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## Demystifying Naiyer Masud: Preliminary Notes

“Life is instantaneous and living is dying. Just as the chariot-wheel is rolling rolls only at one point of the tire, and in resting rests at one point; in the same way the life of a living being lasts only for the period of one thought. As soon as that thought has ceased the being is said to have ceased.”

—LORD BUDDHA

OBVIOUSLY real life, by and large, does not follow a definite and predictable pattern. If it does so at all, at least for the sake of argument, even then it would just be a random collection of still photographs with perhaps a vague semblance of coherence. If a slice is taken out, it certainly represents life and may or may not be called a story. A lot of artifice has to be injected into such slices to transform them into a genre. Artifice drives a story away from real life, making that life ridiculously simple. Real life is full of open-ended, questionable and incoherent events. The main question is: can such open-ended and incoherent events be rolled together into a genre? If the answer is in the affirmative, the next question could be: can such a genre be called “short story”? Naiyer Masud does make an effort to address such questions, albeit implicitly, through his unique narrative style, amply supplemented by interviews. Readers who believe in a fixed-definition genre are baffled by Masud’s hazy, multilayered narratives. It would perhaps be appropriate to note that Masud himself has never been very sure of the acceptability of his narrative style. When he offered his first narrative for publication in *Shab-klūn* (Allahabad) he pretended that it was the translation of a story by a Persian author. He even coined a Persian name for the imaginary author—Rooya Nishej. The question of genre impressed itself on Naiyer Masud’s subconscious mind to such an extent that it finds mention every time Masud has an opportunity to talk about it.

### Thus Spake Naiyer Masud

In an interview with Sagaree Sengupta, Masud said:

Once I was talking to Asif Farrukhi and I was explaining [...] 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.

(1998, 26)

His readers are equally baffled when trying to penetrate to the crux of Masud's narratives using the heavily-scratched filter-glass of his interviews where he seems to deliberately attempt to demolish almost all the genre-specific realms by saying such things as:

"... when the new kind of short story, with its penchant for ambiguity and abstraction moved to center stage and was discussed vigorously in debates, I read it too. However, I didn't find it to my liking."

"As for abstraction and ambiguity—I personally don't care much for them...."

"If you find the atmosphere unfamiliar, I guess the reason is that it is not even familiar to me."

"My effort was to suppress spatial and temporal specificity."

"... that they [his stories] should be beyond time and place, or be something entirely different, was certainly not my intention."

"My stories are not fantasies, at least not in the sense of the fantastic."

"I've not presented anything in ["Mār Gir"] which you might call unreal or contrary to reality."

"... I don't like a story to be a straight retelling of actual events...."

"... I do make a determined effort not to let my work sound like a tale...."

"You make the vaguest suggestion and the reader's imagination takes over."

"At times I don't have the whole story in my mind. Other times I do, but I leave out substantial parts in the finished piece."

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

“... new plots don't occur readily to me. I shouldn't even call it plot; what does occur is the vaguest ghost of a plot.”

(Farrukhi 1997, 265–74)

“There is no nostalgia in my work. I don't like nostalgia.”

“Things that have already happened have a dreamlike quality about them.”

“The story should just go on, without necessarily a lot of dramatic events.”

“To state things openly ... I don't think it's the job of fiction.”

“I don't try to be obscure. I've tried not to write a single obscure sentence....”

“I didn't want any artificial dramatics in [“*Īṭr-e Kāfūr*”], [...] nor any intriguing event.”

“There's no plot and there's nothing unusual about it....”

“I've had some dreams which are complete and coherent stories....”

“The hardest thing is to figure out the plot.”

“Just under half of my stories are based on some dream or another.”

(Sengupta 1998, 128–32, 139)

In the two interviews I have cited above, Masud has frowned upon symbols, rejected idioms and denounced metaphors in prose narrative. His list of negatives goes on almost ad infinitum regarding genre-specific elements and techniques.

### **Naiyer Masud vs. Naiyer Masud**

Many critics find Masud quite intriguing. Attempting to analyze his stories strictly based on the text can prove baffling. The stories seem to be the antithesis of the concepts Masud has enunciated and elaborated in his interviews. Even Shamim Hanafi has pointed this out.

On various occasions Naiyer Masud has stated many things about his creative life and also about his short stories, and in the context thereof many readers and critics have formed opinions. I think if one trusts such assertions blindly it would give rise to innumerable confusions.

(2007, 166)

And although Masud refuses to accept that his short stories can be part of

the genre of the fantastic, Mehr Afshan Farooqi sees fantasy in “Jānashīn” and “Bādnumā” (2003, 150).

At the outset, I must confess that I too was baffled by Masud’s interviews and, like many others, was convinced that the author Naiyer Masud does not care two hoots for the theoretician Naiyer Masud and there is an irreconcilable gulf between the two. Rejectionism may be an ideal condition for perfect fiction, according to the theoretician Naiyer Masud, but the first-person narrator of his stories *prima facie* does not seem to follow the illustrative, if not mandatory, dictates of the theoretician, and apparently these dictates are observed more in breach than in practice.

There appear to be two Naiyer Masuds: one is the theoretician and the other is the master storyteller. It is not that there are no conceptual overlaps between the two Masuds, but they are very few and far between. His dual personality becomes sharply demarcated when his stories and his interviews are read side-by-side. Masud the theoretician lays down the tenets of his poetics of fiction in his interviews, while Masud the author conveniently, and perhaps deliberately, ignores almost every tenet in the rule book of Masud the rational theoretician. The discernible features of fiction, as enunciated by Masud the theoretician, may be very important, but Masud’s first-person narrator does not seem to be an ardent and willing follower. Masud, for example, is very emphatic in expressing his dislike for ambiguity and abstraction, yet the first-person narrator of his stories seems to love them. His narrator chooses to call a graveyard a “death field” (*murda maidān*), for example, just to create ambiguity. Masud the theoretician may say that the change in diction has been resorted to in order to break the boundary of temporal specificity, but in the context of *murda maidān* Masud talks about graves (*qabr*) fully-dug, half dug, or even re-dug on several occasions. He would perhaps say that he has used the word “*qabr*” to avoid incomprehensibility in the context and that, hence, the use of the word “*qabr*” repeatedly makes the concomitant occult rituals (a discussion of these occult practices with reference to “*Sīmiyā*” follows) less ambiguous. Granted. But ambiguity is ambiguity irrespective of its being less or more. This is just one example. Another example might be found in the narrative information pertaining to useless (*fuḏūl*) women in the short story “*Ōjhal*” and the woman of bad-character (*badkirdār*) in “*Nuṣrat*.” These do not have any definite direct bearing on the overall scheme and pattern of the stories. Ambiguity is one of the basic features of the narrative style of Masud the storyteller.

### Naiyeresque Reconciliation

For some, ambiguity and abstraction may be very important features of Naiyeresque stories, but Naiyeresque is not the same as Kafkaesque. In Kafka's stories the reader has to struggle with the narrative. He does not know whether he is an intruder or a participant. In "The Trial," the reader does not know the case, the nature of the charges lodged against Joseph K (the central character), how the trial proceeded, when the death sentence was pronounced, and so on. Similarly in "The Castle," the central character gets a job but nobody knows the nature of the job or the conditions connected with it. The roots of Kafka's incoherence might be found in his highly disturbed personal life, the likely result of the pronounced anti-Semitic environment around him. However, unlike Kafka, Naiyer Masud leads a normal life and "Nuşrat" and other similar stories do not appear to be reflections of emotional turmoil resulting from a hostile milieu. Naiyeresque is more difficult to explain.

In Kafkaesque stories one can discover a central thread running through the entire narrative. Naiyeresque stories are like a cobweb in which there is no discernible central thread, yet there is a pattern. There are unanswered questions and loose ends, yet the wholeness of the stories is not compromised. Naiyeresque stories demand the participation and involvement of readers in order to be deciphered. No one has so far denied the wholeness in Masud's stories. Justifications for the incoherence in Kafkaesque stories may be found in the fact that they are expressions of his emotional turmoil in a patently hostile milieu. Such expressions may or may not be genre specific. In Naiyeresque stories, such defiance is neither palpable nor visible, yet there is a similarity, a highly pertinent and marked similarity.

Kafkaesque stories cannot be understood without taking into account the social milieu of the author and the nightmarish emotional turmoil to which he was perpetually subjected. Similarly, Naiyeresque stories cannot be understood without the theoretical framework deduced from Masud's interviews. For example, Masud has not provided footnotes suggesting that the story in question is based on a dream, so his interviews are useful in this regard. In "Simiyā": What was the festival being celebrated at night? Who was the drowned virgin? These are questions that arise in the beginning. What were the tasks the first-person narrator was trying to accomplish during the initial stages in "Ōjhal"? These are the missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. A discerning reader will have to first search for the pieces in the text and context of the story, but later anyone who reads a bit about the occult sciences of the composite culture of India

realizes that most such tantra (for Hindus) and *amal* (for Muslims) are occult practices performed on the banks of rivers and graveyards (as in “Sīmiyā”). The first-person narrator of “Ōjhal” was interested in establishing a level of physical cum sexual contact with a distant relative and this was a task to be accomplished; a task he failed to accomplish on two earlier occasions but ultimately succeeded. When he clinches the distant relative in a passionate, vibrant and choking embrace, he speaks non-chalantly in a non-contextual manner, “That day I successfully finished the task I had mishandled twice before...” (Masud 1997b, 67).

Naiyeresque is showing a known world through a hazy glass. It demands the involvement of the reader, but it does not demand mental gymnastics. It requires the full participation of readers in the narrative scheme. Naiyeresque stories are like jigsaw puzzles with one or two pieces missing here and there, and readers are required to search for and supply those pieces. A linear narrative can ill afford such features. Obviously, if a reader is not able to supply the missing pieces of the puzzle the narrative will remain ambiguous for him.

A reader must trust both Masuds and make a sincere effort to search for consonance between his theoretical and creative expressions. A fractured approach may result in generic confusion and interpretational chaos.

### Dream Poetics

Naiyer Masud has made three very significant revelations regarding his creative pursuits: (1) his first choice of a penname was Rooya Nishej, which is a Persian compound meaning “one who fabricates dreams”; (2) slightly less than half of his short stories are based on real dreams; and (3) he has deliberately chosen first-person narrators for most of his stories. (His deliberate choice of first-person narrators was discussed in a telephone conversation I had with him on 30 December 2007. He confirmed that his choice of such narrators was a license to include bizarre and unexplainable circumstances since a first-person narrator is neither omniscient nor can he make an objective assessment of any situation. After all, the subjective perception of a particular person is only his personal point of view, which may be thoroughly bizarre and utterly illogical to others.) These three revelations are sufficient to reconcile the apparent contradictions between the theoretical and creative instances of Naiyer Masud.

The glaring temporal incoherence and logical inconsistencies inher-

ent in dream-based stories are definitely applicable to most of the stories of Masud. Dream-oriented stories suffer from this double jeopardy of incoherence because, firstly, dreams by their nature are incoherent. No time-space sequence is possible in a dream, at best it can be a time-space montage with a loosely identifiable theme. Secondly, despite the claim of the author to the contrary, total recall is simply impossible, hence, in dream-based stories even the loose coherence becomes blurred.

Despite such limitations, the dream-based stories of Masud unfold as complete narratives because the source of the stories in question is a dream, which is not an authorial construct and hence, to a large extent, cannot be manipulated, and such stories are recalled memories.

Masud's dreams are unique. They are neither literary nor psychological. They cannot be subjected to Jungian/Freudian analysis. If such an analysis were attempted, it would be tantamount to analyzing the author, not the story.

The first name that comes to mind in connection with dream-based stories is Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Apart from dream-based stories, such as "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man," Dostoyevsky also tried to delineate the poetics of such stories: "It was the way it always is in dreams—we leap over space, time, the laws of reason and existence, and stop only at points dear to our hearts" (1961, 213).

Thus, according to Dostoyevsky, once it is declared that a particular story is based on a dream it acquires a creative license for time-space incoherence. Dostoyevsky has himself benefited from this license immensely in his stories. The central character of "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" says:

(a) A dream is a strange thing. Pictures appear with terrifying clarity, the minutest details engraved like pieces of jewelry, and yet, we leap unawares through huge abysses of time and space.

(*ibid.*, 210–11)

(b) But what difference does it make since the dream revealed the truth to me? Once you've found Truth, you know it's the truth and that there isn't and can't be any other truth, whether you're asleep or awake.

(*ibid.*, 211)

This is what Dostoyevsky is saying through the mouth of the Ridiculous Man. His character dreams what Dostoyevsky wants him to dream. His character speaks what Dostoyevsky wants him to speak. They are dream-constructs and not dreams per se.

Jennifer Cleary has very rightly said that it is

important when discussing a dream in a novel to distinguish between the literary and psychological implications of the dream. The dream is obviously the functional product of the author's imagination, and hence, must serve a definite purpose in the work.

(n.d., i)

In Naiyer Masud's stories, dreams are not mentioned in the text because they do not have to serve a predetermined purpose. Their actual occurrence is outside the text. They are not literary dreams either. They are genuine dreams presented in the form of a genre. Tenets of Dostoyevskian poetics do not apply. Nor can Masud's stories be subjected to Jungian/Freudian analysis. It requires a Naiyer Masud-specific poetics to get to the heart of the matter for such stories. It might be called a Naiyeresque poetics of dreams. For example, in "Nuşrat," which is a story based on a real dream, though there is time-space specificity, still there are instances of temporal aberrations and montage-like patches occur here and there. The central character Nuşrat has had an accident resulting in a severe foot injury. The injury is mended, but she dies. Masud, in fact, does not think it is the job of writers to tell their stories clearly, in a straightforward manner (Sengupta 1998, 143). In "Nuşrat" he creates a fairly elaborate scene but never states that Nuşrat has died. This is left for the reader to conclude. The scene in question is:

I called her softly and my eyes fell on her. Her features were not visible. I couldn't understand why this was so. I leaned forward and took a closer look. Dry yellow leaves covered her face like a veil. I wanted to remove the leaves from her face but saw that they were held together by cobwebs and my hand stopped halfway.

(1997a, 94)

It is true that Masud does not specifically mention that Nuşrat is dead, yet cobweb-snared dry yellow leaves make it clear that she is. Parallel to this plot summary (plot is not a condition precedent to plot summary; here plot summary simply means story summary) there are other incidents and descriptions that have no direct or even indirect bearing on the main storyline. The case of the promiscuous woman is one example, along with the rare artifacts in the drawing room, the discussion of the implication of colors, and so on. There are numerous such incidents and descriptions. If one tries to understand "Nuşrat" as a story per se, it is easy to become baffled and draw the conclusion that the creative Naiyer Masud does not agree with Masud the theoretician. However, when the story is considered as a dream represented as a genre, the contradiction is reconciled. One might call this a typical Naiyeresque tenet.

### Simiya: The Unnarrated Bits

... I want to explore what happens in the unnarrated bits of particular narratives—the quite literal holes in the story, that are so essential to narrative economy that they usually go unnoticed. For lack of a better term, I'm going to call this characteristic *porosity*.

(Wolfe 2006, 1)

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

(Masud qtd. in Farrukhi 1997, 273)

The unnarrated bits are the unknown portions of the narrative that are not textually represented. These bits are an invitation to the discerning reader to participate in the scheme of the narrative and discover the unknown. Naiyer Masud has mastered and perfected the art of the unnarrated. He has a voice of his own, a fictional voice with a unique decibel. It demands being listened to, simply hearing will not do.

Masud's “Simiyā” is a defining text of the unknown and unnarrated. It is full of porosity. Almost everyone would come to the conclusion that it is a story based on occult practices. The lexical meaning suggests it unambiguously. Simply put, the word “simiyā” means “occult art.”<sup>1</sup> The story begins with a vivid description of the remains of a just-concluded festival.

The festival was over now and there was no one at the river bank. The evening's bonfires had long since gone cold, but now and then in the darkness, as the lightly gusting wind blew over them, the fire trapped inside flared up. The burning sensation in my nostrils persisted, which meant that some bonfires were still giving off smoke.

(2006, 140)

Quite a few readers and critics have commented that the opening paragraph has no connection whatsoever with the overall scheme of the narrative. Despite a clear title, which means “occult art,” they missed the woods and opted for the trees. Anyone who has even a rudimentary knowledge of oriental occult practices will know that burning ghats (funeral grounds) are a very important part of such practices, and they are invariably situated on the banks of rivers. Funeral pyres are nothing but bonfires. These are simply lexical representations. This has nothing to do with symbolism or symbology.

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<sup>1</sup>*Practical Standard Twentieth Century Dictionary: Urdu into English*, compiled by Bashir Ahmad Qureshi (Delhi: Anjum Book Depot, 1999), 54.

“You make the vaguest suggestion and the reader’s imagination takes over” (Farrukhi 1997, 271). In the case of “*Simiyā*” the suggestions made by Masud are not even vague. The only vague thing is that he has left some gaps here and there and these have to be filled in by readers’ imaginations. Returning to the subject of the occult, I need only quote a few books on occult practices with regard to the significance of funeral pyres, burning ghats, etc.

The occult arts include mantra, *yantra* and tantra. Mantra is not mentioned in “*Simiyā*” hence no discussion of it is required. “*Yantra* means the pictorial or symbolic representation of tantra and mantra, and of powers, processes and practices (*sadhana*) used to achieve a desired object or result” (Mishra 2004, 3). *Naqsh* (the Urdu equivalent of *yantra*) is described vividly in “*Simiyā*.” The central character uses a child who is physically handicapped as a prop in an occult practice, perhaps in order to cure the child. He draws a *naqsh* (image) in charcoal on the wall but it gets smudged. Later on the child used as a prop dies. The practice failed to achieve its desired result. The father blames the practitioner as he was suspicious of such activities, but later on he realizes that it was not the practitioner’s mistake. *Naqsh* is mentioned repeatedly in the story.

First of all, I looked over at the wall on the right where I had drawn the image [*naqsh*] of a pair of opened hands. I noticed that the image [*naqsh*] was changed a bit and I went up close to it. There was no possibility for doubt. Someone had tried to erase it. Picking up the pieces of charcoal lying on the floor, I began to put the image [*naqsh*] right again.

(2006, 143)

There, as I had expected, he was standing between the spread out hands of the image [*naqsh*]. When he saw me, he laughed loudly.

It was the child with stern eyes both of whose hands were missing. It wasn’t because of some accident; he’d been born that way.

(*ibid.*, 144)

Both men went toward the image [*naqsh*]. [...] The two men pulled out both nails from the palms of the image [*naqsh*].

“We’ll throw them in the river,” one of them said, “and now this child won’t come here.”

(*ibid.*, 147)

“How did he die?” I heard myself saying out loud, and in reply voices came from several directions at once: “By turning green”

(*ibid.*, 153)

They blame the practitioner because he did something on the bank of the river just before sunset. “Just before sunset” and “on the bank of the

river” are uttered repeatedly to emphasize the blame and to add an occult dimension to it. Again, in a typical Naiyeresque manner, neither the word “blame” nor any word that would directly indicate occultism is ever uttered by anyone. The reader has to infer it, just as he had to infer the death of Nuşrat.

I looked at the image [*naqsh*] of the opened hands on the wall. [...] I held the bundle on both hands and went up close to the image [*naqsh*]. The pieces of charcoal lying on the floor crunched as they came under my feet. “What’s the use? I again thought and moved away from the image [*naqsh*].”  
(*ibid.*, 164)

“What’s the use?” the practitioner utters twice. First when he is offered the dead body of the child by his father and again when he approaches the *naqsh*.

In “*Sīmiyā*,” apart from the story of the child, there are other stories as well. While the story of the child born handicapped is based on *yantra* (*naqsh*), the main story is based on tantra, wherein the occult practitioner dies owing to the faulty application of the tantra methodology. “*Tantra* is *sadbhāna* that employs a systematic step-by-step approach with rigorous physical and psychological discipline” (Rajnanananda 2006, 8).

This is a simple linear narrative, but there are several knots. The occult practice here required a jet black dog. The reader gets the impression that the practice failed and the dog bit the practitioner. But why did the practice fail? There is an answer in the story but it has not been discussed in the critical literature. One basic problem with the critics of Naiyer Masud’s stories is that either they do not read the interviews carefully or they do not read the stories carefully. Quite a few neglect both. The jet black dog in “*Sīmiyā*” was itself the product of an occult practice. Since I have not found this point discussed in any of the analyses of the story, I feel it should be pointed out.

It is a simple science, but it comes after *sīmiyā*.” [...] Take equal measures of everything, make a fine consistency and soak in water overnight. The next day, dye the whole body of some white animal with it—all the hair of the animal, indeed right up to the skin, will turn black permanently.  
(2006, 192)

The practice did not fail because of hydrophobia caused by the dog bite. The dog bite was caused by the practitioner and was not the cause of the failure. After all, the occult practice did succeed partially. The entire practice was meant to cause rain, which it did. However, the practitioner did not realize that the dog used as a prop had to be born black, not made black. He did not understand the implications of carrying out imperfect

tantric practices. He failed to read the fine print which contained the warning clause. The practitioner in “Sīmiyā” could not follow the rigors of the required physical and psychological discipline.

Mishra says: “Sometimes the practitioner fails even for minor mistakes” (2004, 4). What the practitioner did here was not a minor mistake, it was a major mistake. The prop-dog required for the practice was supposed to be black, but it was not.

As mentioned earlier, the story begins with nighttime bonfires and festivities on the bank of the river. I would guess that this relates to a funeral-field and to funeral pyres. Masud clarified in his interview with Asif Farrukhi that *murda maidān* (ground for the dead) meant nothing but a graveyard (1997, 268). By logical corollary, the bank of the river, the bonfires and festivities must be tantric practices being performed with funeral pyres.

I consulted some books on tantra and was astonished to find that burning ghats, *shav sadhana* (occult practices with a dead body on a pyre), *munda sadhana* and *kapalika* (occult practices with a skull) and *aghor sadhana*<sup>2</sup> have a direct connection with the bank of a river, bonfires and festivities (Rajnanananda 2006, 40-45). During Masud’s interviews with Sagaree Sengupta and Asif Farrukhi these specific subjects never came up, so they were not discussed. As mentioned elsewhere, I telephoned Naiyer Masud in December 2007 and during our conversation he confirmed that he had read volume after volume on tantric practices and *aghor panth*, and “Sīmiyā,” being a story based on occult art, contains various ingredients thereof as ingrained in his subconscious mind.

In “Sīmiyā,” readers find more than a fleeting reference to a drowned virgin. *Aghor sadhana mithuna* (conjugation) is one of the five practices which requires a virgin.<sup>3</sup> I was unable to find any published references involving the use of drowned virgins so I consulted A. K. Mishra, whose late father J. C. Mishra compiled a few books on tantra. He told me that tantric practices are not performed by reading books. Books are meant for academic discussions only. Such practices should be learned under the strict guidance of an able guru (teacher). He also told me that since, generally, virgins are not available for *aghor sadhana*, practitioners are in

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<sup>2</sup>Aghoris are a special group of tantric practitioners who live on cremation grounds and follow their own rituals without any visible discipline. They remain naked and smear their bodies with the ashes collected from the funeral pyres (Rajnanananda 2006, 44).

<sup>3</sup>The other four are madya (wine), mamsa (flesh), matsya (fish) and mudra (art of making love) (*ibid.*, 28–38).

search of the dead bodies of virgins, and drowned virgins are an ideal choice.

Even if this were not the case, virgins are very important in tantra/mantra. In *Chandi Pooja Yantra* it is mentioned that “For the fulfillment of all desires one should worship a Brahmin virgin, for name and fame a Kshatriya virgin, for wealth a Vaisya virgin and for children a Shudra virgin” (2004, 186). A two-year-old virgin is Kumari, a three-year-old is Trimurti, a four-year-old is Kalyani, a five-year-old is Rohini, a six-year-old is Kalika, a seven-year-old is Chandika, an eight-year-old is Shambhavi, a nine-year-old is Durga and a ten-year-old is Subhadra. One-year-old and more than ten-year-old girls are unfit for *chandi pooja yantra* (*ibid.*).

Even in *kapalik* tantra, the skull of a virgin is required. It is a very common sight to find a tantric practitioner who keeps a skull in his possession, especially a vermilion-colored skull of a virgin, worshipping it to invoke magical and supernatural powers (Rajnanananda 2006, 43).

The various finer aspects of “*Simiyā*” could easily be discussed at length, but since this is a discussion of Naiyer Masud’s work as a whole it will have to be left here for now.

### Naiyeresque Plot and Epiphany

Naiyer Masud has unambiguously expressed his disinclination for traditional plots. While a fast-paced, tightly-held and well-woven plot may be a prerequisite formula for bestsellers, it is, nevertheless, a formula that does not require extraordinary skill. Despite being a bestseller, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* is nothing more than the juggling of symbology within a plot. Writing a story without moorings is an art perfected and mastered by very few, particularly when the writer tries to avoid the stream-of-consciousness route. Masud has chosen a very difficult path. His narratives are different from James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*. “*Mār Gīr*,” “*Ōjhal*,” “*Nuṣrat*,” and “*Simiyā*” are all full of temporal and chronological events. Readers can easily observe the passage of time with very little movement at the conscious level. Gustav Freytag’s Plot Triangle (1895) cannot be applied to Masud’s stories. A Naiyeresque plot is unique. In a traditional plot, it is the character who creates movement. After exposition, it is the character who creates curiosity, involves himself in a conflict, facilitates a climax and reaches dénouement through conflict resolution. If there is a plot to be found in Naiyer Masud’s stories, it is Naiyeresque. It is not an Aristotelian or

Freytag plot based on the concept of unity of action. Hints about the elements that constitute a Naiyeresque plot are given in “*Ōjhal*.” Almost everyone, including Masud himself, agrees that fear is a dominant feature of his stories. In “*Ōjhal*” Masud makes clear that desire is equally important.

At some point, it finally occurred to me that there was one part of this house which aroused fear and another part where one felt that some unknown desire was about to be fulfilled.

(1997b, 69)

I returned to the houses I had seen many times and located these domains of fear and desire. No house, whether old or new [...] was without these domains.

(*ibid.*)

Then one day I discovered a house where fear and desire existed in the same domain.

I stood there for a while, trying to decide whether I was experiencing fear or desire but I could not separate the two feelings. In this house fear was desire and desire, fear. [...] She was a young woman and at the time there was no one else in the house except the two of us. She came close to me to examine me carefully and I realized that this domain of fear and desire was affecting her as well.

(*ibid.*)

Ultimately fear dominates desire.

My bed is positioned exactly on top of the domain of fear. I have not been able to discover the domain of desire in this house. But that cannot be. So I have now become convinced that fear and desire converge here in exactly the same spot and that I have dominion over it.

(*ibid.*, 81)

This is just his belief, the fact remains that he did not find the abode of desire.

The conflict between fear and desire is explicit in “*Ōjhal*,” but in almost all of Masud’s stories such conflict is implicit, and in almost all of his stories it is fear that ultimately dominates desire. In “*Ōjhal*,” the first-person narrator could not get beyond an embrace, despite all his opportunities, because he was fearful. In “*Mār Gīr*” the snake catcher ultimately dies. In “*Sīmiyā*,” first the child used as a prop dies and then the practitioner dies, both of them in a macabre fashion. Death is the ultimate crystallization of fear. Everyone fears death the most, whether willing to admit it or not is immaterial.

The Naiyeresque plot, like the traditional plot, is formed by conflict, but here there is a cross-thematic conflict, and, in almost every case fear and desire are the twin themes that are in conflict. And, in almost every case, it is fear that dominates. If there is any possibility at all for a Naiyeresque plot triangle, it would be a triangle with non-linear and non-angular corners, with a series of intertwined fears and desires where, in the end, only fear finds a place. Desire fades away somewhere along the line.

Generally, where traditional plot gets obliterated, epiphany creeps in. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines epiphany in literature as the

sudden revelation of an underlying truth about a person or situation. Taken from the Greek *epiphaneia*, the manifestation by the gods of their divinities to mortal eyes, the term was first applied to literature by James Joyce, who called his early experimentations with short prose passages epiphanies. Such moments of insight form the core of Joyce's short stories, published in *Dubliners* (1914).

(*Micropaedia*, 1974, v.3, 925)

Masud's stories are full of epiphanic moments where a truth is revealed by seemingly trivial incidents. For instance:

"Like any hunter ... like any hunting animal, a python seeks out prey only when it's hungry."

("Mār Gīr" 2003, 170)

This is unlike man, who generally hunts when he is not hungry.

"... there are two types of snakes: one from whose bite a man dies legitimately; and a second from whose bite a man dies illegitimately." But this, in effect, amounted to two kinds of men, didn't it?

(*ibid.*)

The bad woman was there too, as part of the audience. Contrary to my expectations, she didn't look significantly different from the others.

("Nuṣrat" 1997a, 88)

"As for me, I like black more. Do you know why?"

She raised her head to look at me. [...] "Because black is the color of nothingness."

(*ibid.*, 93)

When Nuṣrat was alive she was wearing a white dress and when she died she was wearing black.

"This is precisely the reason I wanted to have her."

“Because of her black color?” I asked.  
 “Black is the color of nothingness,” he said slowly.  
 (“Sīmiyā” 2006, 150)

The practitioner died because of the imperfect black color of the dog.

\*

Naiyer Masud’s narratives are highly multidimensional and multilayered. Many stories run side-by-side in a single narrative such as in “Ōjhal” and “Sīmiyā.” My effort here has been intended to initiate a process of demystifying Masud’s work. Hopefully others will follow and surpass my endeavors. □

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