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## On Reading Two Recent Stories of Naiyer Masud

WHEN I READ “Jā-Nashīn”<sup>1</sup> (“The Heir”), I realized that I could understand Naiyer Masud’s earlier story “Bād-Numā”<sup>2</sup> (“The Weather Vane”) much better. I decided to translate both, for several reasons, which I will explain. I had been working on a paper on chronograms in Urdu poetry and in researching the *abjad*<sup>3</sup> I stumbled upon the divinatory use, among others, of alpha numeration. I was drawn into reading about the divinatory methods of *jafar*<sup>4</sup> and *ramal*<sup>5</sup> which fascinated me as much as

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<sup>1</sup>“Jā-Nashīn” was published in the Urdu journal *Shab-Khūn* (Allahabad), No. 250 (Nov. 2001), pp. 7–10. Naiyer Masud, not happy with the response of readers, who found the story abrupt and underdeveloped, rewrote the piece in *Shab-Khūn*, No. 260 (Sept. 2002), pp. 15–20. On comparing the two drafts of the story, I thought the revised version didn’t improve the original. The latter opens with snatches of a macabre conversation: “I was about to step into the foyer but I held myself back as a voice from the front room could be heard: ‘Look, here, see all my intestines are wrapped around my ankles, and this man, my elder brother says its nothing, just a figment of my imagination. Please look closely, please look, can you see something?’” The story is virtually the same; in fact weaker, more diluted than before.

<sup>2</sup>“Bād-Numā” was first published in the *AUS*, No. 15 (2000), pp. 650–64.

<sup>3</sup>When used numerically, the letters of the Arabic alphabet have a special order, called the *Abjad* or *Abujad*. The *abjad* is an acronym referring to *alif, bā, jīm, dāl*, the first four letters in the numerical order, which in the system most widely used runs from *alif* to *ghain*.

<sup>4</sup>*Jafr* or *Jafar* is the art of divination drawing as its source the book of *Jafr* ascribed to the Sixth Imam, Ja’far aṣ-Ṣādiq.

<sup>5</sup>*Raml* or *ramal*, is an art of divination based on reading figures in sand or on the ground.

*mu'amma*<sup>6</sup> and other enigmas related to alpha numeration. The baffling science of numbers and the mystique associated with it revived many childhood memories for me.

I began this brief essay by drawing on my childhood reminiscences of magical practices and illusions since those memories were the first reactions that “Jā-Nashīn” evoked in me. I found in the explicit engagement with mystic-magic practices in “Jā-Nashīn” a perspective with which I could approach the enigma of the earlier story “Bād-Numā.” Read together, they reminded me of the larger issue of connectivity and intertextuality in Masud’s fiction, which was subtly manifested in his first collection of short stories, *Sīmiyā*.<sup>7</sup> This volume is prefaced with a quote from Imām Ja‘far aṣ-Ṣādiq, the assumed author of the *Book of Jafr*, and in the title story there is the use of the spell *sīmiyā* which is practiced by a mad occultist. “Bād-Numā” also reminded me of “Vaḳfa”<sup>8</sup> (“The Interregnum”), the construction of an insignia motif, and its implications. Masud admits to his penchant for reworking plots of earlier stories and “nudging them forward.” His stories often feel incomplete, “needing to be continued.” While this may not be obvious in a casual reading, because the plots themselves are vague, the connectedness is at a level more profoundly rooted in the cultural subtext of which this fiction is made.

In “Bād-Numā” there were several irksome questions that needed to be addressed in order to satisfy my understanding of the story: What exactly is the relationship between the weather vane, the narrator’s father and the visitors in the front room? Why are these visitors so concerned about the weather vane? Why does the narrator’s father receive so many visitors? Why is there an air of mystery surrounding the identity of the weather vane’s maker? Does the malaise that affects the father of the narrator correspond to the malfunctioning of the weather vane? And, who is

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<sup>6</sup>*Mu'amma*, literally, something made obscure or hidden. This could be in one of two ways: in the sense of word puzzle or riddle or in the sense of secret writing, code.

<sup>7</sup>*Sīmiyā* (Lucknow: Nuṣrat Publishers, 1984) is Naiyer Masud’s first collection of short fiction. It comprises five stories including the title story “Sīmiyā.”

<sup>8</sup>“Vaḳfa” appears in Naiyer Masud’s second collection of short stories *‘Itr-e Kāfūr* (Lucknow: Nuṣrat Publishers, 1990), pp. 105–31. Muhammad Umar Memon subsequently translated it, for which, see “Interregnum,” *AUS*, No. 12 (1997), pp. 95–110.

the woman on the terrace? I must admit that despite being puzzled by these questions I enjoyed the story and read it out loud to my son who enjoys listening to anything associated with the supernatural. In doing so I realized that I was subconsciously reading the story as a “ghost story.” A year later I read “Jā-Nashīn” and felt that my perceptions were validated because I perceived an affinity between the two stories.

In “Jā-Nashīn,” like in “Bād-Numā,” we are informed by the narrator of visitors who are received by the head of the household, (uncle, father) in the front room. However, we are alerted from the start that the narrator’s uncle is an occultist and visitors are for the most part men and women who are afflicted or possessed by something paranormal. There is a direct reference to jinns and mystical-magical practices. Going back to “Bād-Numā,” I speculated whether the visitors in this story too had something to do with the occult. Consider this excerpt:

Visitors, as I mentioned earlier, came to see my father in large numbers. Among them would be new faces I would see once or twice and never see again. But, besides these interim visitors, there were people who would regularly come by almost every day. If any one of the regular visitors missed a turn, my father would sometimes in an admonishing and sometimes anxious manner inquire how they had been. Most of these visitors were from our neighborhood, and their houses were close to ours. But I rarely saw them walking on the streets or in the lanes. However, when I went on the roof to fly my kite, I would see some of them on the roofs of their houses, mostly in winter, and they would be sunning themselves. At that time they would be dressed in ordinary plain clothes. But these very people, when they came out to visit us, would be dressed from head to toe in highly formal clothing as though they were invited for a special occasion. And my father too did the same. Whenever someone came to call on him he would get dressed in full formal attire and then go receive the guests in the visitor’s room. But when he started virtually living in that room, he gave up that custom and now, instead of changing clothes, he would draw his wrap right up to his shoulders when a visitor came.<sup>9</sup>

Reading more mystic-magic into the story I now wondered whether the weather vane had been fashioned by the ubiquitous jinns and was a talisman, a signifier of a special location. Perhaps it was not fashioned by

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<sup>9</sup>“Bād-Numā,” p. 657. All translations from this story and “Jā-Nashīn” are mine.

human hands, and that is why it could not be repaired. I tried to read more meaning into the allusions in the story that the weather vane could change the wind's direction. I couldn't dismiss the obvious inference that the weather vane was a metaphor for the old order and resisted winds of change. Nevertheless, it was difficult to ignore the surrealistic interludes infiltrating the story compelling an intertextual mystic-magic reading. For example, in the following excerpt from "Bād-Numā," what does one make of the mysterious woman who appears on the terrace at night? (It is unclear whether it is night or day.)

I saw the weather vane gleaming, on and off. With each flash of lightning it would come into view looking like a delicate thing wrought in silver. I went up close to examine it. It was still frozen in its strange position. There was no murmuring or any other sound to be heard coming from it. I was in the process of examining it from different angles when I became aware of someone standing on the roof adjoining ours. Her face was sporadically lighting up by the flashing lightning. (p. 662)

The two stories end on somewhat similar notes.

I cleaned out the front room and took his chair. [...] Slowly, patients have started to trickle in. ("Jā-Nashin," p. 10)

I don't get as many visitors as my father did. These visitors keep changing and they only come to my place when they need something done or I need something from them. ("Bād-Numā," p. 664)

Masud contests the idea that his stories can be categorized as "fantastic."

As for fantasy, I try very hard to steer clear of it. My stories are not fantasies, at least not in the sense of the fantastic. You cannot say their events don't occur in real life.<sup>10</sup>

However, he does acknowledge the influence of Kafka—whom he has also translated—and Poe on his fiction. The most famous text that can be placed in the category of the *fantastic* is Kafka's "Metamorphosis."

"Fantastic," in Todorov's definition, refers to literary texts which hover uneasily between the two certainties of the uncanny and the mar-

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<sup>10</sup>Asif Farrukhi, "A Conversation with Naiyer Masud," tr. Muhammad Umar Memon, *AUS*, No. 12 (1997), p. 268.

velous, creating an agnostic limbo of the undecidable. In the twenty-five years since the first publication of *The Fantastic*,<sup>11</sup> Todorov's generic distinctions have identified "the deconstructive moment of the fantastic as an important if elusive aspect of the writing of the unreal."<sup>12</sup> Yet it is very difficult to find examples that fit this definition. Todorov says that the reader and the hero must decide if a certain event or phenomenon belongs to reality or to imagination; that is, whether or not it is real. Christine Brooke-Rose suggests that the pure fantastic is not so much an evanescent genre as an evanescent element; the hesitation as to the supernatural can last a short or long moment and disappear with an explanation.<sup>13</sup> Both "Jā-Nashīn" and "Bād-Numā" may be seen as fitting examples of Todorov's definition.

Surprisingly, after a year, Naiyer Masud released a second draft of "Jā-Nashīn" for publication. Apparently, readers dissatisfied with the original story wrote to Masud expressing their frustration. The reworked version includes more samples of macabre experiences. The story is more diluted than in the first version. The snuffing off of characters when they become unwieldy sometimes weakens Masud's storytelling. In "Jā-Nashīn," an important character Nafisa dies of a depression, almost inexplicably, probably because Masud does not know how else to adjust her in the plot. Maybe my reading of the two stories as complementary to one another is arbitrary and other readers see them as distinctive and separate stories. Still, I would argue that the two stories make more sense when read consecutively. I've used "Jā-Nashīn" to resolve some of the

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<sup>11</sup>Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, tr. Richard Howard (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973). Todorov discusses the *fantastic* more fully in chapter 2, "Definition of the Fantastic," pp. 25–40. "The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty" (p. 25), and "The fantastic requires fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; [...] Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he/she will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations" (p. 33).

<sup>12</sup>For a continuing redefinition of Todorov's work see, Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 11–41.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. her *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 71.

vagueness that “Bād-Numā” held for me. Masud himself admits that he feels a need to continue reworking his stories. Maybe the mystic-magic reading of both is subjective to my own experience. Perhaps the intertextuality was more obvious to me because of my childhood experiences and my own projection into the role of the child protagonist in these stories. Reading a text that referenced *jafar*, *ramal*, *naqsh* and *ta’vīz* reminded me of the connection between mundane life and its symbiosis with the supernatural. While “Jā-Nashīn” may not be Masud’s best piece of short fiction, it deploys a fantastical-real narrative. The texts’ grounding in South Asian Islamic beliefs regarding evil and the supernatural, also calls for attention. For all these reasons I chose to translate the stories and share the unanswered questions with readers in the West. □