in that regard. People won't buy books to read.

* * * * *

SS: Do you think that it would be of any advantage to have exchanges with Hindi writers and magazines?

NM: It would most certainly be of great advantage, and it's been tried as well. There's a young man called Ṭāriq Čʰītārī, now a lecturer at [Aligarh] Muslim University. He was in radio before. He held a short story workshop in Gorakhpur, with the idea that an Urdu writer would read out a short story, which would be analyzed by an Urdu critic and a Hindi critic. After that, a Hindi short story writer would read, and an Urdu-wallah and a Hindi-wallah would analyze the story. From that it was apparent that an exchange like this would have enormous benefit. I don't remember whose story it was but Khurshīd Aḥmad who teaches Urdu at [Aligarh] Muslim University analyzed a Hindi short story. And he did such a marvelous job that all of us as well as all the Hindi-wallahs there were utterly delighted. The gentleman whose story it was himself said that he was overjoyed, because Aḥmad had both understood and explained the story so well. If that's the way, then it's very fine. But of course, here there's a little bit of competition between Hindi and Urdu. Urdu is always afraid, Urdu complains about Hindi swallowing it up; and Hindi is a little afraid that Urdu encroaches upon it, and that its influence still hasn't diminished.

SS: But in spite of this quarrel, Urdu does come in—for example in films. People seem to forget about the fight then.

NM: That's right, there's no fight then. I've noticed that Hindi writers use Urdu words with assurance. [The opposition] is at the governmental level—I can't say about poets, but with fiction writers….

SS: A lot of Urdu is used in Hindi poetry.

NM: Some entirely in Urdu, written in Devanagari so we've accepted it as Hindi. Sarveshvar Dayal Saxena for instance used to compose excellent ghazals. They were very good, and there are still [very good ghazals in Hindi]. Our Urdu poets often cannot think of the topics which Hindi-wallahs think of. Urdu is used at the level of literature and conversation, but when it comes to making a solid contribution to Urdu, many Hindi-wallahs would pause. It might seem to them that Urdu is rising up in front of them like an enemy. And the government is especially responsible

for this situation. Common Hindi speakers have turned away from Urdu to the extent that they don't want to use a single Urdu word in their speech. Urdu-wallahs have developed bad feelings about themselves, thanks to government policy. And that influences their writing somewhat.

SS: What about the role of intellectuals in all this?

NM : No, [intellectuals] don't consider themselves responsible for this at all. For a long time people have been complaining about this, that intellectuals and people who make a living from Urdu are not doing anything for Urdu, including teaching it to their children.

Hindi-wallahs should come forward a little bit in this, because a hundred percent of Indian Urdu-wallahs know Hindi, as far as I know. Even the few people who get their education in *madrasas* with mullahs are in the same situation—they all know Hindi. I don't think you'll run into any Urdu-wallahs who don't know Hindi at all. And as for the young, students in schools and college students, they read and write Hindi with no difficulty at all. They are very well acquainted with Hindi literature.

SS: But students should be taught that learning Urdu is not just for Muslims.

NM: And lots of Hindi-wallahs and Hindus do learn Urdu enthusiastically. If Urdu is rewritten in Hindi script, we can't really appreciate it. I don't know what it is, but there is some kind of connection. If someone learns Urdu script and reads the same work, it makes a greater impression on his mind.

SS: My feeling is that no matter what the genre in Urdu, the influence of poetry is great throughout all literature, including fiction.

NM: There's another reason for that—urban culture and sophistication has become associated with Urdu, and the feeling that the more urban and sophisticated we can be, the better. No rusticity is allowed to show. The most sophisticated form of language is poetry, in the ghazal. There's a general feeling among many of our writers that comes from a long time back, that the closer language is to poetry, the better it is considered to be. The result is that if you ask someone to write something in really good Urdu, he will write it in poetic style. Meanwhile the argument has been going on already that short stories are approaching poetry anyway, and it

may not be a good thing, but I don't see any particular harm in that.

But in a way, poetry has harmed language as well. It's been an advantage as far as bringing in sophistication, which from a poet's point of view is a good thing, but it has harmed prose. Our best prose writers have tried especially hard to keep poetic-ness out of their language. There were the prose writers of Jamia Millia, there was Dr. Żākir Ḥusain who was counted among the best prose writers, Mr. ʿĀbid Ḥusain, my late father, most writers from Aligarh such as Rashīd Aḥmad Ṣiddīqī—they all made regular efforts to make sure that the power of poetry not be taken advantage of, that the unique power and beauty of prose be put into effect. Even Maulāna Āzād, about whom has spread the misconception that he wrote poetic prose, also made use of that very power of prose.

SS: What is the power of prose?

NM: That which makes less use of poetry!

SS: It seems that you are quite attached to certain aspects of tradition, and want to become free of many aspects of it! You don't want traditional endings to your stories, you avoid poetry and many other things.

NM: I make an effort to avoid certain things, and if they come in, I take them out again. If something has too poetic a style, I edit it out. For instance metaphors and so on. You won't find any in my writing.

SS: Not anywhere?

NM: As far I know you won't. If there are any, they've escaped my notice. If I find them, I'll edit them out!

SS: But then eventually you end up editing out the whole language, don't you?

NM: Not necessarily. But the way we've been conversing, we haven't used a single metaphor, have we? And we've talked about a lot of important things! Doesn't power [in language] come from that, that here's a ready-made thing right in front of us but we're not going to use it, this metaphor?

SS: So you won't make a positive statement about what that power is, is that right?

NM: No. If someone makes up their mind that they are not going to use metaphors, then he will make use of the power of prose. I don't use metaphors, although I do use similes here and there, but only here and there. I don't think you will find any metaphors anywhere in my work.

SS: This is intentional?

NM: Absolutely, it's intentional. In fact, when I write essays, I will use them. I just won't use them in my stories. Every once in a while I'll use them here and there in other things, but even so, not frequently. The tools and instruments should be kept for use in poetry. Prose has a power of its own which can be written into it. You just have to work hard at it, and be attentive.

SS: In searching for this freedom, you must have had to fight some battles. Either in the process of writing or publishing or in terms of readers' comments. Would you please go over some of the issues you have had to face in establishing your rights as an artist, in other words not giving in to expectations that people have from normal fiction.

NM: First, there's the fact that I've tried really to write prose, make use of the power of prose, and not in that sophisticated Urdu. In spite of this, the language is correct—no one could say "he has written wrong Urdu." It's right, but it's not full of idioms and is not like our everyday usage. When it comes to dialogs, a little of the everyday will come in. But in my own narration, these things should not appear. People have noticed that, and praised the language as being good. Although some people do say that there's poetry there in some form. And that causes me discomfort. [*Laughs.*] But what they mean is that the effect they get from reading my stories is like what happens when they read a poem. Those poor people praise me a lot, but I don't understand it.

Yes, as if they are reading a good poem. They praise me a lot.

SS: And you mind?

NM: Of course, I don't like it that I say something to you and you think I'm reciting poetry!

SS: Not in the limited meaning, but …

NM: Yes, of course, and it is praise after all. And it's true that I have a command of poetry, and I like poetry a lot. It's not that I have a completely "prosaic" nature; rather, I am deeply interested in poetry, and have studied a lot of poetry. I also have an idea of the moments at which poetry typically comes into a prose piece, and want to keep those at a distance. That's another reason that people sometimes suspect that my stories are really translations. I also make sure that English idiomatic constructions or Persian constructions don't come in. And while writing certain stories in Urdu, it's happened that I get the feeling that this is not the right language, and I'll write a portion in Persian, or in English. If you see my draft you'll find entire pages of Persian and English.

Not so much any more, but in the beginning, in "Sīmiyā" and several others, I saw that entire episodes came out in Persian. And however bad that English or Persian actually is, it was very good for me because each single word seemed understandable to me. And then it feels very easy, not to translate it, but to look at it and rewrite it in Urdu. When I'm reading it in English or Persian, and I have to present it in Urdu, that happens quite easily.

SS: What's the importance of translation to literature? I'm not just asking because people have read *Moby Dick* in Urdu. Rather, what kind of changes occur in the very style of writing?

NM: There are two things. The first is that whatever a person is translating influences his writing somewhat. And if that person is a writer, that influence will show in the translation itself. It's interesting to me that in a few things I've translated from Persian, and in a few from Kafka, there was something that made people think that I was influenced by Ṣādiq Hidāyat, and also by Kafka. Although when I began to write short stories, I hadn't even read Kafka. But it did seem to me that the language he used was of the sort I liked, it seemed to be just right. It could be translated into similar language in Urdu. That's why it began to seem like both things were written by the same person. This is not necessarily a virtue in translation. For instance if I write my own story, then do a translation from Ṣādiq Hidāyat and then one from Kafka—if as soon as you set your eyes on those you are able to say that all three are from the same pen, then those translations should not be taken to be good ones.

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ss: Supposing that you do capture someone's style in another language, it would influence your own writing, wouldn't it?

nm: Yes indeed. The expressions of any other language are different than the ones in our own. And it would be very wrong to write those up in our received language. I wrote in the preface to the Persian short stories that I translated, which are now coming out in book form, that I wanted these translations to be true to Urdu idioms, or to the idioms of both languages, but not to the point that an Iranian story started being thought of as an Indian story. The familiar language must be made a little strange. It should be clear that it's not Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād writing but Turgenev. It's plain that it's a difficult job, and I wasn't able to do it. Some of our translations accomplish this, especially those of Ḥasan 'Askarī and 'Azīz Aḥmad, both of whom were complete experts in English, which you can feel in their translations.

ss: If those translations are successful, they will change the Urdu of some of their readers.

nm: Yes, it can change. Yes, it would certainly change, and it would become more expansive.

But Faruqi Sahab says that there's an atmosphere of menace in many of my stories, a kind of terror, and it's not clear why it's there. The reason for that probably comes from my own life. I was very complex and abnormal in my childhood. There were also some incidents which—I remember one time when I was doing my Ph.D. in Allahabad—I don't tell this incident to too many people. What happens is that you have to switch trains in Pratapgarh. I saw there that some country people—Muslims—were sitting there below and waiting for some other train. And I too was on the platform, pacing around near them while waiting for my next train. I noticed that they kept looking at me and talking among themselves. There was an old man among them who came up to me and asked me, "Bhaiya, are you from Nucklow?" Country people say "Nucklow" for "Lucknow." "Are you from Nucklow?" I answered "Yes." He asked, "Are you Muslim?" I answered that question as well. He asked my age, and I told him that too. There was a woman there, with her *gʰūṅgʰaṭ* drawn low over her head—Muslim women dangle it further down, in the manner of *parda*. She described something and started weeping outright, as if she were mourning a son. So I asked the man what the matter was, and he said, "Nothing, nothing. You can go." And then

he said to the woman, "What can be done now?" Meanwhile, my train came and I boarded it and got underway. And then suddenly I remembered a story my mother used to tell me when I was very small. I was really dark in my childhood—in comparison to that I'm quite fair now. [*Laughs.*] I was sick, and so looked even darker and sallower and was put in the hospital. When I got better, I was bathed and dressed in new clothes and brought home. My mother said, "They've changed boys on me! This is not my son!" The nurses laughed and said, "No, he was just sick—we've just bathed and powdered him well!" Suddenly, I remembered this incident and started feeling doubtful that what my mother had said was true, and that I truly had been exchanged for another boy at the hospital. That I was really the son of those people I had seen at the train station, and their son had actually been my parents' child. This thing took hold in my brain and I developed a complex and started staying away from my mother and sisters, as if they were women from another household and it wouldn't be proper for me to be around them. Even when I was grown up, I'd lie down in my mother's lap, so of course she started feeling the change, and she even asked me what the matter was, if I was angry or had some other problem. I told her, and she was upset, but also laughed a lot.

SS: You were in college then?

NM: Past college—I was doing my Ph.D.! It was around 1960, I was about twenty-five years old. The thing my mother said was very true, namely that "a mother's arms know her child, it's not a matter for the eyes, but the arms. You looked so good after getting cleaned up that I said it must be another boy." Although that particular thing passed after a while, I had this fear embedded in my heart that something was wrong with me and that if people found out, there would be a big scandal. I had that since childhood, that there's something about me which if people found out would cause a lot of trouble. But I've had a clean and simple life like any family-type boy. But somehow I had this complex. The other one is that I had had some kind of sinful life of which I had no knowledge. An example of that is the kind of discomfort you feel if you make a reservation and go to the station and then discover that you've left your ticket at home. I had the same kind of feeling about myself, that I've committed some grave offense which I don't remember. One dream that I have two or three times a year is that I drink a lot of liquor, entire bottles, and finally it occurs to me that I shouldn't drink any more. Because

of our religious training we develop an allergy to alcohol, and it seems like a very terrifying thing. In my dream, I drink my whole life, and then I regret it. The other even stranger dream I have is that I never got married, that I never actually married my wife. My wife is very religious, says her prayers every day and comes from an old family. So in the dream I keep thinking, "Why did I ruin the life of such a decent girl, and what harm would there have been if we had gone ahead and had a few verses read and gotten married?" The interesting thing about this is that there must be something psychological going on, that when I wake up from these dreams I don't feel the relief that, "Whew, that was just a dream!" That doesn't happen—rather, for a whole day afterwards I'm in a kind of shock about this terrible thing I've done. Either that I've been drinking for a long time, something forbidden in our religion—and there was no particular need to drink—or that I had lived an illicit life, from the point of view of religion, with a woman, and with a very pious woman at that, the poor thing. If only I had gone ahead and married her, etc. We've been married since the age of twenty or twenty-two—that's a long time we've been living together. So these things have become embedded in my mind and I'm sure this accounts for this slight feeling of guilt in my stories. There's that nameless fear, and there's the feeling of menace as Faruqi Sahab calls it, that something bad is about to happen. If the atmosphere is sorrowful, it's because of these things. As you've mentioned, it doesn't seem like [the writer] has any regret about things that are gone, although things from the past are mentioned frequently, so there's no nostalgia but rather a bad feeling having to do with this feeling of having done wrong and that it will come out later. It's psychological. When I was young, I also suffered somewhat from somnambulism. For that reason my mother used to think that jinns—she used to call me by the name *jinnāt*. Say, if one of her bottles of perfume vanished, she would say, "That *jinnāt* must have carried it off." Jinns had a lot of interest in perfumes especially. It's just a coincidence that…. In those days—you must have seen it in your family too, it's kind of a tradition here in the East—in each house was one particular thing which was supposed to be possessed, either by a ghost or a jinn or a sorceress. Ask in your family, I'm sure you'll find this out to be the case in most houses. For instance, such and such a hall over there, there's something haunting it. In our house, the little chamber by the front porch had such a reputation. When something is haunted, it's said to have *aṡar* [i.e. to be under the influence of something]. It happened often in my childhood that I disappeared from my mother's side, and when she'd come looking for me she'd find me sleeping in that little

cubbyhole, and I wouldn't remember how I got there or who had brought me. Even after I was grown, this happened a couple of times. I had a feeling that it was because of an offense—I was talking about this earlier. I had read many stories like this—there are many in English, too—that a man was asleep, got up and committed a big crime, such as a murder, and came back to bed. This type of somnambulist comes up a lot in a certain kinds of mystery and detective stories, that someone is very mysteriously killed and no one knows who did it, until it comes out that there is such-and-such a man who has the sleepwalking disease and he went and committed the murder. I remember that even as a grownup, I'd find a couple of times that, for instance, I'd wake up and find myself standing in the courtyard. Sometimes my intimates would tell me that I had been walking in my sleep, that I'd gone here and there, then come back and lay down again. I started worrying that in my sleep I went and committed murders and such. This terror built up to the point that if I knew that I had walked in my sleep the night before, for the next few days I would read the newspaper very intently for any news of a mysterious murder that might have taken place!

SS: This is why you don't like to travel—the situation could get so much worse!

NM: This terror remained with me a long time, that I didn't know where I might wander off to when asleep, or if I killed people and such. There is an influence of these psychological issues on the atmosphere of these stories.

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NM: Once Faruqi Sahab said when he phoned me, I'm sending two teams to look at you. One will be a team of doctors to examine your head, and the other will be a team of detectives to figure out what planet you come from. I said that I know my mind is messed up, it runs in the family—there's been a bit of a tradition of insanity on both my father's and mother's side. I am crazy, but as far as I know I haven't committed any major crimes. What he said is that he didn't understand the angle from which I look at everyday things. "Unusual things don't really happen in your stories, but when you describe them, ordinary things seem really strange, as if the character is not perceiving things in the normal

way. Nor is it as if some great man is looking down from above, like Bēdil for instance, who seems to be looking down from the heavens. That's not it, that the narrator's view is from on high. His angle is completely different. That's why I'm going to send detectives, to find out which planet you are looking at this planet earth from." Faruqi Sahab has praised me, and that has justified my labor.

SS: When Faruqi Sahab came to Philadelphia he said this about Bēdil, that "he should be wrapped in gold, then beaten."

NM: …Then beaten! [*Laughs.*] Yes that's a great thing to say about Bēdil. We have spent a lot of time on Bēdil, Faruqi Sahab and I used to sit down with both his prose and his poetry and would discuss our ideas. Now I remember Faruqi's comment about wanting to beat the narrator of " ʿIt̤r-e Kāfūr" with a stick. There's a suffocating feeling in that story which makes readers restless after reading it. And it seems like the narrator doesn't want to see or show anyone in a good light. I wrote twice about the heroine of the story, that "she smiled with an effort." There was something to smile about, but she didn't just smile, but smiled with an effort. Faruqi said, "This wretched narrator of yours won't even let this woman smile freely! If I saw him I'd beat him with a stick!" This is why people think that he has said bad things about me. It's a matter of ill humor. To me it seems to be great praise.

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SS: You don't write every day?

NM: No! There are stories where I wrote the first sentence and then twenty days later I wrote the second one. The average is four or five months for one story. I can't write intensively. There's not even a single page that I wrote in one sitting. It seems like I write one sentence or one paragraph, and after that I don't see what to write next, and it just sits there. Then again a few days later I sit down and the pen stops after three more sentences and I can't understand what to do next. Then I sit down again ten days later. It would seem that something composed in this manner is going to come out completely incoherent, but I have seen that those are the pieces which are always the most well-connected. And whenever I've felt a bit of facility come into my pen, when I'm writing in

a flow that comes of its own accord, I become very wary and look at that part with great attention and find that it will have many shortcomings.

It's a frequent deception that what one writes in a state of flow is good. One always has to change it later. But the things written a bit at a time—they don't have this problem. I do understand the reason why this happens: if you write one sentence and don't know what to write after that and leave it, it's still in your thoughts. The process of thinking goes on, and when you do finally understand what goes next, you put it down. And if after writing two more sentences you can't go on and your mind begins to wander, you leave it again.

It seems like if you write the first sentence and then the next a week later, and have done many other things in between, that they won't be consistent with each other, but that is not what happens. It is often more consistent. "Flow" makes me very uneasy. What I have to say about that is that it's caused by the Invisible Hātif [Hātif-e Ghā'ib]. It's quite common in poetry. Surōsh and Hātif were two angelic types. It's said that they put words into the hearts of men, and that Surōsh causes you to write them. If it's something particularly fine, people will say "Surōsh made me write it. I didn't write it, but some invisible force made me do it." What I have to say about all this is that Surōsh certainly exists, but he doesn't know Urdu better than I do! [*Laughs.*] With all the Urdu I've studied and thought about, I'll accept that he provides the idea, but I won't use his language.

SS: Maybe you get the rough draft from him, but the editing….

NM: Yes, a rough draft or an idea of using a certain event first and something else afterwards, but to write it down in language [like this] is not Surōsh's work. It's something only a human being could do. ❐

—Translated by Sagaree Sengupta