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Authorial Intention and the Question of Meaning in the Works of Naiyer Masud[*]

Introduction

AFTER READING one of Naiyer Masud's short stories, ordinary readers and literary critics alike often find themselves feeling bewildered. On the one hand, they know they enjoyed the story, but on the other, they are not at all sure they know what Naiyer Masud was trying to say. This question of meaning, in fact, seems to dominate the critical literature regarding the work of Masud. For example, in discussing Masud's first collection of stories (*Sīmiyā* 1984), Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman, one of Urdu literature's most respected critics, suggests that it is possible the collection was conceived of as a ghazal, and that, as in this poetic form, the stories read together "convey the impression of an organic whole, as if deep down there were a prolific intermingling of roots," and yet the totality of their meaning cannot be grasped, it remains elusive (1997, 290).

Muhammad Umar Memon, the translator and editor of many of Masud's stories, tells us that the world in *Sīmiyā* and *ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr,* Masud's second collection of stories published in 1990, "pulled reader and critic alike straight into the seductive centre of what seems like an inaccessible vortex" (1998, VIII), and that reading Masud's stories evokes the "sensation of being thrown headlong into a self-referential circularity" (*ibid.*). He says that he himself, despite having worked closely with Masud's "fictional universe" for a number of years, is no closer to its "meaning" (*ibid.,* II). Masud's stories, he suggests, are preoccupied more with the "experience of being" than with "meaning," and their "sole purpose is perhaps to

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evoke silence, a stillness in which the distracted self is sufficiently calmed to begin to experience its ineffable totality, its inherent identity and synchronicity with Being" (*ibid.* 11, 12).

Similarly, Elizabeth Bell, who describes herself as merely a "Western reader who is engaged in the world and addicted to good writing but by no means an academic" (1997, 279), describes Naiyer Masud's fictional world as "rife with mystery, arbitrariness and overlapping contradictory truths" (*ibid.*). For her it is "a world of mirror images, of ambiguities, of vacancies both subtle and salient that dizzy us with the draw of the void … we feel our way through it like children…" (*ibid.*). And Mehr Afshan Farooqi argues that at least two of Masud's stories, "Jā-Nashīn" ("The Heir") and "Bād-Numā" ("The Weather Vane"), can be classified as "fantastic" in the sense defined by Tzvetan Todorov,[1] even though Naiyer Masud himself contests the idea that his stories can be categorized this way (2003, 149–50).

Indeed, Naiyer Masud himself has commented that "lots of people complain that they don't understand what [he is] trying to say" (Sengupta 1998b, 143), but he does not feel this is a valid criticism. "The same people," he contends, "don't praise other writers by saying how clearly they've told their stories" (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, it seems Masud is affected by such criticisms. M. A. Farooqi notes that about a year after the publication of "Jā-Nashīn" ("The Heir") in the Urdu literary journal *Shab-Khūn* (Allahabad), Naiyer Masud, "not happy with the response of readers, who found the story abrupt and underdeveloped, rewrote the piece" and published a second version in the same journal the following year (2003, 146). Masud has also said that one of his main reasons for writing the story "Ṭāʾūs Čaman kī Mainā" ("The Myna from Peacock Garden") was because of such complaints (Sengupta 1998b, 143).

So what of this question of meaning? Is meaning a valid expectation when reading works of fiction such as those written by Naiyer Masud?

The Question of Meaning

It seems to me that readers naturally expect to find meaning in the things they read. As Martin Wallace points out, the assumption that stories are written by authors who are trying to communicate something meaningful "remains basic to our thinking about literature" (1986, 169). Even T. S. Eliot,

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[1]See (Todorov 1973, 25–40).

who always refused to comment on the meaning of his texts because it was his view that an "author has no control over the words he has loosed upon the world and no special privileges as an interpreter of them," never went so far as to say that he did not mean anything in particular in his writings (Hirsch 1967, 10–11). And E. D. Hirsch has argued that if an author meant to say *something*, then certainly it is permissible for us to ask ourselves what he meant to say and try to discover it (1967, 11).

Like T. S. Eliot, Naiyer Masud avoids discussing what he was attempting to say in a particular story or why he wrote it. In an interview with Sagaree Sengupta in 1996 he expressed his frustration over the fact that people ask him such questions. He told Sengupta that he is not in the habit of writing with a particular purpose in mind, and, as far as what he was trying to say, "it's right in front of you on the page!" (1998b, 123, 143). Nevertheless, it is clear from other statements he has made about his own writing style and writing methods that he does intend to say something, and he works very hard to choose words that will precisely convey what he is trying to say. For example, he explained to Asif Farrukhi in an interview in the early 1990s that he has to "struggle the most on language, on how to write precisely," on selecting words that will convey his intent most accurately (Farrukhi 1997, 267). He also does not much care for abstraction because it obscures the author's meaning and he believes that at least the "meaning should be clear.… words should signify, and signify without equivocation" (*ibid.* 266).

So the question should perhaps not really be *whether* we can ask what Naiyer Masud's stories mean, but rather *how* we can go about asking what his stories mean in a way that might enhance our ability to understand what he is trying to say in a given story. What I would like to do here is develop a framework of strategies for reading his stories and then look at selected stories, especially stories that others have found "baffling," through this framework in order to demonstrate the value of using such strategies.

In attempting to develop a framework of strategies, it seems important to first be clear about what the word "meaning" signifies here, and second, to look at how meaning is derived from literature. The word "meaning" is actually used in two senses by those who comment on literature. In a narrow sense, "meaning" has been used to refer only to what the author is actually attempting to say, without reference to what significance that may have in relation to life, to the world at large, etc. Used in this sense, the only question to be answered regarding a work of literature, according to Hirsch, is whether or not the work conveys the

intended meaning effectively or not (1967, 8). What an author was attempting to say in a given work cannot be known for certain. However, Hirsch argues that this does not mean that the author's intended meaning cannot be known at all; he argues that the only meaning that has a "universally compelling character" should be regarded as the author's intended meaning (*ibid.*, 17, 25). That is, in the narrow sense of "meaning."

More commonly, the word "meaning" is used in a broader sense when commenting on a work of literature. In this broader sense what is really meant, according to Hirsch, is what *significance* the work has in relation to the world outside, or to life outside the text (in Harris 1996, 141). That is, for Hirsch and others, "meaning" in the narrow sense focuses on internal aspects of the text, while "meaning" in the broader sense focuses on relating the text to externals (*ibid.*).

Hirsch not only makes this important distinction about the word "meaning" in relation to literature, he also argues that readers need to first determine the meaning of the text in the narrow sense before they can attempt to determine its meaning in the broader sense (*ibid*, 129). This is something which I think is frequently forgotten by readers and critics alike because it is often so automatic that it seems to be a single process rather than a dual process. However, in looking at the works of Naiyer Masud, I believe it would be particularly useful to consciously think about their meaning in a two-step process.

Likewise, when considering how we derive meaning from literature, it again seems that it would be useful to consciously think of "meaning" in each of its senses separately. That is, first, how do we as readers determine what the author is saying to us, and second, how do we interpret the significance of that message.

In his *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* Wayne Booth argues that "fiction is a form of communication" (Martin 1986, 153). Wallace Martin explains that in this "linear communication model" an author "presents information about characters and events to a reader" much like a speaker conveys a message to a listener in everyday life (*ibid.*). Thinking of literature in this way, according to Martin, fixes the concept of literary meaning "*between* narrator and reader" and "suggests new ways of understanding what happens when we read" (*ibid.*). A number of literary theorists have studied the communication that occurs between writers and readers and I will look at one such theorist, Susan Lanser, in greater detail when I discuss the importance of the narrator in conveying the author's meaning.

The point I wish to stress here is simply this, that, according to this communication model, in trying to determine what an author (through his

narrator) is saying to us, we as readers are interacting with the author's narrator in much the same way that we interact with a speaker. The meaning that we receive from the speaker or narrator comes not only from how the words are defined, but also from how they are used, that is, from the *context* in which they occur.

In *Literary Meaning*, Wendell Harris emphasizes the importance of context, both internal and external, in deriving meaning in the narrow sense from a work of literature. Authors, he tells us, do not "send forth naked words but words clothed in contexts" (1996, 95). Taken out of context, the meaning of almost any statement can become illusive. In determining what an author is saying to us, Harris argues that we use both internal and external context. What happens internally is that, as we read, each sentence becomes part of the context in which each subsequent sentence is read and understood. That is, each sentence that we read is part of the total pattern that makes up the meaning of the text (*ibid.*, 98). Harris explains further that, beyond this, authors make certain assumptions about the "knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations" of their anticipated readers; and how well an author's assumptions match an actual reader's characteristics determines, to some extent, how successfully that author communicates his intended meaning to that reader (*ibid.*, 109). If a reader is unable to find meaning, one reason may be that he lacks something in his background which the author assumed would be there (*ibid.*, 113). So, in other words, what Harris seems to be saying is that, in reading a text, we determine what an author is saying to us from the individual words and sentences and their relationship to all the other words and sentences in the text, viewed within the personal frame that we bring to the text. In Harris's view, we then determine the significance (or the meaning in a broad sense) of what the author is saying to us by relating that message to some aspect of the world or of life, applying various psychological, social, philosophical, or linguistic theories and so on (*ibid.* 138, 141).

In looking at the works of Naiyer Masud, my focus throughout will primarily be on the meaning of his works in the narrow sense, that is, what do the words "in front of us on the page" actually say. This is a question that I believe has not really been addressed in the critical literature. The focus has instead been on what is the significance of what he is saying, and it is this latter question that has baffled readers. My suggestion here is that if we go back and consciously focus on what he is saying to us and how he is saying it, our understanding of the significance of his message may, ultimately, be enhanced.

Guides to Reading the Works of Naiyer Masud

Despite all the arguments among literary theorists to the contrary, there is simply no one way which is sufficient for analyzing literature. In discussing the various schools of literary criticism in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1996), Terry Eagleton seems to essentially be saying that while each one—Reception Theory, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Psychoanalysis, whatever—has something to contribute to our understanding, no literary theory or critical methodology can stand on its own in isolation as the definitive means of studying literature. Throughout the book Eagleton argues that "literary theory is less an object of intellectual enquiry in its own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times" (170). He in fact concludes that literary theories are mere illusion; no more than a branch of the social ideologies that spawned them (178).

In my own mind, what seems most logical is to let the literary work itself suggest what method or methods of analysis are called for. Reader-response critics such as Stanley Fish contend that the meaning of a text is created by the reader encountering the text and attempting to understand it using whatever interpretive strategies he or she has internalized (in Harris 1996, 37); and Wendell Harris qualifies this by arguing that each "reader of any experience has a range of strategies and the *author* has not a little to do with *guiding the choice of strategies*… (*ibid.*, 39; emphasis added).

Harris is of course speaking here about the guidance the author gives via the text itself. I would suggest, however, that beyond this, authors, intentionally or unintentionally, also give guidance to readers through extra-textual material such as interviews in which they discuss their work, as well as through the things they do and say in their everyday lives, whether connected to their personas as writers or not. The latter might include things such as unrelated professional activities, scholarly publications, public support for social causes, and so on.

It seems to me then that there are at least two important guides available to readers to aid them in understanding the works of Naiyer Masud. The first is the author himself and the second is the texts themselves—though not necessarily in this order. Although most readers will, in fact, encounter the texts first and form some impression of them, that impression will likely be altered in light of statements about the texts by the author and in light of information that may come to light about the author himself. (There are, of course, those who argue that texts should be ana-

lyzed on their own, separate from the author, but in my view there is no sensible reason to restrict oneself to this narrow view of a text.) First impressions of texts also frequently change upon reflection when reviewed through the prism of some literary theory that seems to have a particular bearing on the text.

Naiyer Masud as a Guide: So, first of all, in developing a framework of strategies for looking at the *work* of Naiyer Masud, I want to look at Naiyer Masud himself. Who is this man? What does he have to say about how he writes, why he writes and what he writes about? What does he have to say about literature, about himself, about his readers?

Two lengthy interviews with Masud have appeared in English.[2] They took place in 1996 and in the early 1990s and they do not necessarily apply to the work he has done since that time. Nevertheless, both interviews strike me as extremely candid and revealing. In both of them he speaks frankly about his life and his approach to writing and, in my view, many insights into his work can be gained from his remarks.

Masud was born in 1936 in his family home, known as "Adabistān" ("Abode of Literature"), which is situated in an old section of Lucknow in India. He grew up in this home and has spent virtually his whole life there, traveling very little and living elsewhere only briefly for his studies and for his first teaching position after finishing his education. Masud seems to be deeply attached to this home and to the cultural environment that exists within it and around it.

When Sagaree Sengupta interviewed him at his home in 1996, he told her that he had "never really written anything outside this house" (1998b, 127). Even the "very thick" the-

Figure 1: NAIYER MASUD

sis he wrote for his Ph.D. in Urdu at Allahabad University was actually written at "Adabistān." He would "collect everything and come back

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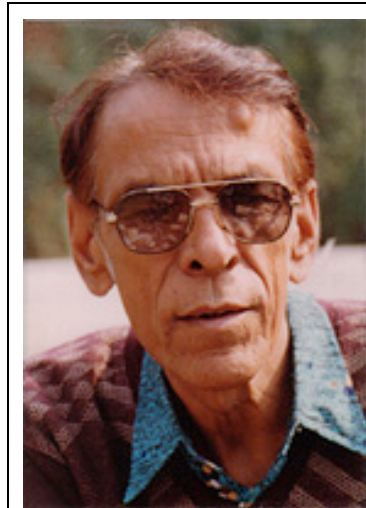[2]See (Farrukhi 1997) and (Sengupta 1998b).

home to write" (*ibid.*). He told her that if he goes out of town while writing a story, "not a line of it gets written" (*ibid.*). He also explained to Sengupta that he is not at all similar to those writers who like to go out to other places to "gain experiences and ideas," and he feels that if he lived outside Lucknow he "wouldn't be able to write anything at all," or at least

Figure 2: "Adabistān," Masud's Family Home in Lucknow

he would not be able to write the way he does (*ibid.*).

Masud regards his attachment to his home to be a weakness on his part and, interestingly, he thinks this weakness is probably the result of the secure life his father used to want for himself and his family (*ibid.*, 128). It seems Masud's paternal grandfather was a very generous man who was always giving everything away, so, when he died unexpectedly when Masud's father was only ten years old, the family was left with almost nothing. Because of this, Masud's father had to struggle to obtain an education, and he never wanted his children to have to struggle the way he had had to. He made sure that their childhoods were "safe and secure" and Masud thinks this is why he himself now has no "energy or capacity for fighting" the way most people have (*ibid.*, 134). He regrets that "he didn't have the kind of experience a person should have in life with

regard to such things" (*ibid.*). He regrets that he never had any occasion to learn how to "make one's way in the 'outside world'" (*ibid.*). For him, the "atmosphere outside leads to confusion" (*ibid.* 128).

At the same time, Masud, who holds Ph.D. degrees in both Urdu and Persian, gives his father credit for the greater part of his literary training. It was his father, like Masud a professor of Persian at Lucknow University and a scholar of Urdu and Persian, who built the family home and brought together there a large collection of rare books and manuscripts which Masud had access to as he was growing up (Memon 1997, ii). This is why, even in his early childhood, Masud mostly read adult books rather than children's books (Sengupta 1998b, 136).

In childhood, Masud tells us, he was "very complex and abnormal" (*ibid.*, 155). What he describes as "complexes," however, strike me as merely evidence of an extremely active imagination. He says, for example, that ever since childhood he had this fear embedded in his heart that something was wrong with him and that "if people found out, there would be a big scandal" (*ibid.*, 156). As a child he suffered from somnambulism, and even as a grown-up it has happened a few times. He used to imagine that while he was sleepwalking he had gone out and "committed a big crime, such as a murder" and then come back to bed (*ibid.*, 157–58). His fear was so great that for the next few days he would "read the newspaper very intently for any news of a mysterious murder that might have taken place!" (*ibid.*, 158).

He also tells a story about how he once got it into his head that when he had been taken to the hospital as a child because of a serious illness, he had actually been accidentally switched with the son of some village woman (*ibid.*, 155–56). All this because, when he was about twenty-five, some village woman he saw weeping at a train station (as if, he says, "she were mourning a son" (*ibid.*, 156)) seemed to recognize him, and he suddenly remembered that when he had been brought home from the hospital as a child his mother had remarked, "They've changed boys on me!" because he had been bathed well and powdered, so his complexion now appeared to be lighter colored (*ibid.*).

He also has vivid dreams, some of which serve as the sources of his stories. Sometimes he dreams that he drinks a lot of liquor, something which seems terrifying because of his Muslim religious upbringing (*ibid.*, 157). Another recurring dream is that he never got married to his wife, and in the dream he wonders why he ruined the life of such a decent girl this way (*ibid.*). The interesting thing about these dreams, he says, is that when he wakes up he does not feel relief that it was only a dream! Some-

times even for a whole day afterwards he is "in a kind of shock" over the terrible thing he has done (*ibid.*).

He is sure that these things that are embedded in his mind account for the "slight feeling of guilt" in his stories, that "feeling of menace … that something bad is about to happen" (*ibid.*).

Even though he did not publish his first story as an adult until 1971, when he was thirty-five years old, he knew even as a child that he wanted to write and he wrote a few poems and plays, and some short stories that were published in children's magazines (*ibid.*, 138). When he began writing as an adult, the first story he started working on was "Sīmiyā,"[3] a story he had originally written as a "very simple children's tale" when he was about twelve years old (*ibid.*, 138–39). (The adult version which appears in his first collection of stories was lengthened to ninety pages.) Unfortunately, like many budding authors, Naiyer Masud destroyed much of what he wrote as a child (*ibid.*, 138).

The number of stories Masud has written and published since 1971 is relatively small, not more than a few dozen, of which twenty-one are currently available in English translation. He says that he is a very slow writer. It takes him an average of four or five months to write one story, and he has never even written a full page in one sitting (Sengupta 1998b, 159). He finds that things written in this way are the "most well-connected" and that when he looks back at things that seemed to flow he realizes they "have many shortcomings" (*ibid.*, 160).

He finds that his scholarly work and his creative writing do not interfere with each other, rather they are mutually supportive (*ibid.*, 277). When he first came back to creative writing, having written as a child but then having spent many years away from it as he earned his various academic degrees, he says that he found it quite relaxing. Suddenly he felt that he was in command and could write whatever he pleased. In research work "you can only write what you can authenticate from reliable sources…. [if] you are unable to establish it from available sources … it does not get written. You feel very frustrated. And you carry with your-

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[3]The word "*sīmiyā*" can be variously translated as alchemy, magic, enchantment, and necromancy (Platts 1884). It has been used particularly with reference to natural magic, or hypnotism, and with reference to the "science of letters" through which members of certain Sufi orders claimed to be able to control the material world (*Encyclopaedia of Islam*, CD–ROM edition v.1.1, s.v. "Sīmiyā"). All of the above seem to apply to this story so I have refrained from assigning any single English word as a translation.

self a sense of incompletion. This sense disappears when you're writing a story" (*ibid., 278*). On the other hand, he finds that the rigors of scholarly research "predispose your mind to a refined sense of how to make do with little, how to construct without sounding choppy" (*ibid.*). And "creative writing can be an asset in research," he says, "[it] can teach you the principles of selection and organization" (*ibid.*).

He told Asif Farrukhi that he began writing fiction simply out of a "fondness for it" (1997, 265), whereas he told Sagaree Sengupta that he was "trying to write something different than the stories that were coming out" in Urdu in the late 1960s (1998b, 142). In his view there are two justifications for writing fiction: either be good or be really different (*ibid.*). In what he calls his "different" kind of story he attempts to do something which straddles between "pure realism" and "abstraction and ambiguity"—"reality, yes, but not naked," he says (Farrukhi 1997, 266).

Masud has much to say about his own writing style and about what others have to say about his writing style. He is clearly not one of those writers who avoid reading what the critics have to say about his work and, interestingly, his friends, and even his readers in general, seem to feel quite free to criticize his work publicly and privately. In one interview, for example, he commented that his friend S. R. Faruqi, who also happens to be a highly-regarded Urdu literary critic, had written somewhere that whatever he (Masud) had been trying to say in "ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr" ("Essence of Camphor") was not clear; that in the story there is a feeling that "something major is being signified but when you scrutinize the story no such thing comes out" (Sengupta 1998b, 143). And later in the same interview, when talking about his story "Ṭāʾūs Čaman kī Mainā" ("The Myna from Peacock Garden"), he mentioned that Memon Sahib (M. U. Memon) had told him to give his narrator a vacation and send him to Kashmir—that is, his friend Memon Sahib had told him "the narrator in all his stories seemed to be the same type of man"—and this was one reason Masud had made the narrator in this "Ṭāʾūs" story different (*ibid.*, 143–44).

One aspect of Masud's writing that receives a great deal of attention from critics is its "dreamy" quality. This is particularly evident in the stories in his first two collections, *Sīmiyā* and *ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr*. Masud admitted to Asif Farrukhi in the early 1990s that the atmosphere in his stories was indeed "somewhat dim" and that this even bothered him a bit—it certainly was not his "goal" he said, it just "sneaks in" (1997, 266). He suggested to Farrukhi that this quality may have resulted from the fact that his own thoughts are never entirely clear to him (*ibid.*, 267). He went on to explain that the vagueness with which his thoughts occur to him

inevitably imparts "a diffuse dreamlike quality to the words" he chooses to convey those thoughts and this might be why the "atmosphere appears unfamiliar" (*ibid.*). However, he cautions—and here he seems to clearly be guiding us in how to read his early stories—that "if you look closely, you will notice that the atmosphere is really no different from the life around us. It is the same, just as the characters are the same … they are drawn from this very life" (*ibid.*).

Regarding this dreamy quality, Masud also explained to Sengupta that he does not write about his present life and that if he did the story would be "of a different sort" (1998b, 129). He lets things "pass a little," he said, and then "it takes on the status of memory, and a light dreamlike state overtakes it," because things that "have already happened have a dream-like quality about them" (*ibid.*). This later explanation would suggest to me that the dreamy quality does not just "sneak in," as he says to Farrukhi, it is, in reality, an inherent quality of what he is writing about. Likewise, you will also recall that earlier I mentioned that Naiyer Masud has vivid dreams and that these sometimes serve as sources for his stories, so it would not be surprising for such stories to have the inherent quality of dreaminess. In 1996 he told Sengupta that up to that time "just under half" of his stories were based on some dream or other (*ibid.*, 139). "Nuṣrat" (originally translated with the title "The Color of Nothingness" and more recently published as "The Woman in Black"), for example, was entirely from a dream and the girl in it, he has said, was a real person, a childhood playmate (Farrukhi 1997, 266).

It seems to me that there are a number of other things in his style of writing which would also contribute to this dreamy quality or dim atmosphere. One is the fact that he says he intentionally tries to "suppress spatial and temporal specificity" in his early stories (*ibid.*, 267). Rarely, he says, will you find in them any personal names or the names of cities or references to religion (*ibid.*), for example. He does not want his stories to "correspond to a recognizable time or place," but at the same time, it is not his intention, he says, that they should be "beyond time and place, or be something entirely different … they are every bit of a piece with our own time and place" (*ibid.*, 268). He does not want to make explicit the fact that the time and place of a story is Lucknow of the 1920s or 1940s, but "that time is vividly alive in [his] memory" (*ibid.*). He works very hard, he says, to withhold "the sharpness of outline" that "specificity gives to atmosphere" (*ibid.*).

However, lest you imagine that he does all this for some mysterious esoteric or literary purpose, he himself gives a very down-to-earth, almost

amusing, explanation. He suggests it has to do with the fact that he has spent most of his professional life doing scholarly research. He says that, as a researcher, if he made reference to a particular time and place, he would then feel that it was his responsibility to ensure that all of the story's details were consistent with that time and place. You might say, in other words, that the lack of specificity in his stories is there largely because of his "love of ease" (*ibid.*). We need not, of course, take this assertion as being entirely serious on Masud's part, nor as something which would exclude other esoteric or literary reasons.

Another aspect of his style of writing which perhaps contributes to the dreamy quality and dim atmosphere in his stories is the fact that his stories, much like dreams, do not have elaborate plots. He has mentioned more than once (Sengupta 1998b, 139; Farrukhi 1997, 274) that plots do not come readily to him. In fact he even hesitates to call them plots; to him they are, rather, dim outlines or vague ghosts of plots (*ibid.*). But, interestingly, Masud finds great satisfaction in the fact that he has been able to write stories that are not particularly "story-like" and that have nothing particularly "worth saying" in them and still they are regarded as good stories, some have even won prizes (Sengupta 1998b, 131). This suggests to me that Masud likes to break the literary conventions that exist in his readers' minds at a subconscious level, and this will become important later in looking at his texts.

Likewise, dramatic endings, although not necessarily included among the literary conventions of his readers, are also missing in Masud's works. He told Farrukhi that even as a child he found such endings "repulsive" (1997, 273), and he told Sengupta that he has actually "edited out the last sentence in several stories if the ending seemed too forceful" (1998b, 130). He mentions at least three reasons why he does not want to have such endings. One is that he does not feel it is right that "if you already know the last sentence you won't enjoy reading the rest" (*ibid.*). The second is that he does not feel a story should give the impression that it has ended, that nothing remains—"what has ended," he says, is only "the specific episode around which it is woven" (Farrukhi 1997, 273). Here he cites the example of the five stories in his first collection, *Sīmiyā*, which he says he wanted to be "independent yet interconnected" (*ibid.*). And the third reason he mentions is that even after he finalizes a story he seems to want to continue writing it, or another like it (*ibid.*).

Dramatic endings are not the only thing that Naiyer Masud edits out of his stories. One of the very characteristic things that he does, and which is likely another factor contributing to the unusual atmosphere in

his stories, is the editing out of "substantial parts" of the first draft of a story and thereby suppressing the details of the "event being described" even though these details are "fully worked out earlier in the mind, or even written down on paper" (*ibid.*, 272–73). He originally began to do this as an experiment because he has this idea that once a thing is brought into existence, it continues to live in some form or fashion even when it is removed from the scene—just as, he says, the presence of a person sitting on a sofa is still felt, in some sense, even after that person gets up and leaves (*ibid.*, 272). This is perhaps why, he suggests, readers often feel that his stories say "more than what is described, that there is something else in them which the writer has chosen not to make explicit" (*ibid.*, 273). This suppression of details is useful in poetry—Masud's area of scholarly research—but also "works just as well," he believes, "for the short story" (*ibid.*).

For some people, reading his stories in fact has the same effect on them that reading poetry has (Sengupta 1998b, 153). However, Masud says that he actually also tries to edit out of his stories elements that seem to be too poetic. He explains that there is a general feeling among Urdu writers that the closer language is to poetry the better it is, so if you ask someone to write good Urdu he will write in a poetic style (*ibid.*). But Masud thinks that prose is more powerful if it uses a less poetic style of language, so he edits out, for example, metaphors (*ibid.*, 152). If you decide not to use a "ready-made thing" to express your thought, then you are forced to use, in his words, "the power of prose" to express it (*ibid.*, 152–53).

As I mentioned earlier when looking at the question of meaning, language is the thing that Masud struggles most with and pays great attention to (Farrukhi 1997, 266–67). He even says that, apart from the "dreaminess" of his stories, "whatever else may be considered 'atmosphere' … comes, in large part, from the language" he uses (*ibid.*, 266).

In general he tries not to use "coarse language and words which wouldn't be thought to belong to cultured speech" because, according to him, the "notion of correct language" is more pronounced in Urdu than in other Indian languages, such as Hindi and Bengali (Sengupta 1998b, 147). In Urdu, he says, people "question the usage of words at every turn" (*ibid.*). More specifically, the language he chooses is again related to his desire to obscure the location and time of the story. Toward this end he tries not to use "language tagged with straightforward [cultural] identity" (*ibid.*, 141). That is, he tries to use language that is correct but does not have "an identifying Lucknow temperament … or the language of a critic, or the language of a very emotional man" (*ibid.*). He says he does not

want people to be able to recognize "who was writing" (*ibid.*).

This question of "who was writing"—that is, of the presence of the author in the story—is an interesting one related to the question of authorial intention and meaning and I will discuss it in more detail when I look at particular stories. Generally, it can be said that Naiyer Masud succeeds in not placing himself *matter-of-factly* in his stories; or at least he succeeds in obscuring his presence sufficiently so as not to be obvious. However, given that his stories are drawn largely from his own life experiences, from his own dreams, from his own Lucknowian universe, and so on, it is not difficult at all to see his indirect presence there.

One last point that needs to be examined with reference to reading and interpreting the works of Naiyer Masud is what Masud himself has to say about his readers and their relationship to his work and to him as the writer. I think he says two things in particular that are important to remember. First of all, Masud seems to see his relationship to his readers as one in which he communicates with them, via his texts, both explicitly and implicitly, and he seems to take special pleasure in the latter. In talking with both Sengupta and Farrukhi he brings up the fact that when he has something in his mind while writing a story, even if he does not state it explicitly, even if he wrote it down and later edited it out, this somehow still gets communicated to the reader in some mysterious way. He tells Sengupta, "There's something to the idea that if something is completely clear in the writer's mind, it will somehow be conveyed to the reader" (1998b, 126). He says,

> I have experienced this myself, that when you have a very complex, long personal experience and you describe it in a plain and straightforward manner, with no details, but with everything present inside your own mind as you are writing, somehow it reaches the reader. Why it reaches the reader, through telepathy or something else, I can't say.
>
> (*ibid.*)

Similarly, he tells Farrukhi that this mysterious process of communication is something he cannot really describe but that "even though you don't explicitly mention certain things in your stories, your readers nonetheless feel that you have. You make the vaguest suggestion and the reader's imagination takes over" (1997, 271).

Related to this mysterious process of communication is the second thing which should be remembered. It seems to me that Masud very much *wants* his readers to let their imaginations take over. Commenting

on the impression some readers have of his stories he says that, frankly, he does not think that their impressions are accurate, but he is willing to concede the point to them because he thinks "a reader's impression ought to be taken as more authentic than a writer's own" (*ibid.*, 269). And, in response to Farrukhi's own expressed opinions about the morbidity of Masud's stories, he reiterates that if Farrukhi sees it, he himself "cannot very well deny it" (*ibid.*, 270). Both of these comments suggest to me that Masud is giving his readers full authority to, if you will, fill in, from their own imaginations, the details and the context that he has intentionally not supplied.

What then have we learned from Naiyer Masud about himself and about his work that can become part of a framework of reading strategies through which we can view his stories more clearly? First of all, one thing that Masud seems to assume about his readers is that they will be familiar with Lucknow, the acknowledged implicit setting for many of his stories. He seems to believe that because this setting is "vividly alive" in his own memory as he writes, it will be conveyed to his readers. Indeed, when his readers *are* familiar with Lucknow, this does seem to occur. He reports, for example, regarding his "Ṭāʾūs" story, that people have said to him that in reading it they felt that they had "gone back to those very times" (Sengupta 1998b, 126) despite the fact that he made no attempt to create an authentic historical atmosphere in the story. That atmosphere was, however, present in his mind as he wrote because he had "known about such things from childhood" and had "also studied it" (*ibid.*). It seems then that a familiarity with Lucknow is one thing that would probably enhance our ability as readers to understand what Masud is trying to convey in at least some of his stories.

At the same time it is also important to remember that Masud is in no way limiting us to this setting. He also wants us to feel free to form our own impressions, which may be quite different from what he had in mind when he wrote. Elizabeth Bell, in fact, did just that after helping to translate Masud's story "Shīsha-G̱h̠āṭ" ("Sheesha Ghat"). Certain elements of the story, she later explained, sounded very foreign to her ears—the idea of a ghat was "a mysterious facility," the bazaars and small villages were "remote figments" to her "untutored imagination," and so on (1998, 223). So, she took the liberty of recasting the entire story by reflecting on it and clothing its "essence" in a new "sociocultural setting" more familiar to her—that of a "backwoods area of the United States" (*ibid.*, 224).[4]

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[4]Bell's version was published as "Glassy Dock," see (Masud 1998).

Besides a familiarity with the history and culture of Lucknow itself, another useful element in a framework of reading strategies might be a familiarity with, and awareness of, Masud's personal attachment to that city and, especially, to his family home within that city. You will recall that he mentioned to Sengupta that he believes he would not be able to write at all, or at least not the way he does, if he did not live in Lucknow (1998b, 127), and that he has never really written anything outside of his family home (*ibid.*). How then, we might ask ourselves, is this attachment reflected in his stories?

We might also ask ourselves about the father figures that appear in Masud's stories since he discusses the fact that his own father played an important role, both positive and negative, in shaping his intellectual, emotional and professional life. In fact, an awareness of his life experiences in general would form a useful part in a framework for reading since he discusses his life quite candidly and states openly that he does not write about his "present life," he lets things "pass a little"—that is, he writes about his own past (*ibid.*, 129). An awareness of his past then would no doubt help clarify some aspects of his stories.

Since many commentators talk about the unusual "atmosphere" in Masud's stories, an awareness of how that atmosphere is created is useful to have in mind when reading. What has Masud "edited out," what details does he seem to have deliberately suppressed? If we knew these things, how might it change our understanding of the story? What is the source of the story? Does that source help clarify the kind of atmosphere the story exhibits? These are some of the questions it seems we need to think about as we read.

An active imagination would also seem to be an almost essential element in the framework through which Masud's stories are viewed. His own imagination, suggested by the stories he tells about himself, is so active he seems at times to have difficulty distinguishing between what is imagined and what is real in his own life. Did he really drink "lots of alcohol" or only dream it? Was he ever really married or did he only imagine his wedding? Is he even really Naiyer Masud or the son of some village woman weeping at the train station? These are hazy questions perhaps still lurking in the back of Masud's mind and, it seems to me, he wants his audience to have these same kinds of questions, these same kinds of doubts about what is "real," when they read his stories. In other words, it would also be useful to build into the framework of reading strategies an awareness of what his intentions might be in writing the way he writes.

These elements, however, are only the beginning of a framework of

strategies for reading the works of Masud—even with respect to the man himself versus the texts themselves—and I will not be able to use even all of these to the extent that they might be used. For example, a *thorough* study of Lucknow history and culture would easily contribute more to understanding his work than the preliminary examination of the subject I have been able to undertake at this point. And there are many other things that might become part of this framework as well which I have not even touched on—such as writers whom Masud says have influenced him or whom others say have influenced him, and specific aspects of his scholarly research related to Urdu poetry, and so on—because these elements would also require venturing off the main path for long periods of time to read Masud's scholarly works, to study the poets he has studied and the poetic forms, and to read the works of Edgar Allen Poe and Washington Irving and Ghulam Abbas and Franz Kafka, for example, with an eye to spotting similarities and differences. All of this, it seems, is beyond the scope of what I am attempting here, which is to explore one possible direction we might take to enhance our understanding of the works of one of Urdu literature's most noteworthy contemporary authors.

Texts as a Guide: Turning next to the texts themselves as a source of guidance for understanding the works of Naiyer Masud, I would like to begin by referring back to what I said earlier about how meaning, in a narrow sense, is derived from a text, and I would like to focus on two things that strike me as particularly relevant to Masud's works: namely, how the text itself is constructed and how the author's message is communicated. In reading what Masud himself says about how his texts are constructed and in reading the comments others have made about their impressions of those texts, I was struck by the number of elements that seemed to resonate with what Umberto Eco has to say about what he calls the "open work" (see Eco 1989). In looking at Masud's texts, especially the early texts which left many readers feeling baffled, I believe it would be useful to think of them as, at least in some sense, "open works" and to consciously approach them as such. The question of what exactly Eco means by an "open work," therefore, needs to be addressed.

Even traditional works of art, according to Eco, are "open" in some sense because they are susceptible to many different interpretations, but what he defines as an "open work" is open in a "far more tangible sense" (*ibid.*, 3–4). For Eco, an "open work" is something which seems "quite literally 'unfinished': the author seems to hand them on … more or less

like the components of a construction kit" (*ibid.*, 4). This, according to Eco, is merely a loose description of a phenomenon he has observed in modern works of art—paintings, music, texts, etc.

Masud's works seem to fall into this category. Some readers and critics have commented that his works seem "incomplete." For example, Mehr Afshan Farooqi has said that to her Masud's stories "often feel incomplete, 'needing to be continued'" (2003, 147). Likewise, Zeenat Hisam commented in an article that Masud removes parts of the story to leave the reader wondering and questioning because what Masud wants is to "ignite the reader's imagination" (2003, n.p.). And Masud himself discusses, with seeming relish, how an author has merely to suggest a thing and the "reader's imagination takes over" (Farrukhi 1997, 271). So it seems to me that Masud's stories are in fact open in this "far more tangible sense" referred to by Eco. They provide the essential elements and then leave it to the reader to finish constructing the story by means of that "mysterious process" of communication that goes on between the author's imagination and their own.

One of the most striking aspects of these "open works," says Eco, is our uncertainty about how they should be viewed (1989, 4). Much of modern art, Eco argues, is "deliberately and systematically ambiguous…. The text presents the reader with a 'field' of possibilities and leaves it in large part to him or her to decide what approach to take" (*ibid.*, x). Naiyer Masud, of course, disclaims any desire to be deliberately ambiguous (Farrukhi 1997, 266), nevertheless it could be argued that the way he constructs his texts, especially his deliberate suppression of "spatial and temporal specificity" (particularly in his early stories) (*ibid.*, 267), and his deliberate editing out of the details of the event being described (*ibid.*, 272–73), creates ambiguity in the minds of his readers.

Another intriguing aspect of these "open works," according to Eco, is the question of why the modern artist/writer feels the need to move in this direction of openness (1989, 4). Related to this question is another interesting argument made by Eco that any "truly important work of art" should be understood as an "epistemological metaphor" which reflects a way of dealing with the reality of one's historically defined universe" (Bondanella 1997, 30). Eco argues that what underlies an "open" work is a "different vision of the world" (1989, 7). In support of his argument he considers the phenomenon of the emergence of the "open work" in the baroque period (seventeenth century). He views the artistic works of that period as "dynamic," as never allowing a "privileged, definitive, frontal view" thereby forcing the spectator [reader] "to shift his position continu-

ously in order to see the work in constantly new aspects, as if it were in a state of perpetual transformation" (*ibid.*). He considers this a reflection of the fact that during the baroque period "for the first time, man opts out of the canon of authorized responses and finds that he is faced (both in art and in science) by a world in a fluid state which requires corresponding creativity on his part" (*ibid.*). This description of the emerging "open work" of the baroque period seems to correspond to some of the comments made by Masud's readers—for example, S. R. Faruqi, who told Masud that he could not "understand the angle" Masud was looking at everyday things from (Sengupta 1998b, 159), and also M. U. Memon, who finds that Masud's stories evoke a "sensation of being thrown headlong into a self-referential circularity" (1998, VIII).

The "open work" in the modern period, Eco contends, is an "accurate reflection of twentieth-century 'alienation'" (Bondanella 1997, 25). In looking at examples of open works from the modern period, one of the authors that Eco singles out is, interestingly, an author Naiyer Masud has translated and by whom some say he has been influenced: Franz Kafka. Masud says that Kafka was not, in fact, an influence on him because when he began writing again as an adult he had not yet read Kafka (Sengupta 1998b, 154). Nevertheless, after reading Kafka, even Masud himself felt that the language Kafka used was the kind he himself liked (*ibid.*), so you might conclude that even Masud sees a similarity between Kafka's style of writing and his own.

Eco singles out Kafka because he believes Kafka's works are easy to think of as "open." He points to Kafka's use of symbols which do not have prescribed meanings —"unlike the constructions of medieval allegory … there is no confirmation in an encyclopedia, no matching paradigm in the cosmos, to provide a key" (1989, 9). The various interpretations of Kafka's work, according to Eco, cannot exhaust the possibilities because the fictional world Kafka presents is "based on ambiguity, … directional centers are missing … [and] values and dogma are constantly being placed in question" (*ibid.*). These, again, are comments which seem to resonate with the reactions readers have had to Masud's works.

Although I would not want to suggest that Masud's works qualify as "open works" in every sense (e.g., I do not think his work is, necessarily, a reflection of twentieth-century alienation), two particular characteristics of Eco's "open works" seem applicable to Masud's works. The first is that such works "innovate at the level of artistic form" (Bondanella 1997, 31). This I think Masud clearly does, even to the extent that he says it was as an *experiment* that he began editing out substantial parts of his first drafts

of stories and deliberately suppressing the details of the event being described (Farrukhi 1997, 272). In doing so it seems that he was essentially applying characteristics of poetic forms to prose because he believes they "work just as well for the short story" (*ibid*., 273). What this amounts to is a violation of prose narrative conventions in some sense, and it is Eco's contention that the effect of such violations is to create ambiguity.

It seems to me that Masud also consciously breaks language conventions in constructing his narratives. He discusses very frankly the fact that language is the thing he struggles most with (*ibid*., 266–67) and that he deliberately tries to use language that is free of cultural, personal, or emotional attributes (Sengupta 1998b, 141)—all things which it seems readers would normally expect to see in the language in narratives to provide clues to the meaning of the text.

Eco argues that the breaking of language conventions is particularly significant in the creation of open texts because, in his view and in the view of linguists, "language is not *one* means of communication among others," it is the "basis of all communication" and "in relation to language, other systems of symbols are concomitant or derivative" (Roman Jakobson qtd. in Eco 1989, 28). Violating language conventions thus makes a text more "open" by creating ambiguity and thereby increasing the range of possible meanings.

The other characteristic of Eco's "open works" that seems especially applicable in the case of Masud's works is the fact that such works change the relationship between the creator of a work and the public—in the case of a text, between the writer and his readers—by requiring a "much greater degree of collaboration and personal involvement" on the part of the reader than was ever required by the traditional works of the past (Eco 1989, xi). The fact that Masud's works do, in fact, require much more involvement on the part of the reader than has been the case in more traditional narratives is, in my mind, the main reason many readers complain that they do not understand what he is trying to say. Readers generally expect the writer to do most of the work. In our reading of Masud's stories, then, it would appear that a consciousness of the increased role we must play as his readers should be an essential part of the framework through which we view those stories.

In fact, for those readers like myself who are particularly attracted to Masud's work, it is actually the "openness" itself that makes his work so appealing. The uncertainty and the challenge one feels in reading his work resonates, in a sense, with the uncertainty and challenge one feels in facing life early in this twenty-first century. Like Masud's "open works,"

life at this moment in history seems to be in "perpetual transformation" (as apparently was also the case in the baroque period looked at by Eco) and one needs to be forever shifting one's position to be able to view it with any sense of understanding.

In looking to the texts themselves as a source of guidance for understanding Naiyer Masud's fiction, the second point related to deriving meaning from a text that I would like to focus on is how the author's message is communicated. Here I would like to return to the literary theorists I mentioned earlier who have studied the communication that occurs between writers/narrators and readers, and in particular I would like to look at the work of Susan Lanser.

In her *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*, Lanser argues that point of view plays a crucial role "in creating meaning in fictional narrative" (1981, 5), and she defines point of view as the relationship of a perceiver to what is perceived (*ibid.*, 4). In her view, there are three relationships that structure point of view in discourse. The first, which she has called *status*, is the relationship between the narrator and the speech act; the second, called *contact,* is the relationship between the narrator and the audience; and the third, labeled *stance*, is the relationship between the narrator and the content or message (*ibid.*, 9).

Lanser discusses each of these relationships in detail and explains how and why that relationship shapes our understanding of a narrative text. She, in fact, develops a rather elaborate model of the narrative act that delineates different aspects of each of these relationships and describes how these aspects can be manifested in any given text as a point along a continuum, being either completely manifested or hardly manifested or anything in between these two extremes. In each case she raises questions that might be asked regarding the narrative voice with reference to this or that aspect.

What I find most compelling in her discussion, and most significant in terms of reading the works of Naiyer Masud, is the pivotal role played by the narrator in conveying the author's intended meaning and in shaping our reception of the author's message. In this regard she also considers the relationship between the "real" author and the narrator, often thought of in terms of Wayne Booth's "implied" author.[5] Here she points out that

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[5]"Booth suggested the term 'implied author' to describe the image of the writer which the reader creates through his or her encounter with the text and in light of which the reader assesses the literary work and retrieves its norms" (Lanser 1981, 49).

despite the fact that formalist-structuralist criticism has largely dispensed with the author-narrator relationship by declaring that they are "formally distinct entities," this distinction, in fact, only exists in the abstract, and it is not abstractions that guide our reading of literature (*ibid.*, 149). Rather, what guides our reading of literature, she argues, is literary and linguistic convention (*ibid.*). As with all the relationships in her model of the narrative act for any given text, she also looks at the relationship of the "real" author and the "implied" author (narrator) as a "spectrum of possibilities" existing between two poles, one pole representing complete identification of the two and the other pole representing complete separation (*ibid.*, 149–50).

I find all of this particularly significant in relation to reading Masud's fiction because, first of all, as I have already pointed out, he consciously subverts literary and linguistic conventions. If, as Lanser argues, these conventions are what guide our reading of a narrative text, we must ask ourselves when reading Masud: what is missing, what were we expecting, and, in its absence, how should we maneuver in our encounter with the text in order to develop an understanding of its message, that is, of its meaning in the narrow sense.

Secondly, although it would be impossible here to summarize Lanser's discussion of the various ways the narrator can shape our understanding of a text, many of the points she makes—such as how much authority the narrator wields, how much autonomy he has, how close his voice is to the "real" author's, what kind of contact he has with the reader, what kind of decorum that contact infers, how self-conscious he is, where he exists within the fictional space of the narrative, how much information we as readers have about him, what the nature of that information is, and so on—are points which should be considered for any text. These points seem especially important in the case of Masud because almost all of his stories are told by an "I" narrator. Of the twenty-one stories currently available in English, only two— "Nōshdārū" ("Nosh Daru"), a later story that was originally published in Urdu in 1992; and "Iḥrām kā Mīr Muḥāsib" ("The Chief Accountant of the Pyramid"), a very brief, almost anecdotal-style story published in his third collection in 1997—do *not* have "I" narrators.[6] In fact, as M. U. Memon pointed out in the comment he made to Masud (Sengupta 1998b, 143–44), the "I" narrator in all of

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[6]The English translation of "Iḥrām kā Mīr Muḥāsib" is only available electronically in an Internet publication, see (Masud 2004). *Editor*— The translation of a third such story, "Jarga," is published for the first time elsewhere in this issue.

Masud's early stories is the same kind of "I" narrator. This suggests to me that looking closely at Masud's narrators is a critical strategy for understanding his texts.

And finally, the third reason I believe Lanser's discussions are especially useful in viewing Masud's work is that, as you will recall, he told Sengupta (*ibid.*, 141) that he does not want people to be able to recognize "who was writing" and he tries to use language that, in effect, masks his presence in the narrative. Lanser, however, argues that the "extrafictional voice" of the "real" author informs the "deep structure" of a narrative and, in deriving meaning, this voice must be uncovered "by working through the other narrative levels in the text" (1981, 147). This "unmasking" of Masud's presence in his texts would seem then to be yet another critical strategy to include in the framework through which his stories should be viewed. In the case of "I" narrators—where the narrator's voice especially tends to be equated with the authorial voice by the reader—this unmasking can be accomplished to some extent, it would seem, by analyzing the traits of the narrator. It might also be accomplished to some extent by looking at where else in the text the author is present, such as in the title, or in an epigraph or prologue and so on.

The Works of Naiyer Masud

I want to turn now to the body of Naiyer Masud's work and look at it first in general, historical terms before discussing a few select examples from his corpus.

Since he began writing and publishing as an adult in 1971, Masud has produced just three collections containing a total of twenty-two stories. In addition to these collections he has also published occasional stories in literary journals. In a 2005 article in the newspaper *Dawn* (Karachi), Rabab Naqvi reported that Masud has published a total of thirty-five stories to date and has finished three others that remain unpublished (n.p.).[7] Of these, twenty-one have been published in English. Masud's most recent collection of stories came out in 1997, and of all the stories available in English the most recent appeared originally in Urdu in 2001.

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[7]This article was based on information obtained during an interview with Masud. Two of these finished stories have now been published in *Āj* (Karachi) 50 (August 2005), see (Masud 2005a and 2005b).

That is, although Naiyer Masud's corpus is not large, he has continued to produce new work slowly over the course of more than thirty years.

His first collection of stories, *Sīmiyā*, came out in 1984 bringing together five stories that had originally appeared separately in the Urdu literary journal *Shab-Khūn* (Allahabad). Four of these five stories have been translated and published, and a translation of the fifth is in progress.[8] The unique thing about the stories in this collection, versus the other two, is that these stories are all linked together—connected, in my view, to one ancestral home and the people associated, in one way or another, with that home.

These stories should really all be looked at together. However, since my focus here is on the totality of Masud's work and not on the work of any one period or story set, I will look closely at only two of these five stories: "Mār-Gīr," ("Snake Catcher") and "Ōjhal" (translated as "Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire"). In the published collection, "Ōjhal" is the first story and "Mār-Gīr" the third. However, when they originally appeared in *Shab-Khūn* (Allahabad), "Mār-Gīr" was published third (1978) and "Ōjhal" fourth (1981). I have chosen these two stories out of the set of five for several reasons. First of all, since "Ōjhal" appears as the opening story in the *Sīmiyā* collection, it introduces the major character of the story set, an unnamed man who reappears in every story in the set except "Mār-Gīr" and who actually narrates two of the stories. In addition, it introduces the only major female character in the story set, Nusrat, who reappears, in some form, in all of the stories except "Sīmiyā." I have chosen "Mār-Gīr" for close study because, among the four translated stories, it seems to be the one readers have found the most puzzling, some even regarding the story as "fantasy." The other two translated stories, "Nuṣrat" ("The Color of Nothingness") and "Maskan" ("Resting Place"), will, by necessity, also be discussed to some extent while discussing these two stories since they are linked to them and contribute to an understanding of what they are about.

Although the title story, "Sīmiyā," is not yet published in English, it too will be referred to here. Masud himself has explained that the story is about what might happen when a mystical "spell" goes wrong (Sengupta 1998b, 139). This story, by far the longest story in the set, is narrated by the same unnamed "patient" who narrates "Ōjhal" and it reveals more of this character's activities.

Masud's second collection of stories was *ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr* (Essence of

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[8]This translation appears for the first time elsewhere in this issue. —*Editor*

Camphor). Published in 1990, it contains seven stories of which four have appeared in English. Although the stories in the collection do not seem to be linked together in any way, two of them strike me as stories that are critical for understanding the rest of Masud's work. In them Masud actually seems to be talking about his own approach to writing. These two stories, "ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr" ("Essence of Camphor") and "Sulṭān Muẓaffar kā Vāqiʿa-navīs" ("Sultan Muzaffar's Imperial Chronicler"), will both be looked at closely here. I will also look closely at a third story from this collection, "Vaqfa" ("Interregnum"), in connection with "Bād-Numā" ("Weather Vane") which was published in 2000, because I believe "Vaqfa" sheds light on this latter story described as an enigma by Mehr Afshan Farooqi (2003, 147).

In 1991 Naiyer Masud published "Baṛā Kūṛā-g̱h̲ar" ("The Big Garbage Dump") in the Urdu literary journal *Āj* (Karachi). (A translation of the story appears in the 2003 *Annual of Urdu Studies.*) One interesting thing about this story is that it was not, for some reason, included in Masud's third collection of stories that was published just a few years later in 1997. This story is also, in my view, the most "open" of Masud's works available in English. At the end of the story the reader is left feeling that what Masud has given him here are the pieces of a very interesting puzzle. However, I myself have not yet fit those pieces together—in fact I feel that there may still be other pieces out there in an untranslated story or perhaps even in a story that has yet to be written.

Ṭāʾūs Čaman kī Mainā (The Myna From Peacock Garden), Masud's third collection, contains ten stories of which eight have appeared in English. The majority of the stories in this collection deal with the *end* of old ways, old cultures, ancient peoples, and the like, and I will only discuss two of them here: "Rē Khāndān kē Ās̱ār" ("Remains of the Ray Family") and "Ṭāʾūs Čaman kī Mainā" ("The Myna From Peacock Garden"). The first is an interesting example of a story in which Masud seems to poke fun at himself, and this story is, in fact, one of the few stories by Masud which seems to contain genuine humor. The second story is interesting because it is considered by readers and critics alike to be Masud's most "straightforward" story, and, as Masud himself has said (Sengupta 1998b, 143), it actually was written particularly to satisfy readers who complained that they could not understand what he was trying to say in his stories.

Of Masud's more recent stories, one has already been mentioned ("Bād-Numā" / "Weather Vane"). Another story from this period, "Ganjifa" ("Ganjefa"), was originally published in 1997 in a special issue of *The Annual of Urdu Studies* devoted to Masud's work. This story will also be

discussed here because the narrator bears such a striking resemblance to the "real" author. Finally, in 2001, two stories now available in English were published in Urdu literary journals. "Jā-Nashīn" ("The Heir") will not be looked at in depth here but will be considered in relation to "Bād-Numā" ("Weather Vane") and "Vaqfa" ("Interregnum") because M. A. Farooqi has suggested a possible connection. "Allām aur Bēṭā" ("Allam and Son") will also not be studied closely here but it is quite an interesting story because it seems to be the first story in which Masud appears to be inching closer to looking at his present life rather than his past. Here the focus is "decay"—as it is in so many other Masud stories—but not of a culture, a civilization, a people, a family, etc. Here we look at *inward* decay—the effect of time, of aging, on our fragile memories.

In looking at the twenty-one stories available in English as a whole, several interesting patterns and motifs occur. First of all, it becomes quite clear that the titles of Masud's stories (which are often exact translations of the Urdu titles) are intended to suggest the author's meaning to the reader and to serve as a point of orientation in thinking about the meaning of each story. Second, epigraphs serve as another major source of guidance from the author. Every story in Masud's first and second collections contains two epigraphs, one in English and one in Urdu or Persian, which clearly indicate the theme or focus of the narrative. Although not all of his later stories have these epigraphs, many do, suggesting that Masud does consciously provide his readers with tools to help them understand the intended meanings of his stories.

As I have mentioned before, the "I" narrator in many of Masud's early stories was the same kind of individual. Interestingly, many of the narrators in his later stories share at least one common trait as well: they like to "wander around town" all the time. This is all the more interesting since there was a time in Masud's own life when this was one of his pastimes (*ibid.*, 136).

Two other recurring motifs in Masud's stories relate to women; both are intriguing but, unfortunately, neither of his interviews sheds any light on them. One is the appearance in several stories of a slightly older girl or woman with whom the young male narrator has a deep bond of affection that sometimes has a sensual or sexual component. This bond is abruptly severed for one reason or another and the memory of this girl or woman lingers in the mind of the narrator throughout his life. The other is the appearance in several stories of numerous "extraneous women" and the annoyance of groups of girls and women "chattering." Often, one girl or

woman emerges from among them to capture the attention and affection of the young male narrator.

Let me turn then to the stories themselves. I would like to begin *not* with "Mār-Gīr" ("Snake Catcher") or "Ōjhal" ("Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire") from the first collection, as you might expect. Rather, I want to turn first to the story I consider one of Masud's most important stories because here I believe he is telling us exactly where his stories come from, how they are "made," what his "formula" is—things which are, of course, important to keep in mind when attempting to understand them. I want to turn to "ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr" ("Essence of Camphor").

"ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr": You will recall that "ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr" ("Essence of Camphor") is the story about which S. R. Faruqi commented that whatever Masud "was trying to say through the story was not clear," that there was "the feeling that something major was being signified" but when the story was scrutinized no such thing came out (*ibid.*, 143). And Muzaffar Ali Syed has referred to this story as a "gloomy tale of sickness and decay with a seemingly morbid message permeating throughout" but with a "ray of light" provided by the "joy of making some 'plaything' which could out-live the inevitable end" (1997, 304).

It seems to me that, unfortunately, both of these observations have missed the most interesting aspect of this story—something I believe Nai-yer Masud is actually saying rather clearly here. First of all, Masud focuses our attention on the "essence of camphor" by giving that title to the story. In doing so, I believe Masud is signaling his readers that *this* is the subject of the story and that they should pay particular attention to what this essence is as they read. Then, as is so often the case in Masud's stories, we are given two epigraphs, one in English from Edgar Allen Poe and one in Urdu from Amīr Khusrau, which suggest something further about this subject by providing a clue about what the nature of this essence is. The quote from Poe refers to an "Essence—powerful to destroy a soul / that knew it well" (13);[9] and the quote from Khusrau suggests the death of young friends when it says "If Spring comes asking after friends … / Say that the blossoms … turned to straw" (*ibid.*). That is, the two epigraphs suggest that the "essence of camphor" is related to the death of friends and to a power that can destroy a soul that knows it well. In other words, the subject of the story is clearly not camphor in the literal sense. So

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[9]All quotes from "ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr" are taken from Masud 1997b.

already, before we begin reading, we are alerted to the fact that we should be thinking about camphor in some other way.

The story then opens and our narrator, a perfume-maker, tells us more about this essence, explaining that it is the foundation of all his perfumes. However, if we are not to think of the essence of camphor in a literal sense, then so too the perfume-maker and his perfumes. It seems clear to me that the perfumes here are the stories of Naiyer Masud, and he himself is the perfume-maker explaining to us, his readers, how his perfumes are made. If you call to mind the various things mentioned earlier which readers and critics have said about Masud's stories, it becomes evident, reading section one of this story, that here Masud is addressing many of those same issues and questions.

For example, if you begin reading section one as the voice of Masud talking about his own story-writing, you can see that when he says:

> I never learned the intricate, tenuous art of perfume-making practiced in ancient times, now nearly lost or perhaps already extinct; nor am I acquainted with the new methods of concocting artificial fragrances—that is why no one understands the essences I prepare, nor succeeds in imitating them, …
>
> (*ibid.*)

he is, in fact, telling us that since he writes neither in the old traditional style nor the new abstract style, no one really understands how he writes or what he is trying to say.

He goes on in the same vein saying that people assume he is "privy to some rare formulas" and they insist he preserve these formulas "somehow for posterity," but, he says, there is "nothing unique in [his] perfumes except that [he prepares] common fragrances on a base of camphor extract" (*ibid.*). In other words, Naiyer Masud is saying here that there is nothing unique about his stories except that they *all* have "camphor extract" as a base.

And what is this "camphor extract"? Masud again reminds us not to take this literally. His extract does not "smell" of camphor or "any other fragrance," rather, if you attempt to smell it you will *feel* "a vacant forlornness" and, breathing deeply, you will *detect* "something in this forlornness" (14, emphasis added). Then, at the very end of section one, Masud says that "whatever is revealed in this forlornness already existed before the extract's conception; indeed the preparing of the extract relies on its existence" (15). That is, Masud essentially prepares all of his stories on a

base that exudes forlornness; this forlornness existed before the story was even conceived; and, in fact, the writing of the story relies on what this forlornness reveals.

What then follows *is* a "perfume," that is, a story, created on a base that is permeated by forlornness, and the narrator of it says just that at the end. The narrator's friend Mah Rukh Sultan is lying on the bed close to death. The narrator tells us:

> Mah Rukh Sultan's hand elevated until it touched my nostrils…. I could sense a sort of forsaken fragrance…. Again I held my breath, again I felt suffocated and drew in a lungful of air. I experienced an immense forlornness. With another breath, I saw something in this forlornness. First, the *kafoori* sparrow, then the bird carcass, my hand swarming with ants, the bird with the white string and the rain flapping like sheets of white smoke above the yard, Mah Rukh Sultan standing by the table in my room, Mah Rukh Sultan sitting on the verandah, the chandelier spinning in her fingers, the dangling vials, one of them empty.

> (41–42)

Each of these things that the narrator saw "in this forlornness" is a significant element of the story he has just told—that is, this story exists only because of the forlornness that "already existed" before it was conceived and in writing it the narrator has relied on that forlornness.

The most important thing about this "story within the story," in my mind, is that, as an example of a "common fragrance" on a "base of camphor extract" it makes clear what Masud is trying to say in section one. But also, the story itself, in which the "perfume-maker" is recalling his childhood habit of making playthings, sheds more light on these "toys" (30) that are permeated by the scent of camphor. Before looking more closely at this "sample perfume" however, I would like to digress briefly to look more closely at the "forlornness" which Masud says serves as the foundation of all his perfumes.

The word used in the original Urdu text is actually "*vīrānī*" which is defined as desolation, destruction, depopulation, ruin, dilapidation, and a desert place (Platts 1884)—clearly a more inclusive term than the English word "forlornness" might suggest. This term "*vīrānī*" indeed expresses very well the kind of subject matter found in Masud's corpus.

The "sample perfume" Masud provides within "ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr" leaves me with the impression that in it he is giving his readers a fanciful version of his own dabbling with writing as a child. But that is just one of the inter-

esting things about it. Another interesting aspect of this "sample" is the relationship that exists in it between the child narrator and the older girl (or young woman) who dies at the end. A third interesting feature is the additional information the "story within the story" provides about the nature of the "essence of camphor."

I would like to look first at this last feature since it takes us back to where we were at the end of section one of the story and it keeps our attention focused, for now, on the subject Masud has drawn our attention to in the title and epigraphs. Recalling his childhood, the perfume-maker who is our narrator begins talking about birds and turns rather quickly to the "portrait of a bird" he had named "the camphor sparrow" (15). This portrait had been made by a girl in his family who had died just a few days after making it. The picture, he tells us, used to make him feel "a cool, almost frosty sensation" similar to the "frosty feeling" he had whenever he saw camphor (15–16). What is interesting here is that now camphor is not just something from which we can *inhale* forlornness, it is also something that gives a "frosty *feeling*" when we see it.

A few pages later camphor is suggested again when the narrator as a child detects "a fragrance as cold as ice" from a puff of wind (21); but this scent met his eyes instead of his nostrils, "appearing as the end of a white string" (*ibid.*), and this string was tied to the claws of a bird that looked just like the "camphor sparrow" (*ibid.*). Here again the cold "fragrance" becomes less literal because it takes on the tangible form of a bird. So again the "essence" of camphor is not just something we can *inhale* and *feel inwardly*, this "essence" is also something we can *see* in a tangible form.

Later, when the narrator first encounters Mah Rukh Sultan, he recalls that he felt a "very light caress of *kafoor* when she had walked past" him (29). So then, our essence is also something that can *touch us* like a breeze. One day when the narrator and Mah Rukh Sultan are talking, Mah Rukh Sultan brings up the subject of camphor (35). She says that "a lot of people are scared of it" because it makes them "think of death" (36). When the narrator asks about her perfumes, she places the box in front of him and he *senses* "a pale, cold, silent, white smell caress all the other fragrances and flit away, then leap back, touch them all once more, and creep away again" (37). Here we learn that camphor essence is often associated with death and that it can come and go—like forlornness. And when the narrator suggests that one of the perfumes is camphor perfume, Mah Rukh Sultan assures him, "You can't make perfumes of *kafoor*" (*ibid.*). How is it then that all the perfume-maker's fragrances have a base

of camphor? A contradiction? Or does it perhaps again suggest that the perfumes created on a base of camphor are not these kinds of perfumes and this perfume-maker's camphor is of a different sort?

The child-narrator's relationship with Mah Rukh Sultan exemplifies one of the recurring motifs mentioned earlier—that of a young narrator's deep bond of affection with a slightly older girl or woman, with whom he may experience a kind of sensual or sexual awakening, only to have the relationship terminated prematurely. In understanding this relationship we have to keep in mind the fact that, although Naiyer Masud "had worked out the whole story of Mah Rukh Sultan" he later decided not to include it (Farrukhi 1997, 272).

This is one of those instances where Masud believes the story will live on in some sense even though he has removed it. He may have deleted her story here because it was not central to the message he wanted to convey. Masud tends to delete extraneous detail and leave only the "essence," if you will. (Masud may, in fact, not just think detail unnecessary, he may be averse to it. For example, in another story, "Mār-Gīr" ("Snake Catcher"), the narrator even criticizes another character in the story who, while attempting to recount certain events that have occurred, continually digresses from the actual events to relate numerous irrelevant details.)

In our "sample perfume" we have only the barest traces of the relationship that existed between Mah Rukh Sultan and the narrator and, to understand the depth of his forlornness at her death, we perhaps have to fill in some details from our own imaginations. The first thing we can pick up on is the fact that even before the narrator meets Mah Rukh Sultan he is attracted by her name—he wishes he could have used it as a name for the "*kafoori* sparrow" (27). And he and Mah Rukh Sultan have something in common since we learn that she is also interested in the "sort of thing" our narrator creates from clay (*ibid.*). The narrator also immediately associates Mah Rukh Sultan with camphor, since, as mentioned earlier, when she first walked past him he felt a "very light caress of *kafoor*" (29).

The first time they talk it is about his clay "creations" and we see that these things that he was so proud of before are now an embarrassment and they "suddenly seemed dull" (30). He notices that she is arranging his things a new way, better even than the way he had set things out on the mantel (*ibid.*), and he hesitantly admits to her what he had earlier denied emphatically to others: "These *are* toys" (*ibid.*). Before she leaves that day, Mah Rukh Sultan gives the narrator something she says she made when she was his age, "a short, square jar of white china" (31), and we

immediately recognize that this must be the same "white, square-bottomed china jar" (14) the grown-up narrator had told us held his own odorless camphor that exudes a vacant forlornness. In other words, this childhood gift from Mah Rukh Sultan became a treasured possession that remained with the narrator throughout his life and it now holds that "forlornness" which is the foundation of all his "perfumes." And we now associate this forlornness not just with camphor but also with Mah Rukh Sultan.

The narrator tells us he "never grew close" to anyone in the family other than Mah Rukh Sultan (32), but he never spells out for us just how close to her he was. This we have to surmise for ourselves from the things that he says and does. For example, he decides he wants to give Mah Rukh Sultan his "finest piece" (34). When he realizes this would have been a square clock she had taken for real and he has just recently given that piece to someone, he does not choose something else, he decides to make a new one. Locking himself in his room, he works "straight through until midnight and the following day until noon" (*ibid.*). There were cuts all over his hands and the bottle of camphor balm was almost empty, but still he did not stop (*ibid.*). This does not sound like the kind of thing a young boy would do for just any young lady old enough to "remember her childhood" when talking to him (36). On another occasion, he fashions "two houses so tiny" they could both be held in one hand (*ibid.*). He is sure that she will like them and that he will "be able to see her" (38). He tells her proudly, "I made them for you" (*ibid.*). Clearly he adores this older girl and wants to please her, wants to do whatever it takes to get to "see her." He last sees her on the day she dies and he leaves her room with his head bowed, feeling forlorn (41–42)—and that forlornness has been with him ever since, carried, as it were, in her white square-bottomed jar.

The last aspect of this "sample perfume" I want to discuss is the possibility that the child-narrator's "creations" represent the writings Naiyer Masud created as a child, some of which were published, but most of which were destroyed or disappeared.

Inspired by the portrait of the camphor sparrow which had been pieced together from various objects, the child-narrator tells us he became convinced that he too "could make one without much effort" and he began "gathering materials" for an attempt (16). Even when he was "very small," he tells us, he would "put together ill-assorted pieces of things" (19) and he would never admit that the things he made were just toys (20). Even these early creations were inspired by "forming and dissolving

images" that came to him through the "embrace of some familiar or unfamiliar fragrance" that he sometimes sensed in the breeze (*ibid.*). Eventually he became interested in "working in clay" from which he felt "the faintest whiff of *kafoor* leap up like a flame and vanish" (25). He was proud of all the things he made but none of them could rival the camphor sparrow (27).

All of this reminded me of Masud's comments to Sengupta about his own early efforts at writing when he was a child. First he wrote some poems, a couple of plays, and then some stories which were published in children's magazines (138). After that he actually began writing short stories but he would "scrutinize them intensely and they never seemed good enough" so he would throw them away (*ibid.*). He also seems to touch on this subject in other stories, in particular "Rē Khāndān kē Āsār" ("Remains of the Ray Family") which I will be discussing later.

Of course, there are still other layers of meaning that I have not touched on here. Not all layers of meaning are necessarily accessible to every reader. After all, by his own admission, not even S. R. Faruqi, who is of similar age, experience and background to Naiyer Masud, was able to discern anything at all of what Masud was trying to convey through this story.

We also have to consider the nature of our narrator here. He is an adult recalling events from his own childhood. His memories may be incomplete, he may not even be telling us everything he remembers (e.g., about his relationship with and feelings for Mah Rukh Sultan); and we do not necessarily know enough about Naiyer Masud to "peel back the layers of meanings," as Susan Lanser would have us do, in order to uncover the meaning that Masud is trying to convey in some of the passages here.

Beyond this we have to remember that Naiyer Masud is purposely not giving us the whole story here and the pieces of the puzzle will not necessarily ever fit together nicely and completely. As with all "open texts" we need to come back to the story again and again—looking at it from various angles, trying to put pieces together differently, and so on—in order to enrich our understanding of the story over time.

"Sulṭān Muẓaffar kā Vāqi'a-navīs": The story I want to turn to next is another story from Masud's second collection, namely "Sulṭān Muẓaffar kā Vāqi'a-navīs" ("Sultan Muzaffar's Imperial Chronicler"). It is a rather brief story, just eighteen pages in its English translation. Masud has said this story was based largely on a dream (Sengupta 1998b, 133). The whole

episode of the desert campaign—which definitely reads like a dream with its desert-people launching an aerial attack disguised as birds and its desert woman who is crushed to death merely from being under a roof, although the roof itself remains intact, and so on—appeared to him in a dream as if it were a "film playing in front of [his] eyes" (*ibid.*).

The story was originally published in English with the title "Sultan Muzaffar's Imperial Chronicler" and was later changed, at Masud's request, to "Sultan Muzaffar's Chronicler of Events," which is an exact, word-for-word translation of the Urdu title. The fact that Masud requested this change seems significant to me and provides further support for regarding his titles as pointers from the author regarding meaning. This seemingly minor change slightly alters the reader's orientation toward the story and the chronicler. Adding the word "imperial" gives the character of the chronicler, as well as his chronicle, an air of authority that, it seems, Masud does not intend.

As with "ʿIt̤r-e Kāfūr," I believe this story is important because in it Masud again seems to be talking about his own orientation toward the craft of writing. He seems to be saying here that *he*, as an author, is a chronicler of events. He writes what he sees and what he hears. He does not explain, that is not his responsibility. He just asks questions, he does not provide answers. In his "chronicles," he does not necessarily write down what we may expect him to write down. And, like the chronicler in this story, he breaks the rules.

The title here is again the signpost which prevents us from becoming lost in the events of the story. In my view, it is not the events themselves that are important, it is the chronicler himself and what he does—as the title suggests. This is what Masud is talking about here and he makes that clear to his readers from the beginning. The story again has two epigraphs. The English quote is from the science fiction writer H. Beam Piper and it is just one line which contains just one keyword, "continuum," a word that can suggest any number of things in relation to a chronicler and his events. The Persian quote is a line of poetry from Muḥammad Iqbāl which essentially says that whether we see or do not see, we are in agony. The quotes taken together suggest to me that the nature of the work of a chronicler is to set down, as a coherent whole, a sequence of events he has witnessed or heard; and for the chronicler, what he sees and what he does not see both cause him agony. These two epigraphs seem to exactly reflect the way the chronicler in the story approaches his work.

As the story opens, the chronicler informs us that he has been

ordered to write an account of how Sultan Muzaffar's tomb was built. He tells us that his last chronicle was an account of the Sultan's desert campaign and that, since then, he has been staying at home. However, instead of then beginning his chronicle of how the Sultan's tomb was built, he begins to chronicle his days at home—starting with the very first day when he had planted two shoots from "the big umbrella shaped trees" which surrounded the valley of the tombs (137).[10]

That very day, he tells us, an envoy of the Sultan arrived. As with all imperial envoys, there was no oral or written message, but the type of uniform he wore indicated that the Sultan demanded some service from the chronicler and he was to remain at home to await his orders (138). The chronicler notes, with what seems like a hint of sarcasm, that the "most remarkable thing about the day" (*ibid.*) was that one of the shoots he planted was crushed underfoot by the envoy but the other survived.

When section two of the story begins, the chronicler is resting under the fully-grown tree of that surviving shoot—and another envoy now appears. That is, the chronicler has been waiting at home for his orders for many years, he has grown old and can no longer see well; and he has literally not left home during all that time, not even to go to the bazaar. Masud makes much of the amount of time that has passed—perhaps to suggest the degree of obedience commanded by the Sultan, or the amount of fear he inspires, or perhaps to impress upon us that the chronicler is obedient to the letter, like everyone else, except when it comes to his chronicle writing. However, it could also be imagined here that Masud is referring to himself and suggesting, humorously, that the reason he himself remains at home all the time is that he is awaiting orders from "the Sultan." (And, incidentally, the chronicler in the story, like Masud, always does his writing at home.)

After accompanying the second envoy and receiving his orders, the chronicler comes home by way of the bazaar. Now, instead of beginning his chronicle of how the Sultan's tomb was built, he begins chronicling what he saw and did during his walk through the bazaar—and readers begin asking themselves here why he does not get on with the chronicle they are *expecting*.

The chronicler notices that there is someone tagging along with him and this someone turns out to be the Sultan's latest official historian who has been appointed to observe the chronicler. As section three of the

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[10]All quotes from "Sulṭān Muẓaffar kā Vāqiʿa-navīs" are taken from Masud 1997g.

story opens, the two of them finally head for the desert where the tomb is located so that the chronicler can write the account of how it was built—although the tomb is nearly finished and he did not actually see it being built. But now, instead of writing the chronicle of how the tomb was built, the chronicler begins to write the account of what he saw and did on his way to the tomb. That is, every step of the way in this "chronicle" we are reading, our chronicler writes what he actually sees and hears, rather than writing what we, and the Sultan, *expect* him to write.

Clearly, the chronicler, our narrator, is not chronicling the events of the Sultan's life here—that is, here he is not, in fact, an "Imperial Chronicler." Rather, using the Sultan's "imperial paper," he is chronicling the events of his own life. Referring back to the Piper epigraph, the events of this narrator's life chronicled here represent a "continuum" which includes, and cannot be separated from, the events in the life of the Sultan which intersect with it.

Along the route to the tomb, the custodian of the tomb comes out to meet the chronicler and the historian, and he recounts to the chronicler every step of the building of the tomb. However, despite this, the chronicler insists on seeing the tomb himself, and he asks the custodian many questions—some of which the custodian will not answer. The custodian protests that he has told the chronicler everything he was ordered to tell him (145), and there is fear in his voice.

As the chronicler asks the custodian about the building of the tomb, it becomes clear that everyone, not just the custodian, simply follows the Sultan's orders without question, except perhaps the chronicler. And the Sultan, it seems, fears the chronicler because of this. The chronicler asks questions and records exactly what he sees and what he hears. In this chronicle, the Sultan appears to have tried to prevent the chronicler from actually seeing the tomb being built because there seems to be something the Sultan wants to hide. And we are given to understand, by way of a discussion that takes place between the chronicler and the young imperial historian who is tagging along, that chroniclers, not historians, record the facts. The historian of the Sultan's desert campaign made the error of writing "all those things in his history which the chronicler of the desert campaign had written," so he "had to die" (146).

In section four of the story, the chronicler again succeeds in *not* writing the account of how the tomb was built. Instead, he now writes about the chronicle of the desert—describing how he was supposed to write the account of the battle, but he did not see the battle. Most of the account, he tells us in section five, "consisted of hearsay" which he de-

scribed as if he were "an eyewitness at the scene" (153). But, he tells us, he also wrote what he saw; and what he saw was the Sultan on the roof of a fort in the desert—with a woman—a desert woman who could not survive with a roof over her head.

Returning to the present, he tells us he must now write the account of the building of a tomb he did not see built. However, he must also write what he sees—he seems to consider this his duty as a chronicler. When he sees the tomb, he sees that it is built where the fort once was, out of the stone from the fort that is no longer there, and the tomb has no roof. The implication seems to be that this is not, in fact, the tomb of the still living Sultan, rather, it is perhaps the tomb of the desert woman who died during the desert campaign; but the Sultan does not want this to be known; or, perhaps, the Sultan wants to be buried with her when he dies.

The chronicler tells us that he received special "imperial paper" on which to write the account of the building of the tomb but, instead, he says, he has "written all this from beginning to end on the paper stamped with the Sultan's seal" (154). "The personal use of imperial paper by a chronicler is a new crime," he says defiantly (*ibid.*). In any case, he thinks he has fulfilled the Sultan's orders, although, he says, he has "forgotten many of the conventions of chronicling events" (*ibid.*).

I cannot help but hear the voice of Naiyer Masud in everything this chronicler is saying. So often Masud's narrators seem to simply record what they see, without emotion, as if they are just doing their duty as chroniclers. It does not matter what we, and the "Sultan," might want or expect. As chroniclers, they must write what they see, not to please anyone, just to perform their function as chroniclers of events. And like the chronicler here, Masud's chroniclers seem to have "forgotten" many of the conventions of chronicling. They often do not tell us all the things we might expect to hear about an event, they do not analyze or explain anything, their chronicles almost always lack the specifics about the time and place of an event, and so on. The story even seems to suggest that "Masud-as-chronicler" will go out of his way *not* to write the kind of chronicle we expect. And if we do not like it, we can perhaps destroy the chronicle, but we have no power over the chronicler himself.

"Mār-Gīr" *and* **"Ōjḥal":** I would like to look now at two stories from the five interconnected stories in Masud's first collection. The whole collection has generated a great deal of discussion among critics and commentators, proving to be, perhaps, the most puzzling stories Masud has

written. In 1993 Safdar Mir suggested, for example, that the stories in this collection were "happenings," rather than stories in the traditional sense (1997, 300). These "happenings," he said, are "volatile, fleeting, evanescent; they are trembling on the edge of being and non-being" (*ibid.*). Likewise, Salim-ur-Rahman suggests that the stories in this collection taken as a whole, like the couplets of a ghazal, "defy any consensus of interpretation" (1997, 290).

Significantly I think, the collection opens with a brief prologue quoting from Imam Jaʿfar aṣ-Ṣadiq, the presumed author of the *Book of Jafar*, which, as M. A. Farooqi points out, is the sourcebook for a particular form of divination practice (2003, 146). The quote talks about a geometric pattern on the wall and notes that, even if you know nothing about the principles of geometry or geometric forms, you can still enjoy looking at the pattern because you see that it is a unified pattern, that it suggests "symmetry as well as alignment," and so on (Salim-ur-Rahman 1997, 290–91). True to form, Naiyer Masud prepares his readers to watch for the pattern in the stories in the collection, and it does not matter if they know nothing of *sīmiyā*, the science of letters and its spells, which gives the collection its name, they can enjoy the pattern anyway. And indeed, in attempting to understand "Mār-Gīr" ("Snake Catcher"), it is important to remember that this story fits into, must fit into, the unified pattern of the collection. Failing to remember this will likely leave a reader quite confused. In writing about "Mār-Gīr" in his Master's thesis on the *Sīmiyā* collection, for example, Robert Phillips noted that this story was "one of the more obscure stories" in it and that here the "ambiguity and lack of specificity" that worked well elsewhere, left the reader "merely feeling frustrated" (1999, 28).

Masud noted that some people regard "Mār-Gīr" as "quite fantastic" (in the sense of unreal) (Farrukhi 1997, 268) but that, in fact, he had "not presented anything in it" which might be called "unreal or contrary to reality" (*ibid.*, 268–69). So, in addition to knowing that the story must fit into the pattern of stories in the collection, we also know that the story must be consistent with reality.

As another guide to understanding the story, we also have, as usual, the title itself and two epigraphs. The translated Urdu title is "Snake Catcher" so we know we need to pay close attention to the snake catcher in the story—who he is, what he does, where he is, what his relationship is to the narrator who is described as his "Helper," and so on. Of the two epigraphs, one is a Persian couplet from Rumi's *Masnavī* which might translate as "Though hobbling, bent over, and uncouth / Creep ever

towards Him, seeking Him forevermore."[11] This quote is taken from the introductory section of Rumi's story of the snake catcher. In this section Rumi tells us to listen to this story that we might "get an inkling of this veiled mystery" (1930 vol. 2, 56), and in the quote itself he seems to urge us to persevere in our quest to understand this veiled mystery, regardless of our limitations (*ibid.*). As Rumi's story begins, he also tells his listeners to "leave the part and keep thine eye (fixed) upon the Whole" (*ibid.*, 57). The overall message in Rumi's story of the snake catcher seems to be that we, as seekers, must be careful not to be misled by appearances. The "snake" that seems to be dead may only be frozen, like the snake in Rumi's story, and we ourselves may become its victims.

In my view, in this epigraph, Masud is clearly guiding his readers in how to read his own story of the snake catcher with understanding: namely, the meaning is veiled, we must not allow ourselves to be misled by outward appearances, and we must consider the story as a whole and persevere even if we feel inadequate to the task.

The English epigraph is from the poet William Blake and it speaks of "turning away" (152).[12] This, it seems to me, connects the story to the story immediately preceding it in the collection, "Nuṣrat" ("The Color of Nothingness"/"The Woman in Black"). The narrator in both stories is the same individual. The story "Nuṣrat" ends tragically with the narrator recalling the day when, by chance, he found Nusrat sitting under a tree in the garden, hidden by the branches of that tree, which are drooping under the weight of the tree's dense foliage. Though not stated explicitly, it is clear to the reader that Nusrat is dead, and has been dead for some time. The narrator tells us that a "severe trembling" seized his body (94)[13] and he stood up, ran into the house through the side door, shut the door after peering one last time through the slit that remained, and "was never able to open it again" (*ibid.*). Although "Nuṣrat" is the second story in the collection, it seems to be the closing story, chronologically, of the five-story set because in it the narrator is a mature man looking back on the past.

In "Mār-Gīr," we find this same narrator, who could *never* open that door again, as a young man "facing the jungle" (155), and he tells us that he "was running away from a dead girl" and that for "some time already" he had "given up thinking altogether" but now he "stood there facing the jungle and spent a long time thinking" (*ibid.*).

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[11]I am indebted to M.U. Memon for this translation.

[12]All quotes from "Mār-Gīr" are taken from Masud 2003c.

[13]All quotes from "Nuṣrat" are taken from Masud 1997a.

Despite all the pointers provided by Naiyer Masud, I think at least two very different readings of this story are possible. One, which may very well be the one Masud intended, is that our narrator really did flee to some hamlet outside the city and get bitten by a snake in the surrounding jungle. I, however, am not really comfortable with that interpretation. There are too many suggestions in the story that there is more going on than that.

What seems important here is the state of mind of the narrator. We know from the "Nuṣrat" story that he has sustained a tremendous shock and, as he tells his story here, he has not recovered from that shock. Everything we read in "Mār-Gīr," I believe, is colored by the fact that the narrator has lost touch, has "turned away," if you will, from a reality that he could not face, from a reality that exists outside that "door" he could never "open" again. If you read the story with this in mind, it is quite clear how the story could be consistent with reality, as Masud says it is, and yet strike readers as somehow outside of reality, as "fantastic" in the sense of unreal.

In my understanding of this story there is, in fact, no real "jungle." The jungle that the narrator faces is only the "jungle-like" garden that exists outside his own home. And the "snake catcher" who "saves his life," and whose "helper" he becomes, does not exist except in his own mind. (In fact, the snake catcher seems to take on the characteristics of at least two separate individuals and I will have more to say on this later in my discussion.) In other words, although the narrator tells us that he left his house far behind, and even his hometown, I do not believe he personally did this in any physical sense. In my view, he never actually left home under his own power at all, except in his own mind. The story does suggest that at some point he was away from home, perhaps under the care of a doctor, but he seems to have been taken somewhere and did not go there under his own power (see e.g., 176).

All of this becomes evident if the reader focuses his attention on what the narrator says about the Snake Catcher—the character Masud has drawn the reader's attention to in the title. We are introduced to him in the first line of the story when, the narrator tells us, the cry "Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher!" echoed in the stillness of the night (152), and it had that "quivering fear of death" in it which is common to all ages and genders (*ibid.*). Then, the narrator says, a "slight shudder" swept through his body and he was obliged to get out of bed.

This opening passage has the aura of a dream about it and it calls to mind two things. First, it harkens back to the narrator's trauma of finding

Nusrat dead under the tree in the garden and the "severe trembling" that seized his body at that time. The reader can easily imagine that the narrator is reliving that trauma in a symbolic way here in his dream. The passage is also suggestive of Masud's own somnambulism in which the "dreamer" is actually "obliged" to get out of bed and act out his dream.

We next meet the Snake Catcher when the narrator enters the "jungle" and he no sooner thinks there could be snakes there, than one appears and bites him (159), again suggesting a dream. By "coincidence," the Snake Catcher is nearby and he struggles to carry the narrator out of the "jungle" on his back, only to collapse about halfway, even though "people from the hamlet" had arrived to help (161). The Snake Catcher's inability to carry the narrator out of the "jungle" would be consistent with the Snake Catcher being, in reality, the *old* surgeon living under the nearby portico in the narrator's "jungle-like" garden. The Snake Catcher, we are told, made him "drink a certain extract several times" (162), also consistent with what we learn about the old surgeon in the final story of the collection, "Maskan" ("Resting Place"); namely, the old surgeon was able to create effective medicinal substances from the items found in the jungle-like garden of the narrator's home.

One day, the Snake Catcher stands the narrator on his feet and takes him out of the "hamlet" along a path which *soon* leads to the mouth of the "jungle." This, of course, could simply be the path leading from the main house to the garden. Several times, the narrator says, the Snake Catcher stared at his face intently and then led him into the "jungle," which seems to be populated by humans rather than animals (*ibid.*). All of this is again consistent with the narrator's own home and garden.

Significantly, the people of the "hamlet" seem to know the narrator—they told him about himself but asked very little, not even his name (165)—and it occurs to the narrator that perhaps he has been living in this "hamlet" longer than he realized (*ibid.*). The impression left on the reader is that the narrator is really in the same place he always was, but he is perceiving that reality in a completely different way, a way that protects his psyche from re-experiencing the trauma of finding Nusrat dead in that jungle-like garden.

The narrator also tells us what kind of help he gave to the Snake Catcher and this also points to the old surgeon. The narrator reports that he would "go into the jungle" with the Snake Catcher and "gather the materials for his medicinal concoctions" (*ibid.*); and on all these occasions, he tells us, the Snake Catcher described to him "the effects of each item in great detail" and the "effect always dealt exclusively with healing

wounds, never with the treatment of snake bites" (*ibid.*). In "Maskan" ("Resting Place") the old surgeon himself tells us that he would treat the wounds of the people in the house, and even outsiders, with the resources available in the garden (193).[14]

However, despite the fact that up to now the Snake Catcher *seems*, in reality, to be the old surgeon, I do not think that he, in fact, is the old surgeon. In my view, the narrator at this point is delirious and is either dreaming or hallucinating. In this mental state, he is drawing on familiar images from his own mind. I say this because at the end of the "Nuṣrat" story, which recalls events that take place prior to this, the old surgeon appears to be gone, perhaps, like so many other elders of the household at that time, he has died, and the narrator is more or less alone in the house.

I say this also because, later in the story, the Snake Catcher takes on characteristics that are not consistent with his being the old surgeon. This is especially evident beginning in section five of the story where the narrator seems to begin talking about what has happened to him all over again, but this time from a slightly clearer perspective. He says, for example, that "up to now" he has not been able to figure out how much time he spent "among those dim shadows" (175) and that eventually those shadows, which were incomprehensible to him at first, "began to assume whatever form [he] wished" (*ibid.*). He even says that the forms they took were "entirely dependent on [him] for their existence" (*ibid.*). He also says, "There were large doors all around and each had several curtains of exceedingly fine fabric hanging over it…. The strong light that poured through the open door appeared very strange and unpleasant…" (176). In his delusional state he seems to imagine himself as inside the palanquin curio that he had described earlier in much the same terms (158).

Later he says that he heard the Snake Catcher "telling somebody, 'Today I'll take him with me,'" after which several hands stood him up and put him on a seat in a carriage (176). The story continues on in this vein and it seems that the narrator has perhaps been taken to a hospital or sanitarium, and that the person he *calls* the Snake Catcher is actually a doctor treating him following his mental breakdown. Later, when the narrator is talking to this Snake Catcher about his inability to remember even the order of things, the Snake Catcher tells him, "No? Don't try to remember; otherwise you'll be overwhelmed" (179)—just the sort of thing a doctor or psychologist might say to a patient in these circumstances.

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[14]All quotes from "Maskan" are taken from Masud 2003b.

This kind of reading is also consistent with what might be regarded as the overall *theme* of the story set—namely, *sīmiyā*. At one point in that title story we are told that the science of *sīmiyā* involves certain spells and the effect of these spells is that "a thing which is not present is, nevertheless, seen clearly, and this is not an optical illusion" (192).[15] That is, here in "Mār-Gīr" the narrator appears to see clearly things that are not actually present, and it is not a trick of his eye, it is a result of his mind's inability to correctly perceive what he sees. What seems to be going on in the story is that most of what the narrator describes is a reflection of the pseudo-reality he has created in his own mind, but some of what he does say about this "reality" inadvertently provides the reader who perseveres, and who looks closely at the story as a whole, with enough information to piece together an understanding of the true situation.

Even though "Mār-Gīr" is the middle story of the collection, it seems to fall near the end chronologically. One of the connecting characters in the four translated stories is Nusrat. In the first story, "Ōjhal" ("Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire"), and the last story, "Maskan" ("Resting Place"), she appears as the young nurse/caregiver of the "Patient." In the second story, "Nuṣrat," the now mature and at least partially recovered narrator of "Mār-Gīr" recalls her as a young woman whose badly injured feet were restored by the old surgeon, and this narrator also recalls how he found her dead under the tree in the garden. In "Mār-Gīr" she appears only as a haunting memory. In "Maskan," the narrator of "Nuṣrat" and "Mār-Gīr" is just a young boy, and the Patient is the narrator from "Ōjhal" now returned from his wandering, but no longer speaking. In "Sīmiyā," Nusrat does not appear, but the Patient narrates that story and there he has not yet completely given up speaking.

So, following the characters of Nusrat and the Patient, we can see that, chronologically, "Sīmiyā" occurs first, being told by the Patient before he is brought to the ancestral home that connects the stories; "Maskan" and "Ōjhal" occur next since in them the Patient is living in the ancestral home, Nusrat is a young woman serving as his nurse, and the narrator of "Mār-Gīr" is a young boy; "Mār-Gīr" occurs third because in it that young boy has become a young man who now owns the ancestral home and is "running away" after finding Nusrat dead; and the "Nuṣrat" story occurs last because in it that young man is now a mature man recalling events from his childhood and early manhood—which include

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[15]All quotes from "Sīmiyā" are taken from Masud 1984; translations from the story are mine.

Nusrat's caring for the Patient, the later injury of her feet, and her death.

Before leaving "Mār-Gīr" and turning to "Ōjẖal," there is one other aspect of the story that needs to be looked at. Although in "Mār-Gīr" the linking character of the Patient does not appear at all, and the linking character of Nusrat only appears briefly as part of a traumatic memory, another linking element of the stories is given prominence—namely, the curios. It is in "Mār-Gīr" that these antique objects, which sit in the outer reception room of the house that connects all the stories, are described in the greatest detail.

For some reason the "jungle" that he enters reminds the narrator of "Mār-Gīr" of these curios in his house and he tries hard "to recall each and every one of them" (156). He goes on to describe a tiger (or lion, since the Urdu word is the same for both) with missing eyes, standing on its hind legs; a horse molded from some reddish-brown material with a rider mounted on it, one of whose hands is raised but empty (though it is said the rider once held a sword or a scale); a crab that wobbles; a miniature palace built from some tiny bricks of different colors (which is an exact replica of some palace that used to exist and the ruins of which may still be standing); and, the most prominent curio, which was a palanquin sitting on top of an octagonal table (this last was added when the narrator himself was a child).

These curios, first of all, are not the only objects or images that recur in the five stories. There are numerous such items and, in my view, they appear in the stories not, *primarily*, to convey meaning, at least not in the narrow sense of the word, but, rather, to convey a sense of "symmetry as well as alignment," a sense that the stories are part of a "systematic whole"—just as the prologue of the collection suggests (see Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman 1997, 291).[16]

Within the context of "Mār-Gīr," these curios link this narrator definitively to the ancestral home. Here the narrator calls the home *his* home (156). He also calls it his home in "Nuṣrat" (91), thus helping the reader connect the people and events of these two stories. In "Nuṣrat" the curios are mentioned several times but not described. There, however, we learn that they were apparently "added to enhance the room's decor" and that some are apparently "centuries old" (83).

In "Sīmiyā," dreamlike images of these same curios recur (along with

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[16]For a more detailed discussion of these elements and their possible meanings see (Phillips 1999) and (Sengupta 1998a). *Editor*— Also see Muse elsewhere in this issue.

other images) and the narrator seems aware that they are only images, possibly having created the "enchantment" of these images himself from images that already existed in his own mind. At the beginning of that story we are told the narrator is sitting on a riverbank and among the "multitude of forms" (120) that appear, change shape, and then disappear in front of him are: a tiger (or lion) whose front legs are raised up as if it is running, and it seems to move in the narrator's direction; a rider on the tiger (or lion)—which then becomes a horse—who is holding in his upraised hand what appears to be *either* a curved sword or a scale; a crab that moves; a turret with an ornamental parapet; and a palanquin (119–20). However, all of the curios here are different in some way than the ones described in "Mār-Gīr." And the palanquin is mentioned separately from the others.

The intriguing thing is that in "Sīmiyā" the curios seem to come alive, and perhaps even more intriguing is the fact that the house of the "owner" in the story, where the narrator ends up living, seems to itself be the palace curio come to life—all of this subtly suggesting, since "Sīmiyā" is the title story of the collection, that all of the stories here are a kind of *sīmiyā* themselves, which of course they are literally if you think of fiction as a kind of "enchantment" in which the author casts his spell using the power of words to show us images clearly which do not really exist, and it is not a trick of the eyes.

Curios appear again in "Maskan," but not these particular curios. This time our attention is drawn to some vessels given to the old surgeon to use in making his medicinal concoctions, and, as the old surgeon notes, these vessels and all the curios in the room have "something missing" (191)—perhaps suggesting that Masud's own stories, which also all have "something missing," are, likewise, curios of a sort. In "Maskan" the curios appear to play not so much a story-linking role, but, rather, they seem to be a means of linking everyone and everything in the stories to the past. For example, the old surgeon, who narrates "Maskan," reports that the owner of the curios seems to consider the old surgeon himself a curio. When the old surgeon arrives at the house, the owner tells him, "We want to keep you with them … but the trouble is you're alive" (*ibid.*). Later, the subject comes up again and the fact that the surgeon is a "live curio," while the items in the room are "not alive" is emphasized (194)—this is especially interesting since the curios seem to come to life in "Sīmiyā." One last point regarding "Maskan" is that if the old surgeon is to be considered a "live curio," we can perhaps logically conclude that he, like all the other curios, is a precious remnant of the past, but that he too has

"something missing."

The curios are also seen in "Ōjhal," where again they appear not as objects but as images. However, let me set aside a discussion of the curios in this story for the moment and turn instead to the story itself.

As mentioned earlier, the story "Ōjhal" occurs first in the collection but I have, nevertheless, chosen to discuss it after, rather than before "Mār-Gīr," partly because it was, in fact, published after "Mār-Gīr" when these stories originally appeared in *Shab-Khūn* (Allahabad). Indeed, "Nuṣrat," which I have placed last in the chronological order, was published as the first story of the set, in 1971. "Sīmiyā" was published second, in 1972, but only the first part of the story, with no indication that there ever would be a second part. "Mār-Gīr" came next, in 1978, followed by "Ōjhal" in 1981. Part two of "Sīmiyā" finally appeared in 1983, eleven years after part one! (And it was in part two—or what we now *consider* part two, since it was not labeled in any way in 1983 to show that it was connected to the story published in 1972—that *sīmiyā* was actually mentioned for the first time in the story itself.) "Maskan" then appeared as what was, in effect, the sixth and last story in the set in 1984.

You will recall that I have placed both "Ōjhal" and "Maskan" at the same point chronologically in the overall narrative and, interestingly, they are physically connected by the opening passage of "Ōjhal"—set off on a separate page—which is in fact a quote from "Maskan." Placing them first and last in the collection makes for a neat pattern, where all the stories that come between these two give further details—fill in the pattern if you will—of the characters that appear in both of these stories. The reader, of course, cannot appreciate this pattern until he encounters the opening passage of "Ōjhal" again near the end of the last story in the set.

As with all of Naiyer Masud's stories, the title "Ōjhal" is our first guide to understanding what this story is about. In connection with this story, the word "*ōjhal*" is often understood to mean obscure, hidden, concealed, and the like, all of which apply: For example, to the obscure domains of fear and desire which the narrator seems to detect in the houses he inspects, but also, in my reading of the story, to the narrator himself who seems to want to hide behind a veil of silence, and who attempts, as narrator, to conceal the true nature of his own character. However, the word can also mean private or privacy, and in this story that particular nuanced meaning of the word also seems especially appropriate because it is a *lack* of privacy in the family's ancestral home that seems to cause the narrator to become so tired of his "sheltered life" that he wants to be

on his own (67).[17]

We also have two epigraphs to guide our understanding. The first is a verse found in a ghazal of Mīr Taqī Mīr, a well-known Urdu poet of the eighteenth century. This verse: "Hide—but where? / Each door I close opens another" (59), also seems to address the issue of lack of privacy, the inability to hide or conceal oneself. The second epigraph consists of verses four and five from Psalm 77 of the Bible in which the author laments that he has considered the days of old and he is "so troubled" he "cannot speak"—very suggestive, since the Patient who narrates "Ōjhal" declares to us at the very start, on paper at least, that he has "given up talking" (59), yet he makes no mention of being troubled, he says he has no "need to speak" (81).

This narrator, like the other two narrators in this quintet of stories, is, it seems to me, somewhere on the road that leads to and from insanity, or to and from a state where a person loses touch with the sensible world as we know it. Clearly, the narrator of "Mār-Gīr" had lost touch with reality and then later recovered, at least partially. Now, in the quoted passage from "Maskan" which is placed at the beginning of "Ōjhal," the old surgeon says he realized the Patient he had just seen "was traveling far ahead" of him on a road which he (the old surgeon) "knew nothing about" (59). This again suggests to me that, indeed, the old surgeon—who like the Patient in "Ōjhal" had been wandering around a long time—has "something missing" and he perhaps will, at some point, also lose touch with reality.

In "Ōjhal," the narrator, in my view, looks back at the past and tells us the story of how he became insane and what the nature of his insanity is. Of course, the narrator himself does not view his story this way, although even he suggests, at several points, that he had thought he was losing his mind (e.g., 69, 71). The pivotal and defining moment in his life, it seems, came when, one day, his sexual desire for the younger sister of his elder brother's wife was awakened, but, partly due to her fear of being seen, remained forever unfulfilled.

In the story, the narrator goes on at length telling us about what happened with Aunt—because due to a "complicated pattern of kinship" this woman he desired was also his aunt (60)—during one of her periodic visits to the family's home when, by chance, he came home and found her alone in the house drying her hair in a sunny spot, after a bath.

What is most interesting about the narrator's description is not so

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[17]All quotes from "Ōjhal" are taken from Masud 1997e.

much what happened—the fact that a sexual encounter occurred in such circumstances is not really surprising—but, rather, that in the description of the event he goes to great lengths to make himself appear the innocent in the situation, that is, to veil or conceal his own character. This need to appear innocent when obviously he is not—as we can clearly see from what he tells us—turns out to be characteristic of this narrator, both in this story and in "Sīmiyā."

By way of example, in describing the encounter with Aunt he tells us how, when her hair was dry, she stood up to place it in a bun and her "bare waist arched slightly backward, her bust rose and then fell back a little, causing her locks to fall away" (61). The language here is clearly charged with an awareness of her sexuality. Nevertheless, the narrator goes on to say that he saw all this in "a fraction of a second but it had no particular effect" on him (*ibid.*). Again, when she drops an earring he not only quickly bends over to pick it up, he tries to put it back in for her—which of course means he had to come very close to her—and while trying unsuccessfully to put the earring in he tells us that he "could smell the musky odor which arose from her moist body" (*ibid.*). But nothing happens and they both go to their rooms. "A little later" it is *he* who finds his way to her room where he again sees what he "had seen earlier" and now he says he felt a "bit uneasy" (*ibid.*). As things proceed, it is she who is depicted by the narrator as the one who initiates the sexual encounter, and he, feeling "angry at her for the first time," simply cannot help himself because now he finally admits to being aware of her "tremendous physical appeal" (62)—something he actually seems to have been aware of all along but was unwilling to admit since he does not seem to want us to think he may have been trying to take advantage of having found her home alone.

After this encounter comes to nothing—because she repeatedly prevents it from progressing by protesting that "someone will come" and "someone is watching" (62–63)—it becomes clear to the reader that the narrator is much more interested in restarting it than Aunt. He tells us, for example, that he "made many attempts to catch her alone" but that "she sat imprisoned in a circle of women" (64). Later, he goes searching for her upstairs and, seeing her lying on her bed, he has a "hunch" she is pretending but, in fact, it turns out she really is fast asleep (*ibid.*). After that, his every waking (and even sleeping) moment seems to be focused on fulfilling his desire to be with Aunt. He becomes increasingly frustrated and irritable. "Up to now" he had never realized how many "extraneous women" were "crawling about" the house (66). His desperation peaks as

he begins to realize Aunt's visit is likely near its end (*ibid.*), and even a "cold shower couldn't rid [him] of [his] heavy-headedness" (*ibid.*). Another moment alone with Aunt behind a door briefly lifts his spirits, but now even he realizes he has not "given much thought to how she might be feeling" (67). He had not even considered that "she might be totally unaffected by it all" (*ibid.*). When he discovers the next morning that Aunt has left with her brother, who had come to get her late at night with bad news, the narrator regrets that he had not been able to apologize to her (*ibid.*). Now the reader is left wondering, if he was innocent in all of this what would he have to apologize for, and was there really bad news or was this simply a pretense allowing Aunt to flee from this awkward and uncomfortable situation?

Almost immediately afterward, the narrator decides he wants to be on his own. Before long, he steps out of the family home and sets out down the road that eventually leads to complete confusion. You may recall that in his interview with Sagaree Sengupta, Masud talks about his own inability to really function outside the family home where he has spent virtually his entire life, and, at one point he says, "the atmosphere outside leads to confusion" (1998b, 128). This story seems to, perhaps, grow out of that feeling of the author.

Although the narrator leaves home, he never puts this incident with Aunt behind him. It lurks in his mind and affects everything he does. He begins working as a house inspector but soon the houses seem to be alive and, like Aunt, they seem to have domains of fear and domains of desire. He himself begins to believe that he has "turned into an idiot" or that he is "losing his mind altogether" (69). As his mental confusion increases, he comes to believe that every room has a "truly invisible" part and this part is always big enough to "provide a hiding place for at least one man and one woman" (70). All of this, of course, does indeed sound crazy and seems to be, at least partially, the result of his complete inability to have a satisfying relationship with a woman.

In the story the narrator seems to almost boast of his many relationships with women saying he "wandered through many cities and moved in and out of many homes" and "it began to look as though the cities were crowded with houses and the houses were filled with women. And every woman seemed to be within easy reach" (71). But then he goes on to talk about his "many blunders" and this seems to suggest he can "read houses" much better than he can "read women." Women apparently often turn out to be exactly the opposite of what he thought they were (*ibid.*) and he even admits he cannot tell a "professional" apart from an "ordinary

woman" (72).

He refers to one blunder in particular involving a woman closely resembling Aunt, and this particular incident suggests what may have actually happened with Aunt. This blunder occurred when he "made a pass" at a woman who had a "habit of arranging and rearranging her lustrous black tresses" and he surmised, mistakenly, that "she wanted to draw [his] attention to her hair" (*ibid.*). "She went away," he says, and that was "totally unexpected" (*ibid.*)—all very similar to what he had said happened with Aunt, except that with Aunt he was not admitting to any blunder.

Interestingly, this particular blunder resurfaces in the "Sīmiyā" story when the fleeing woman mentioned here arrives at the hamlet shortly before the pursuing Patient—though he is not called Patient or anything else in the "Sīmiyā" story—and thus it links the narrator of "Ōjhal" to the narrator of that story. In "Ōjhal" the narrator admits that he pursued the woman—something he does not admit to or deny in "Sīmiyā" when he is asked this question directly—but that she "kept running away" (71). And in "Ōjhal" the narrator also seems to be aware of exactly how she died, although he tells us he "never found her" (*ibid.*)—this perhaps because he arrives in the hamlet where she has fled to after she has drowned in the river and he learns the circumstances of her death and hears that her body has not been found.

It is also interesting that the narrators of "Ōjhal" and "Mār-Gīr" are quite similar. They both have a period during which they feel an aversion toward speech and toward their own voices, for example. (The narrator of "Mār-Gīr" refers to this on page 175.) They both see a black cloud that appears, drops its rain, and then quickly disappears without a trace. They both see the images of the curios in their minds. They are both connected in some way to a woman who dies, and each is, to some extent, responsible for that woman's death. (Nusrat had re-injured her feet when she stepped on a glass carelessly left on the floor by the narrator (93), and the Patient recalls the woman who drowned while, apparently, fleeing from his sexual advances (71).) The main difference between the two is that the narrator of "Mār-Gīr" seems to be treated by a doctor after his mental breakdown, and he recovers, at least partially. At the end of "Nuṣrat," when he has already reached middle age, he still seems to have some difficulty remembering the "order of things," just as he does as a young man in "Mār-Gīr," and he still seems somewhat confused by all that has happened. Nevertheless, he is able to again at least "peek through the slit" of the door that he was never able to open again (94). The Patient, on the

other hand, who was never under the care of a doctor, shows no sign of recovery. Our last encounter with him is in "Nuṣrat" where he remains a patient who does not speak.

These five stories are obviously so dense and intricate in their patterns and motifs that it is utterly impossible to do any more here than scratch the surface to uncover familiar odors and reveal familiar shapes—just as the characters in the stories themselves do, which in fact draws readers themselves into the stories! But there comes a point where we too, perhaps, must—unless we wish to follow the characters down the road to confusion and insanity—make "something of a pact" with ourselves not to try to remember where we have seen that shape or smelled that odor before (Masud 1997e, 81).

However, before leaving "Ōjhal" we must return briefly to the curios, which, as I mentioned earlier, do occur here, but as images, not as objects. The reference is really only cursory and comes when the narrator is talking about the invisible parts that he believes exist in virtually every room. These invisible parts have shapes which at times bear "a truly amazing resemblance to certain objects" even though they all "appeared to be incomplete or broken" (70). Some images resembled a lion (or tiger) or a crab or a pair of scales—like the curios (*ibid.*). Others were unfamiliar but, nevertheless, appeared incomplete. In other words, here, *within the story*, the curio images seem to be just part of a new twist in the narrator's delusional thinking and it occurs to him once again that either he is becoming an idiot or losing his mind altogether (71).

"Vaqfa" *and* **"Bād-Numā":** I want to return now to Masud's second collection, *ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr*, and look at one of its stories in connection with a later story originally published in the *Annual of Urdu Studies* in 2000. Neither story is very long: "Vaqfa" ("Interregnum") is only sixteen pages in its English translation and "Bād-Numā" ("Weather Vane") is just thirteen pages. Both stories are told by men who are recalling their childhoods and each story seems to emphasize the child's relationship with his father as well as the father's connection to a fish emblem or insignia. In a certain sense the stories seem to complement one another. They both link the family of the story with the fish emblem, but "Vaqfa" views this link from the perspective of family history, while "Bād-Numā" views it from the perspective of the history of the fish emblem.

In her essay, "On Reading Two Recent Stories of Naiyer Masud," Mehr

Afshan Farooqi also noted a similarity between these two stories, but only to the extent that they both dealt with "the construction of an insignia motif, and its implications" (2003, 147). In my reading of "Vaqfa" and "Bād-Numā," the connection is much more fundamental; these two stories seem, if you will, to have been cut from the same fabric.

It seems to me that the "maker" of the weather vane, referred to in "Bād-Numā" as the only one who could possibly have repaired the now broken fixture (277),[18] may indeed have been none other than the father in "Vaqfa" whose "true skill" and "true profession" was masonry, but who would do "carving or something else" when he "couldn't find masonry work" (96).[19] The fish-shaped weather vane that its maker, the narrator of "Bād-Numā" informs us, "had fastened to its anchor in such a way that it evoked a bird perched on a treetop" (271), was hollow (272) but "held its ground, like a stone statue" (273). It was "constructed to endure all manner of intemperate weather and wind" (271). That is, it may very well have been carved and constructed by someone who was also familiar with masonry work, and this suggests to me that its maker might be that same master mason whose handiwork, we are told by the narrator of "Vaqfa," could be seen on many of the historical buildings of his city— and all of his work was marked by his family insignia, a fish emblem (108). In "Bād-Numā," even though this man's "work" was a weather vane intended to indicate the direction of the wind, it was marked, nevertheless, by this same fish insignia.

The two stories read together create an image in the mind of the reader of the decay of old Lucknow, the implied setting of the two stories, and its culture. In the earlier story, "Vaqfa," Masud focuses our attention on his intended subject first of all with his title, which suggests a pause or an interlude in a larger story. He follows this with two epigraphs. The first is an English quote from Emily Bronte: "Then did I know how existence could be cherished, / Strengthened, and fed without the aid of joy" (95). This quote suggests the possibility of a certain reawakening to the reality of one's existence in an atmosphere lacking happiness or joy; especially, perhaps, after enduring some tragic event. The second is a Persian quote from Kisāʾī Marvazī, a poet of the late tenth century. Its English translation speaks of leaving "it all behind" as we moved on, while "what was fated came to pass" and "our doings became tales for the children" (*ibid.*). This quote is suggestive of the tragic event itself. Finally, before the story

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[18]All quotes from "Bād-Numā" are taken from Masud 2003d.
[19]All quotes from "Vaqfa" are taken from Masud 1997c.

begins, there is a brief prologue which brings the insignia, that is, the family insignia, to the forefront and equates the history of this insignia with the history of the family itself.

Considered together, these three "guides" to reading "Vaqfa" suggest to me that the message of the story is that, although the old culture is in decline, is being left behind, and is now little more than the source of stories for children, this is not, necessarily, a permanent condition. It is possible, even in such a joyless atmosphere, for existence to be cherished, strengthened, and fed; and in the context of the larger story, the present sorrows may only be temporary.

Naiyer Masud tells us that in the story "Vaqfa" he has intentionally left out the whole story of the father even though it was all there in his mind (Farrukhi 1997, 272). What we do know from the story is that the father seems to have been a master craftsman and that he belonged to a family of some importance whose members were "fond of preserving their accounts and family tree" (95). Even now, the father and son (our narrator) live in a large old house, although it is crumbling. The narrator's tutor always calls him Prince, suggesting there may be some connection to the old ruling family of the Nawabs deposed by the British in 1856. And, although the narrator says that his father is illiterate, there is a library in the house which includes "massive handwritten manuscripts," some not in the narrator's language and others "so convoluted in their verbal structures and script that only after the greatest reflection" can the narrator "get even the vaguest grasp of their import" (100).

At one point, after the father has been injured in a fall and is near death, he alludes obliquely to the past. He tells his son that when only "this house and you were left … I realized I had to do something" (104), suggesting he had only taken up his work in desperation. The father emphasizes that his son should search for "it" and never lose "it" because "it" is "our" insignia and "it" has even "led to bloodshed" (105), but he does not specifically name what "it" is. At the time, the narrator does not know what his father is referring to, but later, after seeing the fish emblem on old buildings all over the city, he concludes that the fish must be the insignia of his city (108) and the reader can guess that this is the "family insignia" referred to in the prologue. In urging his son to find and protect "it," the father seems, in reality, to be telling him to search for and protect his heritage. As Muzaffar Ali Syed has suggested, "before breathing his last" the father seems to try to inspire a "new generation to search for its own moorings" (1997, 304).

What is clear at the end of the "interlude" described here is that the

son, at that point, did not know who his father really was but he had now "inhaled" the scent of his heritage on the large, exceedingly soft, red handkerchief with the "green silk fish embroidered in the center" (109), and this is what must have led him to subsequently re-discover his family's history for himself.

This is one instance where a knowledge of Lucknow is more or less essential to understanding the real import of the story, since it is not explained that, in fact, a pair of fish was the royal insignia of the ruling Nawabs who were deposed by the British in 1856. This fish motif "was ubiquitous throughout Lucknow" and appeared on the flag of the Qaiser Bagh Palace gateway, "on the silver coins struck by the Nawabs, on their coat of arms, their thrones and their boats" (Llewellyn-Jones 2000, 18).

I would suggest that it is not only the fish insignia that reappears in "Bād-Numā," but also the family whose history runs parallel to that of the insignia. That is, it seems to me that "Bād-Numā" is another episode in the larger story of which "Vaqfa" was one part. Indeed, the ending of "Vaqfa" is such that it leaves the reader feeling very much that the story will be continued. I myself actually looked on the next page expecting to find more, and when what I found instead was a new story I felt disoriented, thinking perhaps there must be pages missing from my book.

M. A. Farooqi has proposed that the story "Bād-Numā" has a connection to the occult and to magical-mystical practices—as seen in the story "Jā-Nashīn" ("The Heir"), which she believes is related to "Bād-Numā"— and that perhaps the weather vane is not even the work of human hands (2003, 148-49). Although Masud would certainly not deny her the freedom to use her own imagination when reading the story, I personally see no such connections. In my mind, the story is solidly grounded in the culture and history of old Lucknow.

The focus in "Bād-Numā," in any case, is clearly the weather vane itself, and by extension, the family that is linked to its fish-emblem form. Just as the fortunes of this fish-shaped weather vane are in decline, so too are the fortunes of the family whose history runs parallel to this insignia; in other words, it is the same family we read about in "Vaqfa." The narrator tells us in the opening paragraph that sometimes his father told those who inquired why the weather vane was not taken down, since it no longer worked, that the weather vane was "the emblem of our house, and that this indeed was its true function" (270).

Interestingly, the fish insignia is so closely connected to the family that in both "Bād-Numā" and "Vaqfa" the fish insignia is actually depicted as being "alive" in the mind of the narrator, as perhaps being an extension

of, or as embodying the spirit of, the head of the family. For example, in "Vaqfa" the narrating son says, at one point, that his father's voice seemed to be "coming from the gaping mouth of the broken fish" (102). And in "Bād-Numā," just as the weather vane is ailing and can no longer turn without assistance (271), so too, we discover, the father is ailing and needs assistance in order to turn (275).

Although the weather vane in "Bād-Numā" no longer functions, it once did and, likewise, even though this family is no longer in its high position, clearly it once was. The father, we are told, receives numerous visitors (275); some of them come almost every day. They are mostly residents of the same neighborhood, but when they come to the house to visit his father they are "dressed from head to toe in formal clothes" (276). His father too used to get "fully dressed" when he went to the reception room to receive them (*ibid.*). But the number of visitors had started to dwindle until there was only one left who came sporadically, and he had trouble walking, but nevertheless, when he came, he still dressed "from head to toe in the finest garb" (277). The family's once high station is also indicated by the fact that the father never went to visit others, they came to visit him. Although the family no longer has any official status, it is still held in high esteem by the members of the "old families" of Lucknow that are now dying out.

After his father's death, the narrator does eventually have the weather vane taken down. He notices one day that "new construction" in the neighborhood now surrounds his house to such an extent that the weather vane can no longer be seen from the ground (281). The implication of this, on the symbolic level, seems to be that the position of the family insignia, and thus the position of the family itself, has faded into obscurity. This is reinforced by the narrator's admission that not as many visitors call on him as called on his father, and they only come when they have something to ask him or he has something to ask them (282). That is, they do not come simply to pay their respects, as they did during his father's time, but still, they do come to him, he does not go to them, so, although the family's position is now obscured, it is not forgotten.

Meanwhile, the family emblem has, likewise, been reduced to the position of a decorative object in a corner of the reception room and is regarded, perhaps like the family, as little more than an object of curiosity (*ibid.*).

Another interesting aspect of these two stories is the relationship between the fathers and the sons, who are the narrators of the stories. Neither of the sons seem to be aware of the true significance of the fish

emblem, at least not at the time of the story they are narrating, and neither seems to be aware of their father's true station in life. In fact, for much of the time in the story in "Vaqfa" the son/narrator was not even sure this master mason was his real father. He admits that he used to think that this man was an old servant of his family who had loyally brought him up (96–97).

It is also interesting that both narrators are describing a past in which they themselves were just growing up and their fathers were still alive, and it is clear, though not stated explicitly, that during the time being described neither was fully aware of their own station or true family history, but that now they are. Yet neither narrator states exactly what that station or family background is, as if the reader would be expected to already know.

In my own imagination, the connection between these two stories may be even closer than it appears on the surface. In my view it is possible, though there is no *direct* reference in either story to support my view, that the father in "Bād-Numā" is, in fact, the son who narrated "Vaqfa." I see nothing in either story that would preclude this possibility. In my own imagination the weather vane, in a sense, physically represents the "it" the son in "Vaqfa" was to find, and which now, in his old age, he protects, just as his father, its maker in my mind, had instructed him to on his death bed.

Another interesting thing about these two narrating sons, who are so similar to one another, is that this same kind of son, who knows little about his father or about his own true station in life, also appears as the narrator of another story by Masud, "Ganjifa" (which I will be discussing); and, especially in the cases of "Vaqfa" and "Ganjifa," these narrators also bear a noticeable resemblance to Naiyer Masud himself. In "Vaqfa," for example, the narrator is drawn to the books in the library of the family home and he mentions, among other things, that some of the "massive handwritten manuscripts" were not in his language or were so complex in their "verbal structures and script" as to be beyond his comprehension (100). This, of course, brings to mind Masud's own early education reading the books in his father's library of rare books and manuscripts (Memon 1997, 11). The narrator in "Vaqfa" also mentions that during his school days he began to go out on his own during his free time and that he roamed through "all the different quarters" of the city and made acquaintance with "good company and bad" (101). This is again reminiscent of Masud's own school days when, he admits, he used to enjoy "wandering aimlessly around Old Lucknow" (Sengupta 1998b, 136) in the

company of "bad boys," and he even once visited the home of a courtesan in the company of a friend who was related to her (*ibid.*, 135).

"Rē Khāndān kē Āsār": This next story comes from Masud's third collection which appeared in 1997, but it was originally published in the Urdu literary journal *Āj* (Karachi) in 1992. It is, again, very brief, just thirteen pages, but it is quite different from Masud's other narratives and is the only one available in English that might actually be regarded as humorous, although it too is clearly formulated with "camphor essence" as its base.

Regarding this story, Masud told Sagaree Sengupta that, in it, he had "tried to write about a daily scene from ordinary life without any unusual or amazing events" (1998b, 132). It was, he said, a difficult task to have someone just describe a "completely flat sort of event" and have that create its own effect (*ibid.*). It was so difficult that, after this story, he says, he never tried to write any more like it.

A reader familiar with Masud's normal style immediately notices that this story is different. I have already mentioned the humor. This is found on two levels. The first is within the story itself where it occurs mainly in the banter that goes on between the narrator and the friend he is visiting in Azimabad. At one point, for example, they are discussing a mutual acquaintance:

> "Oh, speaking of the color blue," he said, "have you heard the great physician Galen's latest idea? I got a letter from him recently in which he said that he had been successful in treating a paralyzed woman with the color blue. Haven't you heard from him?"
>
> "Yes, but he just gave me a list of colors which I should avoid."
>
> "And what were those dangerous colors?"
>
> "All the colors whose names I can remember, and then some more, and of these, two are likely to be fatal for a man of my temperament."
>
> We spent the rest of the time in the office exchanging jokes about this physician. Old age had affected his mind. He would write long letters to my friend and me, telling us of the amazing cures he had accomplished. It was his belief that we were the only two individuals in the world who appreciated his worth. He did not know that we called him "the physician Galen."

(198)[20]

This kind of light humor is very uncharacteristic of Masud's writing, yet here such humor is found throughout the story.

The second level of humor is even more striking. For the reader familiar with Naiyer Masud's own life, it is evident from the start that, in fact, he is poking fun at himself here. You will recall, for example, that Masud admits to having a pronounced attachment to his ancestral home, the home in Lucknow where he has spent virtually his entire life since childhood, and he considers this attachment to be a weakness on his part (Sengupta 1998b, 128). Now, as the story opens, you hear the narrator saying that after "living for more than half a century" in his ancestral home he has decided to move to a smaller one. However, before he can do that, he has to accomplish two things: he has to "empty the house of its accumulated possessions" and he has to "get used to staying away from [his] ancestral home" (193).

Both tasks are proving difficult for him. The smaller and more insignificant a possession seems to be, the less able he feels to part with it. Every little thing seems to remind him of "something from the past" until, finally, he gives up in despair thinking he will "never throw out anything" (194). He admits, "When I made a weak effort to get rid of something, I found that my resolve to leave the house was faltering too. I was not even prepared to leave the splattered drops of whitewash on the dirty walls …" (*ibid.*). That same day, he tells us, he left for Azimabad, and the entire time that he is there he seems to be extremely conscious of time. The opening words of the story are, "It was my fifth day in Azimabad" (193). Later, section three of the story opens with the words, "The time for my return was approaching" (198). And even in Azimabad he cannot escape from little reminders of the past.

Besides the uncharacteristic humor, several other interesting differences are apparent. In my mind they serve almost as outward signs of a deeper, more significant difference that I also see here. One of these outward signs is that, unlike most of Masud's stories, this one contains names of people and places. We know, for example, that our narrator is visiting Azimabad (although that is no longer the name of the city which is now normally referred to as Patna), and we learn, indirectly, that his ancestral home is in Lucknow (200). Likewise, already in the title we are introduced to the Ray family and along the way we "meet" various members of that

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[20]All quotes from "Rē Khāndān kē Āṡār" are taken from Masud 1997f.

family—Angela, Julian, Sebastian, and so on. The man searching for Angela is Frank. Notice here that these are all Christian names and these characters are all identified as Christians in the story. (The narrator and his friend are not named, nor are any other non-Christian characters.) All three things—personal names, names of cities and references to religion—are things that Masud himself has said are rarely found in his work (Farrukhi 1997, 267).

Unlike many of the other stories I have been discussing here, this story has no epigraphs. In searching for Masud's intended meaning, our only clue is the story's title, "Remains of the Ray Family," and I want to turn to that now. In the story, the Ray family's remains occur in two forms, one introduced at the beginning and one at the very end.

At the beginning, the narrator finds "remains" of the family in a decaying wall-cupboard in his small attic. At the time, these remains—a story without a title authored under the pen name Naubahar Gulrez and two empty, dark blue perfume bottles—are not linked to the family by the narrator. He, in fact, claims that everything else in the cupboard *except* the story and the perfume bottles made him "remember something from the past" (194). This is curious since later, when the narrator is talking to his friend about the picture of a young girl that has fallen out of the book he has brought with him from Lucknow, he quickly makes the connection between these items and the Ray family. The young girl in the picture turns out to be Angela Ray, and she, we are told, used to give the narrator her empty perfume bottles because he "liked their dark blue color" (198). And it was her brother who used to write stories, "never worth printing" (*ibid.*), under the pen name Naubahar Gulrez. The plot thickens when the narrator also suddenly remembers that Angela may now live in Azimabad.

From that point on, the rest of the story reveals more details about the Ray family, and it fluctuates between the narrator's memories from the past and the reports from Frank, who works under the narrator's friend in the Department of Posts, on his efforts to locate Angela in Azimabad. At the very end, we learn that Angela Ray is now Mrs. Moore and *she* is the "only remaining member of the Ray family" (206). She has been paralyzed for many years, none of her senses are functioning, and, at present, she seems to have lapsed into a coma (*ibid*). What we appear to have at the end is the reality of the present bumping up against illusions of reality that may have been created by memories from the past.

What interests me most about this woman who is the embodiment of the "remains" of the Ray family—that is, the title suggests that *she* is, perhaps, the subject of this story—is that here again we see the recurring

motif of the slightly older girl whom the narrator encountered when he was young and whose memory has stayed with him throughout life, in many ways shaping his life as an adult.

Among the stories I have discussed here, this motif was seen first in "ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr," where the narrator recalls the slightly older girl as a neighbor in his young boyhood who was interested in his clay creations (27) and for whom he appears to have felt a deep, abiding affection. This girl had given him a "short square jar of white china" (31) which remained a treasured possession of his throughout life after she died prematurely leaving him feeling forlorn.

This motif was seen again in "Ōjhal" where the slightly older girl was the narrator's aunt, as well as the younger sister of his sister-in-law, in the period of his young manhood. In that story he has a sexual encounter with this girl which leads to his almost obsessive infatuation with her until she too abruptly leaves the scene, either from a simple lack of mutual interest or, perhaps, actually to flee from his unwanted attentions—the story leaves either possibility in the reader's mind.

Now here in "Rē Khāndān," Angela is a friend of the narrator's elder sister and she used to study with his sister and other girls at the narrator's family home. She used to give the narrator her blue perfume bottles and, even now, he can "remember the fragrance she used to wear" (198). Written on the back of the picture of her that fell out of the book were the words, "I am no illusion; I am reality" (197). The narrator and his friend poke fun at this line from a film—a line spoken by an actress who resembled the girl in the picture.

The difference in this story, compared to "ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr" and "Ōjhal," is that here the narrator is not remembering his encounter with this female figure as a haunting memory or as a relationship that was prematurely and unexpectedly severed. Like the other two narrators, he also has difficulty letting go of the past, but with him it is more the reality of the past, the objects if you will, than the illusions of what might have been if only he had not lost that girl, so to speak. Here there is, apparently, no forlornness to inhale from her old perfume bottles, here there is "no fragrance" at all left in the bottles (194). Here the narrator is not haunted by her memory. On the contrary, when he first looked at her picture he thought it was the "picture of a famous film actress" (197). And when he does remember the young girl, he has difficulty recalling her full name. In a way, Masud here seems to be making fun of his own earlier treatment of this motif—as if to say, this is no illusion, this is reality.

"Ganjifa": This story was originally published in Urdu in 1997 so it is one of Masud's later stories. It interests me primarily for two reasons: 1) as mentioned earlier, the narrator here is similar to the narrators in "Vaqfa" and "Bād-Numā" and, especially, even more so than those two narrators, the narrator here resembles Naiyer Masud himself; and 2) there seems to be an underlying political message here which is not at all obvious in the story itself but is, rather, strongly suggested when the story is considered in light of the title and epigraph. In attempting to discern Masud's intended meaning then, I want to focus on these three things: the title, the epigraph, and the character of the narrator.

The title of the story is "Ganjifa," which is a card game as well as the name of the round cards used to play that game. (Such cards were apparently also used for telling fortunes.) This card game has several forms and the particular form referred to in the epigraph—namely, a form with eight suits, and these particular eight suits—was popular among the royalty and their courts during the Mughal period. The suits apparently represented different aspects of the court.[21]

The four higher or strong suits mentioned here are: *taj* (representing the crown), *zar-e safed* (white or silver suit, associated with silver coins and later the moon), *shamshir* (a long curved Persian sword or sabre), and *ghulam* (servant, slave, or mercenary soldier; representing the royal household); while the four lower or weak suits are: *chang* (a stringed instrument resembling a small harp), *zar-e surkh* (red or gold suit, associated with gold

Figure 3: Ganjifa Card; King of the "Zar-e Surkh" Suit
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coinage and later the sun), *barat* (an official document or a check, representing the chancellery), and *qumash* (goods, textiles, furniture; representing the palace stores). Each of these suits had ten numeral and two court (or royal) cards.

Ganjifa was a gambling game that seems to have involved playing your strong suits strategically while remembering which cards have been played and which cards remain to be played. Interestingly, the king of

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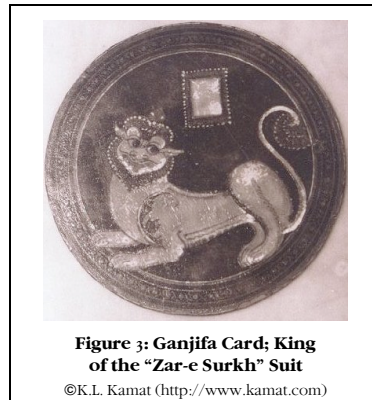
[21]For details regarding the game of *ganjifa*, especially the form referred to here, see (Leyden 1982, 17–20).

one of the *low* suits, the suit associated with the sun, is the most important card in the game from sunrise to sunset. When the sun sets, the king of one of the high suits, the suit associated with the moon, becomes the most important and valuable card. When the moon is shining the king of the sun suit is reduced to an "ordinary card" (214), and the same applies to the king of the moon suit when the sun is shining.[22]

In terms of the story, the narrator himself seems to be the king of the sun suit. That is, everyone seems to regard the narrator as the "most important card in the game" (*ibid.*). And, while it is not stated explicitly, what we learn about the narrator's family in the story suggests that, even though their fortunes have sunk to the level of ordinary people, they, especially the deceased father and now his son, have a high status which causes people to want to help them and look out for them. This, of course, is similar to the families in "Vaqfa" and "Bād-Numā."

The fact that such families appear in several of Masud's stories is not surprising because, in his interview with Sagaree Sengupta, Masud, in fact, mentions a particular interest in such families and explains how it developed. During his schooldays, he told her, many of his classmates were boys from the old families of Lucknow, some even from old Nawabi families. He said:

> I witnessed a classmate who in the beginning would come in a buggy along with a servant to wait on him; an entire banquet would be sent over for him at break and the servant would stand there to chase flies away and take deep bows. I saw this same person later in a state close to beggary. The decline of Lucknow wasn't just beginning then; rather, it had already happened in full measure. I saw many nobles become poor here. My father had come to Lucknow at the beginning of this century, and he used to tell us stories about how entire families from here were ruined, how much wealth they had had, and how they had wasted it in wrongful ways and finished it off. Thus an interest grew in me about people like that and the destruction of whole lineages.
>
> (1998b, 135–36)

Also, going back to the rules of the card game, it is interesting that the king of a *low* suit, rather than of a *high* suit, is the most important card in the game during the daytime and that this situation is, matter-of-factly, reversed at sunset. These rather curious rules suggest to me a certain arbitrariness and injustice in the "rules of the game," and this, I think, is also reflected in the attitudes and events related in the story.

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[22]All quotes from "Ganjifa" are taken from Masud 2003a.

Turning to the story itself then, in the opening paragraph we meet our narrator, a young man about thirty years old who feels bad about his life. He began to feel bad about his life, he tells us, on "the night of the riots" (214). It was not the riots themselves that made him start feeling bad about his life, it was a particular question he was asked when he was stopped several times on his way home that night. Besides being asked what his name was and where he lived, he was asked, "What do you do?" A "couple of people even got beaten up" when they answered that question (*ibid.*). This question bothers him because "in his heart" he knows the answer is: "I live off the earnings of my mother" (215). The narrator does not seem concerned, does not even seem to know, why riots are taking place or why this particular question is being asked. The reader, however, is already wondering.

Naiyer Masud never spells out for us during what time period the story is taking place or why riots are occurring. Here again, it helps to have some knowledge of Lucknow's history—and Masud seems to be assuming we have such knowledge because, without it, we will most likely miss the underlying political message that seems to be here related to British rule in India. What I gather from the story is that the British are still in power at this time and the "riots" referred to are disturbances that took place in opposition to that rule. (Historically, Lucknow was, in fact, a center of opposition to British rule.) On the night of the riots, the narrator's mother is so concerned about her son's well-being that she goes out searching for him. She knows, even if he does not, that he could get beaten up himself if it were to become known that his father had worked for the British.

Also, as in "Vaqfa" and "Bād-Numā," we again seem to have a narrator who is unaware of the reasons for his own status as "the most important card in the game" in the eyes of the players. He admits, for example, that he knows "next to nothing" about his own parents (220). He was unaware that his late father had worked for the British, had earned a comfortable living, or that he had planned to send his son to England to study until health problems had prevented him from continuing to work. The narrator also did not know, and had never asked, how it was that his mother knew the fine art of chikan embroidery which enabled her to support the family after that.

We also again have a narrator here who seems to take his privileged position for granted. He is not really bothered by the fact that he lives off the earnings of his mother, like his father before him. At one point he says that even though he has "merely been roaming around" for the "past sev-

eral years," he "felt good" about his life until the night of the riots (215). What bothered him that night was that he had to *tell other people* that he did nothing himself to earn a living. In doing so, he also had to acknowledge to himself the reality of his own life.

When the narrator's mother dies, everyone seems to jump to his aid. A neighbor woman is ready to cook his meals without his even having to ask (232). The Lala who employed his mother offers him a job immediately and, we are told, speaks to him "with great courtesy" (233). Eventually the Lala even hires him, but just tells him that he will let him know later what work he will actually be doing (239). After her death, we also learn that his mother, in fact, had resisted the Lala's efforts to hire her son earlier because she herself considered whatever work the Lala suggested for her son to be too "demeaning" for him (234).

Hearing all of this, the reader is left wondering who this narrator is that he should be treated so well by everyone? How is it that his father was educated and worked for the British? How is it that his mother could learn chikan embroidery "for fun" (220), not in order to earn a living? Well, Naiyer Masud never answers these questions for us. This seems to be another instance where he has purposely left out all of the details and given us only a suggestion of what all has occurred, leaving it to our own imaginations to fill in the gaps.

In attempting to do that, it is helpful to look at the character of the narrator in contrast to another character who appears in the story—a character who resembles the narrator's father except that this character preferred to sell Badshahi Manjan (Royal Toothpowder) in the market rather than work for the British—and to take note of the different treatment he receives. This character is Ladlay. He is clearly well educated. The narrator himself comments on the fine quality of Ladlay's writing (229) and on his refined conversational skills (231). In my mind, Ladlay is the king of the moon suit in the *ganjifa* game. It is easy to imagine that he is a member of an old Lucknow family who has refused to "collaborate," even now, with the British rulers who usurped the authority of the Nawabs. His is a high suit, but his card currently has no value in the game. Like the narrator's father, Ladlay became incapacitated and could no longer carry on with his work of selling toothpowder in the market. He too began to live off the wages of a woman, his daughter Husna, who earned her wages doing chikan embroidery (a skill she had been taught by the narrator's mother). Unlike the narrator, however, when Ladlay's daughter dies, leaving him without a source of income or anyone to care for him, no one comes to his aid. Even at the end of the story, when

Ladlay seems to be asking for the narrator's help in the most refined and polite way—that is, without actually asking directly and insisting that he does not want to be any trouble—the narrator seems unable to understand the true implications of what is being said.

What all of this suggests to me—and I discern an oblique political message here—is that this refined and educated character, who chose to degrade himself by selling toothpowder in the market rather than work for the British, and who is valued by no one in the story, is somehow a more morally upright and praiseworthy individual than the character of the narrator who is valued by all. At the end of the story, it is Ladlay, not the narrator, with whom the sympathies of the reader lie. Masud, it seems to me, conveys a message indirectly here by having his first-person narrator present himself to us in a negative light.

The interesting thing about this narrator presenting himself to us in a negative light is that the narrator actually resembles Naiyer Masud himself in several obvious ways. Like the narrator, Masud left his family home in Lucknow to study in Allahabad. While in Allahabad, the narrator lived with his mother's "foster sister" (215), while Masud lived with his married sister who was residing there at the time. Like the narrator, Masud also was in the habit of "wandering aimlessly around Old Lucknow" (Sengupta 1998b, 136). He told Sengupta that there was a period in his youth when his "interests lay in wandering here and there and loafing around town" (*ibid.*). And like the narrator's mother, Naiyer Masud's father never wanted him to take a bad job just in order to have a job; his father never wanted his children to struggle to make their way in the world as he had had to do (*ibid.*, 134). Finally, like this thirty-years-old or so narrator, Masud lacked confidence at that age. He did not publish his first story as an adult until he was thirty-five, and even then he presented it, at first, not as something he had written, but rather, as something he had translated. Masud even put a false name on it because he felt "maybe it wasn't good" (*ibid.*, 138).

What are we to make of these similarities to a narrator who appears to show himself in a negative light? Well, perhaps nothing. I would argue, however, that Naiyer Masud is engaging in a somewhat humorous form of self-criticism here, since, in his interviews, he often comments on how this or that is a weakness of his.

"Ṭāʾūs Čaman kī Mainā": The final story that I want to look at using the strategies I have proposed is the title story of Masud's third collection.

This story stands out for a number of reasons. Masud has said, for example, that he wrote this story largely because of the complaints he had received from friends and critics, like S. R. Faruqi, that they did not understand what he was "trying to say" in his stories (*ibid.*, 143). Others, like M. U. Memon, had commented that his narrators all seemed to be the same type of men (*ibid.*). Here, Masud said, he used a new kind of narrator—a dark-skinned, uneducated man—and he tried to make the story very straightforward.

In fact, the first version of this story was written with children in mind. Masud was concerned that a way of writing about Lucknow and its culture and this period of history had developed in India that gave the impression that Vājid ʿAlī Shāh, and other individuals from this time, must have been "backward and decadent, and if they hadn't been, why did the government end up in British hands?" (*ibid.*, 124). Masud wanted to write a story that showed children that there were "positive aspects about life in those times as well … so they could gain a kind of empathy with their own past by reading it" (*ibid.*). It was only after adults reacted positively to the story that he decided to rewrite it for adults with more detail (*ibid.*).

Much of this story, Masud has said, is historically accurate. "The main event, centering on the myna and its theft," for example, "is real" (*ibid.*). And the description of the "Wondrous Cage," and other details, mostly follow a small, handwritten *masnavī* (type of narrative poem) that Masud found among his own papers (*ibid.*, 124–25). He simply expanded some things on his own (*ibid.*, 125).

Like "Ganjifa"—which is actually a later story than this one since it originally appeared in Urdu in 1997 while this story originally appeared in 1995 in the quarterly literary magazine *Āj* (Karachi)—"Ṭāʾūs Čaman kī Mainā" ("The Myna from Peacock Garden") is a small, personal story taking place against the backdrop of a larger historical canvas. Also like "Ganjifa," it is a relatively simple story with political undertones, and, as was the case with "Ganjifa," knowing something about the larger historical situation is useful for understanding the events taking place in the story. Here those events "intrude" upon the small story much more so than in "Ganjifa."

Keeping in mind that Naiyer Masud has said that if he had any real purposes in writing this story, one of them was that he "wanted to offer a corrective to the bad reputation Vājid ʿAlī Shāh had acquired" (*ibid.*, 123), I want to discuss this story primarily in terms of that stated purpose. That is, I want to compare the reputation of Vājid ʿAlī Shāh offered in the historical record with his depiction in this story, and then I want to look at

how the narrator and his small story are used by Masud to present another side of this King's character to his readers.

Vājid ʿAlī Shāh was the last monarch to rule the Kingdom of Avadh and he reigned from 1847 until his kingdom was annexed, in February 1856, by the British Authority in India at that time, the East India Company. Lucknow was the major city and the capital of Avadh and, at the time this story is taking place (the latter part of 1855 and early 1856), it was actually larger than any of its contemporary cities in England or Europe.[23]

Historically, it seems that the British, in order to justify their annexation of this very prosperous kingdom, made a number of accusations against the King which suggested that he was incapable of ruling effectively so authority *needed* to be assumed by the East India Company (see Azhar 1982, vol. 2). They claimed, for example, that the King had "sunk in the uttermost abysses of enfeebling debauchery" and that his appetites were so satiated by these debaucheries that his "understanding was emasculated to the point of childishness" (*ibid.*, vol. 1, v). In actuality, however, the King was a great patron of the arts and he himself wrote over 100 books (*ibid.*, vol. 2, 173).

In any case, the British Resident (the man in charge of the Residency mentioned in the story) tried very hard to convince Vājid ʿAlī Shāh to sign his ancestral lands over to the Company, but the King refused, preferring to lose his throne entirely than to sign such a "treaty" (*ibid.*, 458).

Naiyer Masud paints quite a different portrait of the King. We hear nothing in "Ṭāʾūs Čaman kī Mainā" about harems or debauchery, and we see no hint of a King incapable of ruling. We see a ruler who is, perhaps excessively, fond of gardens and animals. He obviously spends vast sums of money collecting his "pets," having his gardens tended, his bushes sculpted, and so on. He even gives each bird or animal a name and knows each one by sight—in some cases he even knows them by the sound of their voices. The impression created in the mind of the reader is that Vājid ʿAlī Shāh is merely the rather eccentric ruler of a very prosperous kingdom. None of his pastimes or pleasures seems all that unusual for a monarch of the period, nor do they appear to distract him from caring for his subjects. After all, when the King receives the petition of our narrator, a man who is no more than a lowly caretaker of the birds in the "Wondrous Cage" in the King's Peacock Garden, we are told that, "as soon as it passed under his gaze, a judgment was passed on it forthwith"

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[23]For most of the details regarding Vājid ʿAlī Shāh and Lucknow during this period I am indebted to Azhar 1982.

(181);[24] and the judgment turns out to be not only quick, but also compassionate and even generous.

The King is, of course, not the central character in this story. That role is assumed by our narrator, Kale Khan. This "new kind of narrator" that Masud is using here, it seems to me, has a great deal to do with why we as readers come away with a sympathetic view of the King—a view that at least tempers any negative image of Vājid ʿAlī Shāh we may have had prior to reading the story.

Masud seems to take great pains to create a narrator here who is naïve, unworldly and very likeable. We learn that this man had cared very deeply for his wife, and when she died, he tells us, life

Figure 4: Vājid ʿAlī Shāh
© National Informatics Centre, Lucknow
(http://Lucknow.nic.in/images)

stopped mattering for him (156). Then, like so many of the narrators in Masud's later stories, he began just wandering around Lucknow (*ibid.*). Only after one of the King's *daroghas* (commanders of the guard) sees him wandering around, takes an interest in him, and helps him get a job in one of the King's gardens, does life interest him again—and this time he becomes completely devoted to his daughter. Unlike many of the other, more sophisticated, characters in the story, whose views seem tainted by their own involvement in the political maneuvering going on in the larger story, our narrator gives the impression that he is conveying a picture that is genuine and sincere.

The picture that he conveys is one of awe at the artistry and splendor he sees around him. He is amazed, for example, that the shrubs in the garden have been "trimmed into peacock shapes" (158). He tells us, "[It] seemed like the plants had been melted down and poured into some kind of mold! Even the triangular crests and pointy beaks could be made out clearly" (*ibid.*). When he sees the Wondrous Cage for the first time, he confides to us, "Cage? This was an entire building!" (161). He describes to us how this cage has been crafted in such a way that if you looked at it from one direction it appeared red, and from the other direction it looked green (*ibid.*).

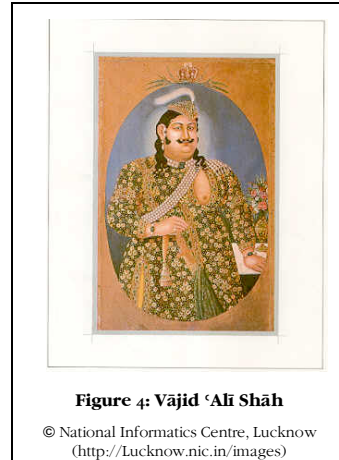When the King arrives, the report that Kale Khan gives us suggests

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[24]All quotes from "Ṭāʾūs Čaman kī Mainā" are taken from Masud 1997d.

that the King is a man proud of Lucknow's craftsmen and generous in rewarding them for their work, even telling his minister to *increase* their reward a little when he is told, "Seven generations of each craftsman's family will be blessed with plenty due to His Majesty's graciousness" (163). Later, Kale Khan marvels that, although all the mynas being placed in the cage looked the same to him, "The Badshah [King] saw something unique in each one and named it accordingly" (164). On another occasion, when the King comes to visit the mynas, Kale Khan reports that he was impressed by the way the "Badshah spoke to even his servants so cordially, and how extremely gentle his voice was" (170).

About half way through the story, after Kale Khan has stolen one of the King's mynas in order to make his daughter happy, and then returned it again when its absence was noticed, the major incident occurs where this myna, speaking in the voice of Kale Khan's daughter, begins to "babble" in front of the King and some British officers visiting from the Residency (183). At this point, Kale Khan gets pulled into the larger story, although he never totally loses his naiveté.

After the babbling myna is granted as a gift to Kale Khan's daughter by the King, but is also promised to an English officer by the Royal Minister, the focus of the story shifts and Kale Khan must participate in an elaborate ruse intended to keep the myna out of the hands of the British. Although the ultimate objective is achieved, Kale Khan, naturally, fails to play his part successfully since he lacks the sophistication not to just blurt out his true feelings when he is challenged. In doing so, he angers the Royal Minister's men and ends up in prison, but, in the process, strengthens his position with the readers as someone they can rely on to give them a true picture. This is a man who cannot even be disingenuous to save himself!

One last question remains to be answered: what is Naiyer Masud's intended meaning here? Other than what Masud himself has said about this story in interviews, our main clue is the title, "The Myna from Peacock Garden," which suggests that the bird itself is the subject of the story. The final sentence of the story also announces that the "story of the Myna from Peacock Garden ends right here" (192). In one sense, it seems that this "Myna from Peacock Garden" could be understood to be Vājid ʿAlī Shāh himself. Like the bird who is kept out of the hands of the British and ends up living in a small cage with Kale Khan and his daughter in Banaras, so to, in this story, Vājid ʿAlī Shāh is kept out of the hands of the British, preferring to leave Lucknow and live in confinement in Calcutta. In another sense, however, the myna does indeed seem to signify the bird

itself. Avadh could not be kept out of the hands of the British, but, thanks to the efforts of the King's friends and supporters, at least the British did not get their hands on this one bird from the King's Peacock Garden. In that sense, the bird may symbolize that a small token of Lucknow's honor has, at least, been salvaged.

The myna also, of course, is the critical element that connects the small personal story of Kale Khan with the larger historical story of the Badshah. In that sense, the myna may also suggest that Vājid ʿAlī Shāh's love for his "pets" is like Kale Khan's deep love for his daughter. Kale Khan refers to his daughter as his pet hill myna (159) and calls her Princess Falak Ara (Ornament of the Sky)—the very same name the Badshah later bestows on one of his own pet hill mynas (the one that is eventually stolen by Kale Khan). Keeping the myna out of British hands is thus tantamount to keeping one's own beloved child out of the hands of someone who covets her or him.

Kale Khan's overwhelming love for his daughter might also run parallel to the King's love for his "pets" in other ways. For example, the story may suggest indirectly that just as Kale Khan's blinding love for his daughter led him to foolishly steal one of the King's mynas to please her, so too, perhaps, the King's excessive love for his "pets" may have led him to do some foolish things as well. And just as Kale Khan's foolish act led to his arrest and imprisonment, so too, the implication might be, some of the King's foolish acts led to his own downfall and confinement in exile.

Summary and Conclusion

My discussion of these nine stories has been, necessarily, superficial, since analyzing the works of Naiyer Masud is not really my focus here. In looking at these sample stories what I hope has become clear is that the question of meaning is one that can and should be asked in relation to the works of Naiyer Masud—at least in the narrow sense of the word "meaning." In discussing these stories I believe I have demonstrated that if we, as readers, construct an appropriate frame within which to systematically examine Masud's stories, we can, without too much difficulty, begin to discern the author's intended meaning in them.

What I have concentrated on here is step one of what I suggest should be a two-step process for studying Masud's work. That is, I have concentrated on attempting to identify the meaning Masud intends to convey *within the text itself*, without being overly concerned with what

significance it may or may not have in relation to life or to the world at large.

I have done this by relying on two essential guides: Naiyer Masud himself and the texts themselves. From Masud I have developed, above all, a greater understanding of how he constructs his texts, how he attempts to communicate with his readers both explicitly and implicitly, what assumptions he makes about the knowledge his readers bring to the story, and what sort of license he grants to his readers in attempting to understand and interpret his stories. This has helped me to improve how I approach his texts and how I interact with them while reading.

From the texts themselves, I have discovered, first of all, the importance of the title of each of his stories as a guide to meaning. In my view, Naiyer Masud chooses the titles of his stories very carefully and *intends* for them to be an aid to the reader. At least in one case that I know of, where the English title of the story was significantly different than the original Urdu title, he asked that it be changed to something that was closer to an exact translation of the original Urdu or something equivalent. (Namely, "Sultan Muzaffar's Imperial Chronicler" to "Sultan Muzaffar's Chronicler of Events" for "Sulṭān Muẓaffar kā Vāqiʿa-navīs.") In the case of every story that I have looked at here, the title has been a critical marker for understanding the meaning being conveyed. It was particularly evident, for example, in a story like "Ganjifa," where the card game itself was never mentioned in the story. The title, in fact, seems to have so little to do with what is going on that it is likely to be forgotten by the time the reader finishes the story. However, without thinking about the story in relation to this *ganjifa* card game, much of the story's meaning is lost. Equally important are the epigraphs and prologues Masud often uses, since, wherever they are present, they clearly provide additional markers regarding the author's intended meaning.

Keeping in mind the "open" nature of Masud's works and the ever-present "I" narrators, I have attempted to look at these nine stories while remaining conscious of my own relationship to the work, to the narrator, and to the author behind both. This proved to be especially important for a work like "Mār-Gīr," where I had to keep reminding myself to look at the story from different angles instead of simply accepting the front view which suggested a traumatized young man who had run off to some jungle only to be bitten by a snake. In interacting with the text this way, I was consciously trying to apply the strategies for reading that Umberto Eco discusses in his *The Open Work*. That is, I was consciously trying to take the information the author had given me, and do MORE with it than I

normally would do in order to continue creating and recreating the story in my own imagination, thereby filling in pieces that seemed to be missing. In reading "Mār-Gīr," I also had to continually ask myself questions about who was talking to me and what did I know about him that might help me to understand what he was saying. For example, what was his frame of mind, how reliable was the information he was providing, and so on. In doing this, I was consciously attempting to follow Susan Lanser's model of the narrative act (1981) by focusing on the critical role of the narrator in conveying an author's intended meaning.

In attempting to uncover Masud's intended meaning, I have also tried, as much as possible, to "unmask" his own presence in the story and this has often proved useful. In "ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr," for example, I believe his own life and questions raised by friends and critics regarding his fictional work inform what Lanser refers to as the "deep structure" of the narrative (*ibid.*, 147). The same might be said of "Sulṭān Muẓaffar kā Vāqiʿa-navīs," though to a lesser degree. This latter story seems to have emerged from Masud's unconscious self, since he tells us the basic story came to him in a dream, as if a film were playing in front of his eyes (Sengupta 1998b, 132).

What has become clear to me in looking closely at these nine stories is that attempting to read Masud's work within the same type of frame—that is, using the same type of strategies that we might use for traditional stories written in the kind of "pure realism" that Masud eschews (Farrukhi 1997, 266)—will often insure that his intended meaning is lost. Consider, for example, that even a story like "Ṭāʾūs Čaman kī Mainā," Masud's most straightforward story, has an intended meaning that is not at all apparent to the average reader in the West. As mentioned earlier, Masud has indicated that if he had any purposes in writing this story, one was to provide a "corrective to the bad reputation Vājid ʿAlī Shāh had acquired" (Sengupta 1998b, 123). Yet, Vājid ʿAlī Shāh is never mentioned by name in the story, nor is his historical reputation for debauchery, etc. The reader without a knowledge of Lucknow's history sees little more than the story of Kale Khan stealing a hill myna from among the birds in the King's "Wondrous Cage" in order to make his young daughter happy. In the story, there is only oblique reference to the historical context within which it is taking place. The same is true of "Ganjifa," since the nature of the "riots" is never mentioned. What is interesting, however, is that in every story I have looked at here, Naiyer Masud has provided his readers with what we might call, to use his own fictional terminology, an "essence" which can exude, for the reader willing to make the effort, the beautiful fragrance of a master "perfume-maker."

What has also become clear to me in looking at these stories, and especially in looking at what others have written about them, is the importance of consciously attempting to discern their intended meaning in two stages. That is, readers searching for meaning must first, in my view, be sure that they understand what is actually being said on the page in front of them, and exactly who is saying it, before venturing down the bumpy road toward some broader meaning.

In any case, what it all "means" in the broader sense needs to also be looked at in stages. Take "ʿIt̤r-e Kāfūr" for example. This is a story which has left almost everyone baffled. I have not really attempted here to consider what all the story may mean in the broader context of life as a whole, but clearly *one* of its broader meanings relates to the art and the very nature of fiction writing and the role of the fiction writer. And, based on the stories I have studied here, I would suggest that this theme is probably common in Masud's work (at least during a certain period of time after readers and critics first began reacting to his work) and a very interesting study could likely be done focusing just on this one theme.

For example, as I have pointed out, this theme also appears in "Sult̤ān Muz̤affar kā Vāqiʿa-navīs" where the writer is depicted as merely a chronicler producing chronicles—nothing more. And, as I have mentioned, the entire *Sīmiyā* collection might be viewed as having an underlying theme that the writer is a creator of "illusions" that cause readers to see clearly things which are not actually present, and these illusions are not a trick of the eye, they are more a trick of the mind. The title story of that collection, which I have not discussed in detail here, places emphasis on this concept of *sīmiyā* and presents the reader with a puzzle: a palace built, apparently intentionally, in a dilapidated state. In my reading of this story the palace is something which, again, might be seen as representing Masud's own works, which are, likewise, intentionally built in a "dilapidated state" with sections cut out and details missing. And the prologue of the *Sīmiyā* collection also suggests another way of looking at the nature and art of writing fiction and the role of the fiction writer: here the writer is somewhat like a mathematician producing intricate geometric patterns that can be appreciated even by those unfamiliar with geometric principles. From these few examples it becomes evident that Masud, no doubt, has much to say on this subject of writers and writing, though perhaps obliquely.

If I myself were to venture down the bumpy road toward Masud's broader meaning, I would begin by looking at a single word and at how that word is reflected in each and every one of Naiyer Masud's stories.

That word is, of course, "*vīrānī*," which, as I pointed out in my discussion of "ʿIṭr-e-Kāfūr," more or less serves as the foundation for all of his "perfumes." "*Vīrānī*' is, in my view, at the center of Masud's fictional universe. To study his works in light of the full meaning of this one word would, I believe, go a long way toward helping all of us understand his fictional universe more completely.

Beyond this one word, there are a number of other avenues for study that I believe would yield useful insights into Masud's work. One of those avenues is geometry, not so much in the mathematical sense as in the sense expressed in Islamic art, especially in the form of the arabesque. This is an art form that utilizes repeating geometric shapes and, some say, the style derives from Islamic theology, suggesting that creation itself is in flux, that there are no enduring forms or relations other than the perpetual creative activity flowing out from God (Cragg and Speight, 159). Each geometric shape used in the arabesque has its own symbolism and, as a whole, the arabesque reflects a Muslim worldview. It seems to me that by introducing the idea of elaborate geometric design in the prologue of his very first collection of stories, Masud has pointed his readers in this direction and, therefore, to study not just those first five stories but all of his works together as a kind of never ending arabesque design might prove very interesting and revealing.

A second avenue of study particularly worth pursuing as a possible window through which to get a clearer view of Masud's fictional universe is the source material from which he has chosen the epigraphs that appear on many of his stories. In my own studies, I found that looking at the epigraphs in their original context enhanced my understanding of the epigraph and often, indirectly, enhanced my understanding of the story with which it was connected.

Related to this would be a study of the poets and the poetry that Masud has focused on in his scholarly research. This would include, among others: Mīr Babbar ʿAlī Anīs, Salāmat ʿAlī Dabīr, Mirzā Asadullāh Khān Ġālib, Mirzā-Rajab ʿAlī Beg Surūr, Vājid Ḥusain Yagānah Čangezī, and Dūlhā Ṣāḥib ʿUrūj—on all of whom Naiyer Masud has produced book-length studies. It would also include the elegiac (*marsiya*) style of poetry which has been a particular area of focus for Masud.

Such a study might yield two things. First of all, since I have argued here that Masud has, in effect, applied some poetic conventions in his prose narrative style, this study might provide more insight into what sort of conventions have been carried over. And, secondly, it might give some idea of a worldview that he has studied closely and which may have, in

turn, helped shape, consciously or unconsciously, the worldview that appears in his fiction.

This study of Masud's scholarly interests with a view toward understanding how these may have influenced his fiction writing is itself related to a third possible avenue that seems worth studying, namely, the work of some of the major authors Masud cites as having had a significant influence on him: Edgar Allen Poe, Washington Irving, and Ghulam Abbas. Studying the works of these three authors might provide more insight into Masud's subject matter as well as his narrative technique.

Needless to say, these three areas of possible further study are by no means the only areas worth looking into. They are, perhaps, simply the most obvious areas beyond learning more about Naiyer Masud himself—which, though it might prove to be the most fruitful area of study, would also likely be the one most difficult to pursue.

In the end, what I also hope I have succeeded in demonstrating here is that Naiyer Masud's work is not simply filled with beautiful and interesting patterns and objects and images that are enjoyable to read, as well as both tantalizing and frustrating to ponder, his work is also filled with meaning that can, at the very least, be "detected" by "breathing deeply" of what lies beneath the "expected fragrance" in each of his "perfumes" (1997b, 14). ❑

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