

Introducing the Urdu Short Story in Translation¹

By Muhammad Umar Memon

An Indo-European language, Urdu developed soon after Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna's incursions from present-day war-torn Afghanistan into northern India early in the eleventh century. It is written in the Perso-Arabic script and borrows a significant portion of its literary vocabulary from Arabic, Persian and Turkish. A language of high literary refinement, Urdu is spoken by easily a few hundred million people, chiefly in India, where it is one of the official languages; Pakistan, where it is the national language; and in Western countries with sizeable South Asian expatriate or émigré populations, such as the UK and Canada. Although more people know it than the combined speakers of Arabic, Persian and Turkish, little is known about its literary culture. The reasons are simple enough: Although every bit an Indian language in which not just Muslims but also Hindus and Sikhs participated from its beginnings, it has now become inextricably identified with the Muslims of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent alone, at least since the Partition of India in 1947. This historically misleading and politically motivated conflation of a language with a religious community has led to its marginalization in academic and popular discourses on the subcontinent. On the other hand, Arabs from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the Gulf states, who constitute perhaps fifteen to twenty per cent of the total Muslim population of over 1.5 billion worldwide, identify themselves quite self-consciously as the primary custodians, arbiters and spokesmen of all that stands for Islam and Muslim culture, unaffected by the exuberance of non-Arab expressions in the creative arts. The same close association is validated in the popular imagination across the world perhaps due to the ineluctable force of oil politics in our time. Urdu has had a vibrant literary tradition. However, the creative heart of this tradition has historically been predisposed towards poetry. Since its pre-eminent literary forms and conventions have been mostly borrowed from Arabic and Persian, which stand out for assigning relatively little value to mimesis in the production of imaginative literature, poetry has had to carry the main thrust of all creative art. One could even say that, historically, in Muslim cultures, 'literature'—or belles lettres—stands overwhelmingly for 'poetry,' as though the two were interchangeable terms. In that culture, prose, conversely, had been reserved from the

earliest times for the expression of formal thought and the travails of discursive reason. Although a smattering of prose works did exist, these can only loosely be described as fictional in nature. Prose literature—particularly fiction, if the term can be applied at all—was predominantly oral in the premodern period, i.e. before the mid-nineteenth century, and consisted of the *dastans*—enormous anonymous story cycles recited in public by professional tellers and committed to writing only in the nineteenth century. Radically different in worldview from that of the post-Renaissance West, this form harked back to a different fictional poetics and it had different concerns underlying its production. But fiction as it is understood in the West did not appear in Urdu until well into the nineteenth century, and that too as a by-product of colonial rule. The novel came first, in the middle and latter part of the century, but only in the sense of formalistic rudiments. This early—or proto—novel, is most clearly represented in the works of Nazir Ahmad (1831-1912) and Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar's (1845-1903) voluminous *Fasaana-e Azaad*, a conglomeration of episodes originally conceived as a serial for the newspaper *Avadh Akhbar*. It was not until 1899, however, that the first recognizably modern novel made its appearance in Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* (named after a fictitious Lucknow courtesan; now available in at least two English translations). The short story, on the other hand, arrived roughly a quarter of a century later. It emerged as a discrete narrative form only in the work of Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) around the turn of the twentieth century. But Premchand, except for a few works completed towards the end of his life, wrote more out of a need to push an agenda of social reform than from any concern for the individual as an autonomous entity flung across history and culture, but more importantly across the changing landscapes of their own tortured and tortuous psyche. Still less did he concern himself with the notion that literature enjoyed an autonomy and a mode of being all its own.

The same spirit pervades the bulk of fictional work produced under the aegis of the Progressive Writers' Movement, founded in 1936. In their desire to break free from British colonial rule and establish an economically just society along Marxist lines, the members of this movement bypassed, for the most part, fiction's great potential for probing into realms beyond those offered by their immediate socioeconomic reality. The fictional output of this period was rigidly circumscribed by the authorial notion of the short story then common in the literary canon. The emphasis was increasingly on social reality—though not social reality as a whole, only certain elements of it such as the unequal distribution of wealth, exploitation of the individual by the moneyed classes, disregard of the individual's personality and desires out of religious considerations, etc.—to the growing exclusion of the individual as a being poised precariously between history and desire.

While staunch Progressives such as Sajjad Zaheer (d. 1973), Krishan Chandar (d. 1977) and Ismat Chughtai (d. 1991)—to name only a few—churned out story after story according to a formula forged in the crucible of Marxist ideology, independents such as Ahmed Ali (d. 1994) of *Twilight in Delhi* fame, Saadat Hasan Manto (d. 1955), Urdu's greatest and most accomplished short story writer and Muhammad Hasan Askari (d. 1978)—again to mention only a few—chose to break away from the paradigmatic stranglehold of the Progressive ideology and pursue the elusive and shimmering world of individual consciousness.

The two decades between the birth of the Progressives in 1936 and the demise of their Movement in the 1950s may be considered the most propitious period for the development of Urdu fiction. In that period the short story, for instance, broadened its thematic horizon to include not just the external but also the intensely personal, and showed an increasing openness to technical innovation. More than anything else, it ensured a decisive break from the residual elements of the *dastan* that still flickered unsuspectingly in the fictional production of the time. Alongside the didactic and socially motivated agenda, which remained the hallmark of much of the Progressive writing of the period, one can see, primarily among the nonaligned writers, the use of the short story as a form fully aware of its inherent potential for the discovery and articulation of realities beyond the external and the social. The meandering propensity for technical innovation entered a more daring, if sometimes aesthetically perilous phase, in the sixth decade of the last century. This modern product may be best described by the term 'post-realist', in that it inaugurated the final collapse of the familiar space between the writer's persona and the reader. Here all the spatial and temporal coordinates are often rigidly withheld in order to present experience in its pristine essence, without any kind of mediation or comment.

The developments in Urdu literary production both in India and Pakistan since 1947 have evolved along pretty much the same lines, except that, where fiction is concerned, Indian Urdu writers show a greater propensity for innovation, daring and independence of will. The traditional poetic form of the *ghazal* (loosely, a lyric), eclipsed briefly by the *nazm* (poem) during the heyday of the Progressive Writers (1936-50), has reclaimed its turf, but without any attempt to smother the growth of other forms, especially that of the *na'i nazm* (new poetry), which began in a concerted manner in India in the late 1950s and quickly assumed the dimensions of a significant literary movement.

Prose fiction too has moved away from, or at least become wary, of its earlier dependence on external reality and a linear treatment of plot, though these characteristics still persist in the works of many writers. Contemporary output offers a

more nuanced and complex treatment of the fictional subject, and is characterized by a more aggressive mobilization of different narrative techniques.

Looking at Urdu literary production over the last 150 years, one immediately notices two major facts: one, while there has been no dearth of good poets in this period, there have been very few who approach the originality and virtuosity of Ghalib (d. 1869) and Mir (d. 1810), the only exceptions being Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) and, strictly in terms of popularity, the Lenin Peace Prize laureate Faiz Ahmed Faiz (d. 1984); and two, the period is incontestably dominated by prose fiction. While the list of Urdu fiction writers in the last hundred years is fairly long, the more famous among the Pakistani writers who have received wide critical acclaim would be: Abdullah Hussein, Altaf Fatima, Ahmad Nadeem Qasimi, Asad Muhammad Khan, Ashfaq Ahmad, Aziz Ahmad, Bano Qudsia, Enver Sajjad, Fahmida Riaz, Farkhunda Lodhi, Ghulam Abbas, Hajira Masrur, Hasan Manzar, Intizar Husain, Jameela Hashmi, Khadija Mastur, Khalida Husain, Muhammad Mansha Yaad, Mumtaz Mufti, Mumtaz Shirin, Quadratullah Shahab, Qurratulain Hyder, Razia Fasih Ahmad, Saadat Hasan Manto, Shaukat Siddiqi, Zahida Hena and Zamiruddin Ahmad.² The literary career of some of these writers actually started before the creation of Pakistan, and in the case of Qurratulain Hyder, followed along a serpentine trajectory. She was already active as a writer in India before its 1947 split. She then migrated to Pakistan, where in 1959 she wrote her most controversial and technically most innovative and accomplished novel *Aag ka Darya* (River of Fire). In the decade of the 1960s Hyder decided to migrate back to India, where before her death in 2007 she was still actively engaged in the writing career that had started some sixty years ago. From what we read these days in our print media or watch on our television sets about Pakistani women, we are unlikely to associate any creativity—except perhaps procreativity—with them. Frightening images of unmitigated repression and abuse, including rape and murder, and suffocating seclusion behind the mobile death-tents of the burqa, daily impinge on our consciousness and disallow any happier and more constructive role in society for them. Yet the simple fact is that women have been involved in the field of literature right from the start. The small inventory of names offered above includes several women writers. Altaf Fatima, Bano Qudsia, Fahmida Riaz (who also happens to be a first-rate feminist poet³), Farkhunda Lodhi, Hajira Masrur, Jameela Hashmi, Khadija Mastur, Khalida Husain, Mumtaz Shirin, Qurratulain Hyder, Razia Fasih Ahmad and Zahida Hena are not just women writers, they are accomplished writers. And if one were to judge on the basis of sheer volume and quality, Qurratulain Hyder is arguably the finest Urdu fiction writer.

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Not all Pakistanis are fundamentalists. Indeed most are not. They are affected, like people everywhere, by common human emotions. They love, hate, feel jealousy and sympathy. They fall in love and make love. They are capable of exceptional kindness, just as they are capable of exceptional brutality. But regrettably, this is not how Pakistanis are shown in the media, especially since the tragic event of 11 September 2001 and many other similar episodes occurring within India itself. *Do You Suppose It's the East Wind?* is offered against just this essentializing tendency in order to restore our semblance in the *other*; to give some idea, however imperfect and tentative, of the range and breadth of their preoccupations and concerns, and of the emotions that propel them through the joyous and often equally painful business of living. The semblance may be easily retrievable in some of the stories that appear here, elusive in others. After all cultures differ, as do our responses to common stimuli. But there can be little doubt that Pakistanis do read, appreciate and create literature, just as do people elsewhere in South Asia and the West, and *that* literature offers many facets of our complex human existence.

Abdullah Hussein, who has written extensively about the feeling of exile and alienation and its devastations, revisits it again in his 'Sunlight'. He brings the exiled Saeed home after twenty long years, and readers smile an unconscious smile of satisfaction with Saeed when he overcomes his initial feeling of 'familiarity and foreignness' to finally step out into the refreshing spring rain of the city, his city, to seek out and visit old acquaintances.

Saadat Hasan Manto's 'For Freedom's Sake' is not just a story of how perfectly decent human beings are stunted and flawed when forced to suppress their natural physical desire, it is also a veiled critique of Mahatma Gandhi for his quite inhuman demand from his followers to sacrifice the joys of physical union in the name of national liberation from colonial rule.

The title story of the collection, 'Do You Suppose It's the East Wind?' by Altaf Fatima, reveals, even to the reader who knows nothing about the 1947 Partition of British India, the deep and abiding sense of personal loss felt by those Muslims and Hindus who, before the Partition, had developed bonds of familial affection that were forever severed when forces beyond their control forced them apart. As the East Wind blows, which is believed to reopen old wounds in the individual and revive memories long buried under the dust of time, a Muslim woman, presumably now in Pakistan, thinks about a Hindu boy, her playmate back when she lived in India. That she is still unmarried and goes through life without much élan or enthusiasm reveals the emotion that remains unvoiced in the story itself, an emotion stifled in its infancy and becoming intelligible only in adulthood. 'The Lure of Music' by Ghulam Abbas might present some difficulty to a non-South Asian reader. For one thing, the author is a master of extreme understatement and sugges-

tion, for another, this story, more than any other, requires considerable knowledge of South Asian Muslim society. In the story the reader follows along with amused chagrin as a hardworking husband and father leads his innocent wife and daughters down roads and into neighbourhoods they might have hoped never to see, after his long-suppressed love for music is reawakened on his way home late one evening when the gentle sound of a sarod fills his ears. But the true intensity of his sacrifice cannot be fully appreciated without some knowledge of the status of musicians and courtesan culture.

The Partition of India left a trail of blood in its wake. Its devastations, hard on all victims, were hardest on women. For religious reasons, a Hindu woman, if she survived her abduction and rape by Muslims at all, was not welcomed back into her own family. She thus suffered twice—first the violation of her body and then the indignity of lifelong rejection. While the notion of religious defilement did not apply in the case of a Muslim woman's rape, she too suffered its ill effects due to social and cultural practices. In 'Banished', writer Jameela Hashmi focuses poignantly on another dimension of this violence. Here, a Muslim woman held by her Sikh captor has the opportunity to return to her family across the border when soldiers come looking for abducted women to take them to their new country—but she chooses not to go. What is holding her back? Her children, of course, especially a daughter, conceived during her captivity. She did not wish for the birth of these children, but they are here, along with subterranean bonds that are hard to break. 'Love', she balefully reflects, 'finds new crutches'. Her suffering is endless.

In a lighter vein, some readers might wonder how anyone could write a story about mangoes, but before long they too become caught up in the excitement, in Abul Fazl Siddiqi's description in 'Gulab Khas', of the cutthroat national competition, held only once in five years, for the best 'new and improved' mango variety. The young, beautiful commoner, Sundariya, is convinced to put her Gulab Khas up against the excellent entries of the rich and powerful plantation owners with surprising and amusing and even shocking results. Ikramullah's 'Regret' is a stark and heart-wrenching portrayal of the death of burgeoning idealism. Ostensibly a story of two childhood friends, it vividly recalls, with wistfulness and compassion, the life of a city in East Punjab in what was once colonial India. The hunger and sacrifices of its population for independence, the tense atmosphere of the days just before Independence, when the population was precariously balanced between hope and despair, the unimaginable massacres that followed in the wake of Partition and ripped apart the communal harmony of this quiet city—all are described here with the admirable surety of artistic touch of a master story writer of contemporary Pakistan.

Well-known Pakistani feminist poet Fahmida Riaz takes readers on a visit to Kazakhstan when she turns to prose in her ‘Pink Pigeons—Was it They Who Won?’ The visit brings back memories of a onetime neighbour, Mulla Yusuf Ziai, whose paternal grandfather was a native of Kazakhstan. Through her often amusing memories, the narrator of the story manages, painlessly and almost unawares, to introduce readers to the complicated politics of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the former Soviet Republics. But at the subterranean level, this story also reveals the complicated forces at work in its narrator’s psyche. She discovers, with pleasant surprise, that despite all her education and freedom and feminism, she can ill afford a comparison with her children’s middle-aged Pathan nanny Bibi Jan in matters of freedom of the spirit, independence of mind and the needs of the flesh.

In ‘The Drizzle’, Hasan Manzar leaves it to his readers to answer the lingering question of whether Minachi, the Ceylonese Tamil Hindu girl who comes to wash clothes, did or did not actually steal the new gold locket Miss Kamariya had purchased after much sacrifice and which she had looked forward to wearing when she visited home for Eid. But in any event, the finger is pointed at Minachi and she must suffer the rejection and disdain of those around her more because of what she is than because of anything she may have done.

Trying to make sense of today’s news stories about clan rivalries and local warlords in the regions of north Pakistan and Afghanistan becomes a bit less difficult after reading Asad Muhammad Khan’s ‘Ma’i Dada’. Here readers meet Abdul Majid Khan Yusuf Zai—now known to the whole town as Ma’i Dada—whose favourite threat was that he would rip out someone’s guts and hang them around his neck! Ma’i Dada shows himself to be a true example of Pathan pride and temper, never mind that the rumours about his real ancestry prove true.

In Ashfaq Ahmad’s ‘Havens’, readers are drawn unawares into another story dealing with the deeply troubling reality of India’s Partition in 1947 when memories of his son Asif flood through the mind of an old veteranian waiting to cash a cheque. As the old man continually thinks ‘if only’, it gradually becomes clear that Asif has been killed and the old man realizes it is now too late to be the kind of father he should have been.

The central character in Javed Shahin’s ‘If Truth be Told’ is on his way to Sultan Bahu’s shrine because, while on one of her visits, his mother has left his home following a tiff with his wife, not an unusual occurrence, and she was yet to be found twenty days later. He himself does not believe in such things, but recalls how much his mother loved to visit saints’ shrines. Not finding her there, he nevertheless feels tremendous relief after admitting to himself the real reason he is going through the motions of searching.

The loneliness of a South Asian exile living in London, who claims to like solitude, is unmasked in Tasadduq Sohail's strongly autobiographical 'The Tree', when readers learn that the man's eyes 'involuntarily spilled their cargo of tears' after he finally located the remains of 'his' rather spunky talking tree that had been felled by a violent wind storm while he was away. Two final points need to be touched on. Pakistan is a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic society. Easily half a dozen languages are spoken across its length and breadth, with some of them, especially Sindhi and Punjabi, boasting of quite robust literary traditions. Urdu—which is not specific to any one region of the country and which is the mother tongue of only a small minority of mainly Indian Muslims who migrated there after 1947—continues to be the most widely understood and spoken language, and it also has the longest tradition of short story writing of any other Pakistani language.

Secondly, this collection lays no claim to being definitive or comprehensive or even representative. It cannot be. For every writer included, easily half a dozen equally important authors had to be left out, for instance Intizar Husain and Zamiruddin Ahmad, to name just two. The ambition of this collection is fairly modest: To present a glimpse of Pakistanis in the act of living.

Notes:

¹This essay has been adapted from the "Introduction to Urdu Short Stories," *Do You Suppose It's the East Wind: Stories from Pakistan*, Translated from Urdu by Muhammad Umar Memon. The collection to be published by Penguin Books (India) in June 2009.

²A partial listing of the works of these writers, as well as some Indian Urdu writers, available in English would include: Ghulam Abbas, *Hotel Moenjodaro and Other Stories*, tr. Khalid Hasan (New Delhi: Penguin Books, India, 1996); Aziz Ahmad, *The Shore and the Wave*, tr. Ralph Russell (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971); Altaf Fatima, *The One Who Did Not Ask*, tr. Rukhsana Ahmad (Oxford: Heinemann, 1993); Intizar Husain, *The Seventh Door and Other Stories*, ed. and with an introduction by Muhammad Umar Memon (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Abdullah Hussein, *Stories of Exile and Alienation*, tr. Muhammad Umar Memon (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), *The Weary Generations*, tr. by the author (London: Peter Owen, 1999); Qurratulain Hyder, *River of Fire*, transcreated by the author (New York: New Directions, 1998); Saadat Hasan Manto, *Kingdom's End and Other Stories*, tr. Khalid Hasan (London: Verso, 1987); Shaukat Siddiqi, *God's Own Land: A Novel of Pakistan*, tr. David J. Matthews (UK:

Paul Norbury Publications/UNESCO, 1991); Ismat Chughtai, *The Crooked Line*, tr. Tahira Naqvi (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995); Naiyer Masud, *Essence of Camphor*, tr. Muhammad Umar Memon and others (New York: The New Press, 2000), *Snake Catcher*, tr. Muhammad Umar Memon (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2005).

³ For a sampling of Fahmida Riaz's poetry and that of some other feminist poets, see *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*, tr. and ed. Rukhsana Ahmad (London: The Women's Press, 1991).