

COLUMN

New Stories from an Old City by Muzaffar Ali Syed

LUCKNOW, AT LEAST as viewed by the progressive generations led by Sajjad Zaheer and the pioneer feminist Rasheed Jahan, has always been a “decadent city.” Even Premchand’s *Chess Players* for whom it serves as a backdrop to their escapist pastime find it no more than the tottering headquarters of a dying Nawabate which pleased itself with royal pretensions. Qurratulain Hyder, who has put up a brave defense of its anti-colonial “resistance” and cultural resilience, nonetheless presents a partiality for its new look. The old quarter of the city, however, remains an embarrassing reminder of the past which everyone likes to glorify but none has the heart to describe with all its decaying eminence and desperate effort to survive.

Except, of course, Naiyer Masud, who is a modernist story writer with a scholarly bent of mind. It is a rare and nearly impossible combination of opposites to pursue, since a modernist would ordinarily shy away from the past while a scholar would get immersed in it, never to surface again. But a creative writer who is also a savant would like to have the best of both: a sensitive awareness of the living moment as well as a keen sense of the past extending into the present, in the form of social remains of another time of history.

The opening story of Naiyer Masud’s new collection *‘Itr-e Kafūr* (Attar of Camphor) opens with a letter to the press drawing attention to the sub-human conditions of life in the neglected quarter of the town. This quarter is a relic of the old Lucknow located next door to the provincial capital of Uttar Pradesh, which the writer has chanced to visit recently. It is followed by a visit report which takes us into the early childhood of the narrator and to the life of those times which are dimly reconstructed with hazy memories and uncanny characters. At home, over a distance, his own dying mother is the only remaining link with the for-

gotten world of relationships. A glance into the past is so absorbing that the express purpose of the visit, which was to consult an old *hakim* uncle, slips out of his mind altogether. Yet, this acute “study in a dying culture” manages to affirm its will, and not only its right, to live.

Another story, “Vaqfa” (Interregnum), has a mason passing on the principal emblem of the city to his son before breathing his last, in a mysterious manner so that he discovers it for himself. A powerfully evocative story of the past with a haunting figure of the archetypal teacher, it focuses on the “fisheye” which the young narrator finds looking around from the façade of every old structure restored by his father. Perhaps it signifies an evasive sense of the past, which is yet recoverable from the ocean of the night by a new generation inspired with a search for its own moorings.

The title story, which originally appeared in the literary magazine *Māh-e Naus* some years ago, has already left its mark on whosoever read it then. One may read it there or in the present collection to see how extraordinary is the story of a self-made perfumer of Lucknow who prepares all kinds of attar with camphor as their common base. It is a gloomy tale of sickness and decay with a seemingly morbid message permeating throughout, narrated with analytical precision and unsentimental concentration. A ray of light is provided, however, by the joy of making some “plaything” which could outlive the inevitable end. A richly complex and delicately sophisticated story like this could only come from the heart of Lucknow.

Naiyer Masud is a cultivated man of letters devoted to the study of Urdu and Persian classical literature. Widely respected, like his distinguished father Professor Masud Hasan Rizvi, for his scholarship and sagacity, he has yet been attracted to a creative involvement with the art of the short story. His translations from Kafka and modern Iranian fiction are considered remarkable. He is almost equally admired by a meticulous research scholar like Rasheed Hasan Khan and a fastidious modernist critic like Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, building up a dual reputation through his work in the twin fields. His two collections contain no more than ten stories, while another story or two could be lying about in periodicals. That makes him nearly a perfectionist, like Rajinder Singh Bedi before him or Ghulam Abbas, both of whom attained only late recognition of their merit.

One would certainly like more of him, at the same standard if not in the same vein. He may be considered a restorative craftsman working, like the mason in the short story “Vaqfa,” on bringing old dilapidated

structures back to life again, but like him he is also capable of getting to the heart of tradition irrespective of the dangers involved. More than anything else, one may turn to Naiyer Masud for a genuine sense of tragedy which is also vigorous and enlightening. □

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