

COLUMN

The Fiction of Past as Present by Zeno (Safdar Mir)

THE TRANSFORMATION in the nature of modern Urdu fiction during the last five decades is essentially a matter of emphasis on two dimensions of time—the present and the past. This is but natural: throughout the Subcontinent one important aspect of social reality—and along with it psychological reality—deals with the contradiction between an ancient mode of life and its perception, and a violent shift of these into something totally alien.

This contradiction between the old reality and the new—especially as it is reflected in our consciousness, and more so in our individual and collective unconscious—is to be found in every factor of the complex multiplicity of the economic, political, social, and cultural life of the peoples of the Indian subcontinent. Above all, it has revealed itself in the revolutionary changes in our religious and literary consciousness. Equally violently we find its reflection in a reactionary resistance in both fields. In general terms the contradiction reveals itself as a conflict of modern and traditional tendencies.

Paradoxically, however, especially in recent times, we find the modern and traditional tendencies assuming alternative positions. What is traditional in content reveals itself in an unquestionably modernist form, and vice versa, a modernist content is found to be clothed in a traditional form.

The short stories of Naiyer Masud can be characterized primarily as modernist in form and traditionalist in content. But unfortunately this characterization does not quite suit the occasion. When we try to take a closer look, modernism of form and traditionalism of content seem to change places, and even join together in a complex unity of both modernism and traditionalism of form as well as of content. Actually we arrive at a situation where these categories of form and content no longer seem

to apply.

For the time being we are concerned only with Naiyer Masud's first book of short stories, *Simiyā*. It consists of five highly selective and exclusive narratives of magically evocative happenings.

There are only "happenings" in these narratives, not "stories" in the conventional sense. The emphasis is on the descriptions of what happened. It is the details of these descriptions which arouse the interest of the reader and carry him forward. By the time he comes to the end he feels that he has been absorbed in a dreamlike state; the happenings are volatile, fleeting, evanescent; they are trembling on the edge of being and non-being.

In a recent interview with Asif Farrukhi, Naiyer Masud talked about his stories and the purpose of his fiction writing. It is in the various formulations of this interview that we learn about the nature of his fiction.

We will not discuss the influences on him of writers like Kafka and Edgar Allan Poe. Much has been made of these. Perhaps there are certain correspondences here, but they are not important. Comparisons like these often mislead readers. They start looking for something in an author which is not there; or if it is there, it is not essential. I think some such misapplication is to be found here. It leads one away from the particular and the individual in this author, away from that which differentiates him from others.

What we learn from a reading of the stories of Naiyer Masud, and his confessions in the interview, is his primary purpose of evoking an atmosphere, an environment, an ambiance, as exactly as one can do so in a narrative.

It seems from his interview that he has loved a certain era of his life in Lucknow, his hometown. Having lived in this ancient city most of the years of his life he has seen it transform into something different, even alien. He himself, however, has continued to live in various situations through which he has passed and which have left their indelible impressions on him. "Situations" of course include places, seasons, persons, structures, and so forth.

The technique which he employs for writing his stories is also interesting and has to do with the special form and content which they assume. In his interview he says that he writes much more than he finally includes in his fiction. After having written quite a detailed description of a narrative he goes through the process of pruning it, excluding a great deal of what he had started with.

This is one way of creating that impression of evanescence. Another is his almost complete elimination of names of persons or places. This manner of abstraction helps in eliminating the element of time from the stories. We do not know when an event has taken place or where. (This is perhaps why Naiyer Masud's fiction has been compared to Kafka's. Otherwise the purpose of both writers is quite dissimilar.) It is at once conceived as having happened in the past and in the present. On one level the narrative is luminously existent in the present. There is brightness everywhere; even the darkness is vivid and clear.

On another level, we discover a nervous and tremulous uncertainty, as if the image is impermanent and ready to disappear, or as if it is being looked at through a body of clear and transparent water.

So much for the technique of the narrative. Now about the content and the characters. First about the latter:

It is the same evanescent nature that we find about the characters. In "Ōjhal" we find essentially three women who enter the life of the narrator after long or short periods of time. When, where, and how are not important. There is a girl child who adopts the narrator in play as her bridegroom. At the end she becomes his nurse when in his old age he is bed-ridden. There is a young woman who is slightly older than himself, and they are involved in a brief love affair. They meet a long time later in a strange house and have a mature sexual relationship. In the same house the narrator comes across another woman who lives next door and sleeps with her. All this ends up with the narrator growing old and sick, and his "child bride" looking after him.

One detail in this story deals with the narrator becoming a specialist in houses and their structures. He discovers the secret that in every house there is a spot of desire and a spot of fear. And sometimes both of them are identical. In his love play and sexual activity we are introduced to this concept again and again.

The second story of the collection, "Nuṣrat," is about a *jarrāḥ* (a traditional surgeon in medieval Muslim society) and his patient, a young girl whose feet are crushed and gangrenous. The *jarrāḥ* looks after her and cures her. There is another person in the story whose arrival causes excitement in the house but who is not shown. Nusrat, the girl with crushed feet, is shown once again toward the end. She has again hurt her feet, but now the *jarrāḥ* is no longer there to cure her. Even the girl Nusrat is revealed in a manner as if she is dead and gone.

"Mār Gīr" is a narrative about another traditional character of Indian medievalism—the snake catcher. The narrator runs away from home and

goes into the jungle. He is bitten by a snake and is taken to a snake catcher. He is cured and decides to become a pupil of the master. He becomes his assistant, goes along with him in search of snakes and antidotal herbs. After a time we find the landscape changing. The city is growing and the jungle is being cut down. The old snake catcher dies and takes away all the secrets of his trade with him.

The next story "Sīmiyā" (which implies a magic which changes one's view of things), has to do with the passing of the old ruling class and their broken down castle. The narrator lives in the city and has a rather unusual relationship with its inhabitants. There is a city, there is a river, and there is a graveyard. The narrator is related to all three in a strange manner. There is a young woman who drowns in the river, and becomes an obsession for the narrator. There is a young boy who comes to see him occasionally and plays with him. The boy dies and his father blames the narrator for the death. Later the narrator goes to live in the castle with the "Master." The castle is full of wonderful objects but is crumbling to pieces and sinking into the earth.

The "Master" reveals to the narrator that he had once practiced magic and prepared the concoction for *sīmiyā*. Actually what *sīmiyā* does is to bring rain whenever the magician desires. Toward the end the "Master" is frightened of his own magic and dies. The narrator goes away from the mysterious castle.

The last story "Maskan" (Abode) is strangely related to the first. There is an ill and bed-ridden man, looked after and nursed by the same young woman as in the first story. The narrator talks to the young woman and tells her stories. The bed-ridden man, like the narrator at the end of the first story, does not speak. The narrator here has spent his life wandering about, and comes to this house when its owner was alive. The house had a large garden full of medicinal herbs. The narrator is invited to live in a certain portion of the house. Later the old owner of the house dies, and a new guest comes to stay—the invalid along with his young nurse. Towards the end of the narrative we find the narrator having fits of dejection. With this suggestive idea of his morbid condition we come to the end of the story.

It is not possible to describe what these stories are like. There are no such factors as plots or detailed characters or social or political conditions. All that we are made to feel are atmospheres, persons, places and a strong suggestion of things passing, decaying, dying. It is a matter of time flowing over cities, houses, people and civilizations.

Naiyer Masud is an abstractionist with a vengeance. But he wants to

give a sense of vivid reality to his abstract vision of a life which is no more. In this he is eminently successful. □

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