

FARUQ HASSAN

Hasan Manzar: An Introduction

BY HIS OWN ADMISSION, Syed Manzar Hasan, who writes under the pen name of Hasan Manzar, comes of a north Indian middle class family. His great-grandfather carried a price on his head for his involvement in the 1857 War of Independence—otherwise referred to as the Great Mutiny—against the English. Luckily, he was never caught and escaped imperial wrath.

Hasan Manzar was born in Hapur (Uttar Pradesh) on 4 March 1934. His family migrated to Pakistan in 1947 and settled in Lahore where he received most of his formal education. He attended Forman Christian College, Islamia College, and, later, King Edward Medical College for his medical degree. He did his postgraduate work in psychiatry at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He lives in Hyderabad, Sindh, where he heads a psychiatric clinic. He is married and has three children. His son and elder daughter are medical doctors, and his younger daughter is a university student. His wife is a pediatrician by profession. To date he has published four books: three collections of short stories, viz., *Rihā'ī* (Emancipation; 1981), *Nadīdī* (Greedy; 1982), and *Insān kā Dēsh* (Man's Country; 1991); and a translation into Urdu of Premchand's last, unfinished Hindi novel *Mangal Sutar* (1993). A book of children's stories and a fourth collection of short stories await publication.

In his conception of the form and technique of the short story, Hasan Manzar is very much a realist, inclining towards a traditional, old-fashioned view of plot, character and narrative in his story-telling. But his realism is so subtle, his stories so true to life, that while reading him, one often forgets to notice that a story is being told. That distinctive realism and a broad range of characters, settings and language types distinguish him from a host of other realistic writers of short stories in the South Asian subcontinent.

An aspect of his fiction that has been noted by all his critics is its

variety. The critical consensus about his work is that of all the short-story writers in India and Pakistan writing in Urdu today, his canvas is the widest. A well-traveled man, he derives plots and characters for his stories from his knowledge and experience of the world at large. There are stories situated in Pakistan, England, Scotland, South Africa, Nigeria, Iran, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). There are stories whose locales one recognizes as distinctly non-South Asian, but that are not identified or named, often for thematic reasons. There are, indeed, few writers in Urdu using recognizable geographical locations away from their home as creative settings for their stories, who make the world contiguous with home. More often a writer's travels outside the country end up yielding a *safar-nāma*, a bare-boned account of the travel in which the hosts abroad are given due credit for their hospitality, and that's all.

This variety in Hasan Manzar's art also extends to the use of various language-types, narrators and characters in his stories. There are regional dialects of Urdu, spoken in various parts of Uttar Pradesh and mixed with Sindhi in parts of Sindh; there is a variety of usage distinctly associated with certain sects, linguistic groups and classes or with certain social registers; and there are samples of middle class speech often involving foreign, particularly English, phraseology, the hallmark of educated speakers of Urdu the world over. There are also stories narrated by the young and the old—both men and women, literate people with sophisticated sensibilities, and illiterates who talk with a vivid fluency and informality and whose ignorance and naïveté speak volumes. There are stories about sailors, office workers and their bosses, big landholders and their serfs, city folks and villagers, revolutionaries and their victims, prostitutes and their clients; there is even a political fable with articulate animal characters. In fact, his manifest concern with social justice and fairness makes the critic Muzaffar Ali Seyed comment that “the range of experience and outlook” Hasan Manzar's travels abroad have given him is “more broadly progressive than could be imbibed at home under the surveillance of the mentors of leftism....”¹ To read him is to undertake a voyage beyond one's customary geographical and ideological limits. It is to participate in an experience of “deep human sympathy” which transcends political and national boundaries.

Another aspect of his narrative art which critics find particularly

¹“A Critical Realist at Work,” in *The Friday Times* (11–17 July 1991), p. 14.

intriguing has to do with its narrative voice, which is always temperate and restrained. His stories are told by as many first-person narrators as by third-person and by those whose voice closely resembles that of the author himself. Yet the subdued, and gently assertive manner of articulation is shared equally by all narrators. There are often serious social, economic, religious, political and ideological issues underlying the stories—for instance, how hunger colors one’s nationalistic stance, how religious and cultural prejudices shape one’s view of crime, how the privileged classes in refusing economic means to the have-nots sometimes even deny them their identities, how religious fatalism conditions economic choices, etc. But no polemic or propaganda is ever involved in articulating these issues—in other words, there are no “bold strokes,” only “loaded understatements,” as Asif Aslam Farrukhi has aptly noted.² Even the note of protest, if and when sounded, is subdued and controlled. The speaking voice in the stories remains universally urbane and civilized. Never shrill or overpowering, it reminds the critic Muhammad Umar Memon appropriately of Chekhov.³

Along with this voice is the relaxed and unhurried manner of observing human phenomena. There is never any panic to get to the end of the story even when the closure seems imminent. There is always time to notice, add and record something else—another piece of dialogue, another snatch of song, another forgotten detail, another observation, comment or memory. The dedication Hasan Manzar made in his first collection of stories to his brother, who died of lung cancer, pretty much epitomizes this manner of observation. He writes: “To my only brother, Nayyar—born Lahore, August 1951; died Karachi May 1962, of lymphosarcoma—who, even in the midst of acute chest pains, a little while before he died, seeing a squirrel in a tree outside the hospital room, made me partake of his joy.” Even in the face of death one is yet able to find a moment to enjoy and celebrate life. A number of Hasan Manzar stories are narrated by infantile character—narrators who, because of their ignorance, their inability to synthesize information and their easy distractability, tend, more than the grown-up narrators, to observe and record at their leisure, and wonder at the relevance and relative significance and usefulness of each object they perceive.

This manner of observing phenomena is not without its drawbacks:

²“Man’s Homeland of Stories,” in *The News International* (14 May 1991).

³In Asif Farrukhi, *Harf-e Man-o-To* (Karachi: Nafis Academy, 1989), p. 301.

sometimes a story drags on excruciatingly, as does “Mērī Maut” (My Death); or the ending of a story becomes diffused and loses its emphasis, as happens in the story “Pūranmāsī—Amāwas” (Night of the Full Moon—Dark Night), a brilliant satire on the reality of politics and nationalism in Pakistan, but one which forfeits its pungency because of the narrator’s refusal to cease observing and recording. Muzaffar Ali Seyed is, perhaps, referring to the very same tendency in Hasan Manzar’s art when he comments that “sometimes the narrator is lost in the multidirectional emphasis.”⁴

Henry Miller is known to have said somewhere that “the mission of man on earth is to remember.” Hasan Manzar’s early stories, those included in the first two collections, and those that deal with the time of his youth, are mainly attempts to remember and to recapture times past. In the postscript to his third collection of stories, perhaps baffled by the inability of some of the readers to grasp the import of his stories, he has written what is essentially his *ars poetica*—a justification for writing fiction. For the purpose of this postscript, he has invented, or so it seems, an interlocutor, a doctor friend, who listens to the author’s exegeses of his own stories and who expresses the critical view of a sensitive and socially aware reader in his response. The two carry on an extended critical exchange, thus helping to preclude various possible misreadings of stories and outlining their socio-cultural context. In the same postscript Hasan Manzar mentions that sometimes he runs into the seventeen-year-old youth—his alter-ego, given the name Hasan Maooz—who knows only the life he had left behind in Uttar Pradesh in India. The youth brings to his attention a number of stories about people from the background he had shared with the writer. The young man even cooperates with him in writing some of the early stories. But the cooperative effort soon comes to an end, never to be revived again. Hasan Manzar speculates upon the reasons for this rupture. Perhaps, having been in a new country for ten or fifteen years, Hasan Maooz has lost contact with his roots. Perhaps, having grown up, he has discarded his unpretentious, unspoiled, innocent world view, one that enabled him to put his finger on injustice here, there, everywhere. Perhaps the world he knew about, the feudal world, has come to an end, and he knows little of the world that has replaced it. But Hasan Manzar also comments: “See, the past of a writer, like the previous record of a criminal—where he was born, where his ancestors

⁴*Op. cit.*

lived—does not let go of him either. No matter how earnestly he may wish to begin again, a criminal remains a criminal.” In his case, then, it seems the effort to recapture the past has been much more than that; it has also been an attempt to reveal and to atone for his history, so that a new beginning can be made.