

An Interview with Dr. Muhammad Umar Memon

By Abroo H. Khan

A connoisseur of Urdu language, Muhammad Umar Memon is a literary pioneer in bringing Urdu language and literature to an international readership. Professor Emeritus of Islamic Studies and Urdu literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Memon taught at Sind University and then came to the U.S., where he received his M.A. in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures from Harvard University and a Ph.D. from UCLA in Islamic Studies with an emphasis in sociology, history, Arabic and Persian. His *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle against Popular Religion*, published by Mouton, The Hague, in 1976, is considered a pioneering study of the thought and practice of the thirteenth-century Hanbalite iconoclast Ibn Taimiya. Memon is also an internationally acclaimed translator and an accomplished fiction writer. He is on the editorial advisory board of *Edebiyat: Middle Eastern Literatures*, is General Editor of the Pakistan Writers' Series for Oxford University Press, and is also the Editor of *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, a print and on-line journal that aims to provide scholars working on Urdu language and literature a forum in which to publish scholarly articles, translations, and views.

A prolific writer, Memon has authored numerous articles critically examining Urdu fiction that have appeared in a number of professional journals, among them: *Modern Asian Studies*, the *Journal of Asian Studies*, the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Edebiyat*, etc. He has also translated and published a substantial body of contemporary Urdu fiction, of which several anthologies: *The Tale of the Old Fisherman*, *Domains of Fear and Desire*, *The Colour of Nothingness*, *An Epic Unwritten*, and *Do You Suppose It's the East Wind?* have appeared so far. He has also translated selections from the fictional works of individual writers including: Abdullah Hussein, *Stories of Exile and Alienation*; Hasan Manzar, *A Requiem for the Earth*; Intizar Husain, *The Seventh Door*; and Naiyer Masud, *Essence of Camphor* and *Snake Catcher*. His translations into Urdu include about a dozen novels by Western and Arab writers, besides numerous articles on Sufi metaphysics and Muslim philosophy. He retired in 2008 after a 38-year-long teaching career at the University of Wisconsin and is currently working on a volume which will showcase Urdu fiction by Indian writers.

AK: Would you care to talk about your early childhood? Did you know at that time what you wanted to do when you grew up? Did creative writing or teaching seem like a possible career?

MM: I was born in Aligarh, the last of my parents' six children. Ours was the only Memon family in town. One could write only "Memon" and "Aligarh" and the letter would reach us. Except for a sister who was 8 years my senior, all my other siblings left home soon after I was born. Growing up with a father 51 years older and always absorbed in some book, I went through a lonely and uneventful childhood and always carried a vague feeling of some unnamed sadness, which has dogged me throughout my life. I did have some friends though. I played the games then common among Indian boys. I've tinkered with a number of things during different periods of my life, such as painting, woodworking, macramé, making carved candles, and gardening (at one point I had 150 different varieties of African violets, and none of them were purchased; I used to pick up the fallen leaves of plants from nurseries or I asked for cuttings from friends and rooted them myself using a mixture of perlite and vermiculite). However, during the past two decades my main preoccupations have been just reading, writing, and gardening. Since retirement I've become quite reclusive. When I enter the house I hate to look at the telephone, fearing a red blinking light that will necessitate my returning some call. As I said in another recent interview, mine was an average life. I went through many of the same boyhood and adolescent experiences as other boys. There's no point in going over them now, though I might have done so quite eagerly a few decades ago when I didn't know better. Today such things seem not just insignificant but downright ridiculous. What is one life, after all, in the immensity of the universe?

Just to satisfy your curiosity—well, I did my high school at Aligarh and then we moved to Karachi in 1954. Out of my entire fifteen years in Aligarh—excluding a number of summers which we spent in our ancestral hometown Rajkot in Kathiawar, Swarashtra (the same place where, I believe, Mahatma Gandhi was born and where, during the waning days of the British Raj, the Ali Brothers spent some time in jail on sedition charges), where my parents owned a house—the nights of 1947 stand out in my memory. Partition took place while we were summering in Rajkot. When the time came for us to return to Aligarh, my mother stayed behind because of some scheduled minor foot surgery. On the way back, Father left my sister and me at the Delhi railway station and went to attend some meeting or conference in the city which had been planned earlier and Abul Kalam Azad had insisted on his participation. My father thought a railway station would be safer. My sister and I rode an emotional rollercoaster of fear during those two or three hours alone on the railway platform. Later we took the train to Aligarh which arrived safely, but we

subsequently learnt that the next one did experience some trouble and a few lives were lost. I said “the nights of 1947.” Although communal incidents were relatively few in the university area, our neighborhood on the fringe of it lived in anticipation of a sudden attack and had therefore mounted a big searchlight atop the roof of Manzur Sahib’s house, which is where we were to gather in case of an assault. One morning we were awakened in the wee hours and rushed to Manzur Sahib’s. It was a brutally cold night. I recall I was shivering down to my bones. There was no time to put on anything warm. An overcoat was just hurriedly thrown over my sleeping clothes and off we went, with me still in my slippers. Luckily the night passed without incident.

Did I have an idea what I wanted to do in the future? Well, some boys have a clear idea what they want to become when they grow up and we can look back to find traces of it in the choices they made and the things they did. I wasn’t like that. For me life was merely a moment in the present. Mine was an oppressively protected childhood. I liked playing cricket and *gilli-danda* with my friends, stealing mangoes and other fruits from university orchards on the way back from school, and swimming, and I didn’t stop to ask questions about the future. Maybe there was a future, but it was as remote and inaccessible as the princess in fairy tales. Actually, I never gave the future any thought.

Career? Big word! I don’t know. In retrospect, I might have wanted to follow in my father’s footsteps, I suppose. It wasn’t like I had a choice. But then, there wasn’t an absence of choice either. Just a colossal vacuity, normative, complete, real. Nothing existed beyond it. You moved into it, it moved by its own logic, without defining its course or purpose.

AK: Your entire professional training is in Islamic Studies, but your work during the last three decades has focused mainly on Urdu literature. Would you care to talk about it?

MM: There is a phrase in Urdu, “*kisii kii dukhtii rag par unglii rakhnaa.*” In English, one might say: “to touch someone’s raw nerve.” You have done just that. From my childhood I was interested in things which in our middle-class culture are regarded as a waste of time (*kaar-e be-kaaraan*): painting, reading stories, writing poetry, music, and such. Naturally this didn’t sit well with my father, an orthodox Muslim and renowned scholar of Arabic literature at Aligarh Muslim University. He wanted me to study Arabic. I hated it. But did I have a choice? So I went along, unable to rebel. After we moved to Pakistan in 1954, historian Mahmud Husain, brother of the former President of India, Dr. Zakir Husain, and Dr. Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, also an historian, although both were serving in Pakistan’s Ministry of

Education, asked my father to establish the Central Institute of Islamic Research, the same institute where the eminent Dr. Fazlur Rahman was to be later appointed as Director by Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan. While my father was in the process of establishing the Institute and gathering books for its library, and research work hadn't yet begun, Karachi University asked him to chair the Department of Arabic until the Institute had become fully functional. My father accepted the offer. I was then a B.A. student and I now had to face him in the formal setting of a class. You can imagine my plight. But things changed radically for me when he returned to the Institute and his own student, Dr. Syed Muhammad Yusuf, then teaching in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), was asked to take over. Dr. Yusuf was a brilliant man. He presented Arabic literature in such a delightful way that I gradually began to like it. I had never been a good student. Up to that point I had somehow managed. My heart was not into study, if study meant Arabic. But Dr. Yusuf so energized me and fired my imagination that I gave myself up to my studies, with the result that I stood first in order of merit in the entire faculty of arts (humanities) and did my B.A. with honors with high distinction and full scholarship for the M.A., which I completed in one year. My fate was sealed. That success decided my future profession, no ifs, ands, or buts.

But even as I cultivated my new-found love for Arabic, I never gave up my passion for Urdu, something I cannot rationally explain. During all this time I had been writing short stories on the sly and reading loads and loads of fiction. I have never read as much fiction in my later years as I did in those days: Kafka, Camus, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Mauriac, Mann, Salinger, Maupassant, Moravia, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, Angus Wilson, Hemingway, William Saroyan, Durrell, you name it. And Urdu writers on top of all that.

In 1970, the University of Wisconsin offered me a job teaching Arabic in the Department of Hebrew and Semitic Studies and Persian in the Department of Indian Studies. In my second year of teaching, the latter department asked me to take over Urdu as well and move there full time. I had no professional degree in Urdu. It was a painful choice to make. Giving up Islamic Studies and Arabic spelled disaster. And in retrospect, I do sometimes feel that perhaps it was not a wise decision, but my attachment to Urdu proved irresistible, indeed fatal. When the offer was made, the urge to drop everything and embrace my love—openly, I might add—acquired something of an existential urgency. The rest of the story needs no telling.

Later, on my own, I introduced courses on Islamic religion and culture, Sufism, literatures of Muslim Societies and a few others so as not to cut myself loose entirely from Islamic Studies. These courses, more than those on Urdu, which al-

ways suffered from a deplorably low enrollment, really kept me alive intellectually. They were very well attended and I learned a lot myself while teaching them.

AK: Works such as *Essence of Camphor* and *Snake Catcher* by Naiyer Masud are creative literary amalgamations where the reader has to be attentive enough to grasp the hidden symbolism in the verses. Would you agree that such works are “double translations” for you? If so, how do you manage “double translation” work?

MM: Forgive me but sometimes I don't understand simple things. For instance, I don't quite understand “literary amalgamations” and “double translations.” But I have some vague idea of your drift. I hope I haven't misunderstood your import completely.

First, most Urdu fiction writers don't start their stories with epigrams, and not even Naiyer Masud every story. They do appear in some of his work, though. There they throw an oblique light on the feeling, the pervading mood of the work, which is what allusions and epigrams are supposed to do. Of course I cannot translate such poetic lines in all their semantic richness and conceptual beauty. But I try to transport the meaning.

AK: How did you become a writer? What inspired you to write and translate to bring Urdu literature to an international readership? In a candid interview Ahmed Faraz once said that “a ghazal can be written while sitting in a moving tonga, but a poem needs much more meditation? Similarly, do you have a “meditative regimen” that you follow? What prompted you to translate?

MM: To me a writer and a translator are two different things. They may coincide in a single person, but not necessarily. You talk about my being a writer with such finality. It gives me pause. Yes, I'm a writer in the most general sense, just as someone who writes an instructional manual for a Sony computer is a writer. In the sense of creative writer, I no longer am. I gave up writing fiction quite some time ago. Let's just say the “tapeworm” in my mind succumbed to the H1N1 virus all too soon. Now I'm only a translator, or mostly. How does one become a writer? And here I'm using “writer” in the restricted sense of one who writes fiction. Well, I can do no better than repeat the insights I have gained from Mario Vargas Llosa's delightful little book *Letters to a Young Novelist*. Writing is a vocation, a calling. One does not become a writer; one always *is*. By reading quantities of fiction one begins to notice the ingenuity of the writer in manipulating fictional material in order to assemble it into an artifact, an imaginative fabrication that strives to reach

its delineated narrative goal. In how they manipulate, they ultimately forge their own unique style.

What prompted me to translate? I used to translate even back in Pakistan. But then, in the same way as my creative writing, my translation work was not a matter of conscious choice. I can't give you any reason for it. Much of this activity moved to a conscious level when I came to the U.S. in 1964, but even then not really until 1970 when I started teaching at the University of Wisconsin. Between that time and now, I can see basically three reasons: practical, necessary, and emotional. While teaching Urdu fiction in translation at the UW, I had problems finding enough quality translations done with some thought to the chronological development of the short story form in Urdu. The existing material was in most cases unreliable and poorly done so I decided to translate. I later collected the resulting stories into my several anthologies (*The Tale of the Old Fisherman*, *Domains of Fear and Desire*, *The Colour of Nothingness*, *An Epic Unwritten*, and most recently *Do You Suppose It's the East Wind?*). So this was the practical reason.

The necessary reason—and I mean “necessary” in an existential sense—was my desire to let the West know that regardless of our deplorable performance in contemporary times, we have still jealously preserved a stout spirit of liberalism in the finer works of our imagination. Eventually what must define us is this liberalism. It will remain and withstand the test of time.

The purely emotional aspect is that I love Urdu—even though we are Memons whose language is Gujarati/Memoni and my mother, to her dying day, couldn't speak Urdu flawlessly. And though emotional, my love is not uninformed. I have a fairly good grasp of modern Arabic and Persian literature. Nothing like what our prose writers and poets had already achieved by the 1940s exists in early-modern Arabic and Persian, although we started to fall behind after the 1950s. It should come as no surprise that the first collection of modern Persian poetry was made by an Indian at Aligarh when modern poetry was still struggling for acceptance and recognition as a valid and viable form in Iran.

As to Ahmed Faraz's comment, well, it may be “candid,” but it is hype all the same, ill-informed and naïve at best, downright jejune at worst. I don't agree. Whether it is a ghazal, *nazm* or short story, all take a lot of thought—thought sometimes spanning years, even decades. One can be thinking while riding in a tonga (Ghalib sometimes used to compose in a latrine). Riding in tongas and “meditation” (I would prefer the word “thought” or “reflection”) are not mutually exclusive.

I don't know what a “meditative regimen” is. But I do know that even as a translator, my mind is never free—not even during my evening walks or when I'm shopping or driving (that really gives me the creeps)—from contemplating the semantic possibilities inherent in a translation I was working on last night, to find

what Flaubert would describe as the *mot juste* for a particular word in the translation at hand. Even during my lectures on Islamic culture I would surprise myself by incorporating insights gained from reading fiction, quite independently of my will, or a word I would use was the one I had chosen in a translation I was working on two days ago. Just multiply this process a hundredfold for a creative writer. Once the tapeworm of creativity invades the body it comes to effectively colonize the entire being of its victim. The two become inextricably fused. To illustrate this all-consuming preoccupation Llosa quotes his friend José María, who was afflicted by just such a bug (or *piir-e tasma-paa*):

We [i.e., the tapeworm and José María] do so many things together. We go to theaters, exhibitions, bookstores, we spend hours and hours discussing politics, books, films, friends. And you think I do these things for the same reason you do, because I enjoy them. But you're wrong. I do them all for it, for the tapeworm. That's how it seems to me: that my whole life is lived no longer for my sake but for the sake of what I carry inside me, of which I am now no more than a servant.

Maybe Ahmed Faraz discovered some novel way to send the ghazal-writer's bug on vacation.

AK: So why did you stop writing fiction?

MM: I now wonder why I ever started writing fiction in the first place. Back in the days of ignorance, it took so little to write because there was this urge but no understanding of what good writing involved. Of the several dozen stories I did write in those days, only two or three stand out. I'm not satisfied with the rest, which is not to say that my work was not received warmly. Actually, it was published in the highly regarded magazines of the time, *Savera*, *Adab-e Latif*, *Nuqush*, *Naya Daur*, *Saat Rang*, *Dastan-go*, *Nusrat*, to name only a few. I vividly remember that after reading one of my stories in *Saat Rang*, Muhammad Hasan Askari sent word to me through the editor to come see him. He probably saw something in the story and thought he could guide me. And he did indeed tell me a few things and gave me a few books to read, books mostly on the art of fiction.

In 1980 at Delhi, where I was invited to read a paper during a seminar, a middle-aged man from the audience came to see me during the session break. He

was not a scholar or anything of the sort he said, just an ordinary reader of literature. He wanted to tell me that he had read my short story “Tareek Galii” in the early 1960s and enjoyed it very much.

So it is not like the springs of creativity dried up because of critical inattention or a lack of appreciation. Even now I am sometimes surprised to see one of my old stories included in some anthology or selection.

What put a break on my writing were my studies in this country. There was no time to even think about writing anything. This was followed by the demands of an exacting professional life. When my life had acquired a more manageable rhythm, and I could write if I wanted to, I realized that I didn’t want to be just another writer and writing was an enormous responsibility. It demanded so much. It literally colonized you, in Llosa’s words. The more I probed into myself, the stronger the belief grew that I did not have the temperament, discipline, or perseverance of a writer. Few Urdu writers are professionals, in the sense that they earn a living by writing. I had never imagined myself as a professional writer. So the decision not to write was a relatively easy one to make. End of story.

AK: What is the symbolism in the titles you select for translation? For example, what is the significance of the “east wind” in your anthology of Pakistani stories *Do You Suppose It’s the East Wind*??

MM: I never thought there was any symbolism. Most of the titles come from one of the stories in the collection. Now it’s possible that the story’s title itself has an inherent symbolic content. For instance, “the east wind.” East wind is believed to refresh, at the same time it also brings with it a pensive and wistful mood, and a person may begin to reminisce. It simultaneously refreshes and opens up old wounds. There is another, highly accomplished story on the theme by the late Zamiruddin Ahmad. It is called “Purvaa’ii” (The East Wind).

AK: Urdu language has a poetic elegance and eloquence that is challenging to translate. As an accomplished translator of the Urdu language how do you overcome this challenge and how do you maintain the drama, humor and pathos of the storyteller and his characters?

MM: Quite a few questions rolled into one. Anyway, even as I love Urdu, I have a major problem with it—actually with us, writers of Urdu—especially when it comes to modern fiction, and even more especially when translating fiction. Let me elaborate: “poetic elegance” is a term that applies more aptly to Urdu poetry. Fiction, as we know it in the West, is a borrowed form into Urdu. It is created—as

perceptively remarked by the Palestinian-Israeli poet and novelist Anton Shammas who writes mostly in Hebrew—in the isolation of the individual, and is enjoyed, if I may add, by the reader in her or his own isolation. It is not something to be declaimed before an audience, like Urdu poetry, with its very rich tradition of *musha'ira*. Now the problem is that Urdu hasn't moved into the age of "literacy." To a large extent it is still in the phase of "orality." Its syntactical structure is more suited to oral presentation. A thing to be read, on the other hand, allows the writer immense freedom and also many possibilities to fully exploit the language and even integrate the very grammar and punctuation of the language to the narrative structure, to such a degree that if a given order were disturbed, the meaning of the story would inevitably suffer. Here the eye, more than the ear, is involved. Sound dies down quickly, the writing on the page stays. No matter how complicated and long a sentence may be, assuming all this satisfies the narrative need of the piece at hand, the eye can scan and rescan it until all the embedded meaning has emerged. The ear can't reproduce more than a few spoken words in the same exact sequence, so the sentences have to be kept fairly short and free of syntactical complexity.

So now if you want to translate such forms as the novel and short story, Urdu's existing syntactical structure, devised for oral presentation, becomes a handicap, to a degree. One can break up a long English sentence into small independent sentences in Urdu, but there is no way to translate it in its fullness into Urdu, which results in a woeful loss of intensity and richness. Add to this the arbitrary manner in which punctuation is used, rather misused. There are no fixed rules for it in Urdu.

The use of adjectives is another problem. Muhammad Hasan Askari has pointed this out eloquently and cogently in his article on the use of adjectives in Urdu. Of course there he is arguing for its inherent derivative character as an attribute of noun, lamenting the loss of a cultural (in his case, Sufi) metaphysics where noun is the essence and adjective just an attribute, ontologically devoid of substance and reality. Quite aside from his argument, what he says about the adjective shines some light on the problem at hand.

My other nagging problem is that while we have started writing fiction we have not paid much attention to developing a vocabulary for modern experiences and the expression of the feelings generated by those experiences (the fumbling attempts of the Muqtadira Qaumi Zaban notwithstanding) which, quite naturally, do not exist in the Urdu we have inherited. (No value judgment is involved here, just a statement of fact.) The situation is much better in modern Arabic and Persian. But then the Arabs and Iranians do not quarrel over language nor do they consider their languages inferior, while we still haven't adopted Urdu as our truly national language in this 62nd year of our independent existence. And since I have already opened this Pandora's box, something else pains me a lot. This is the ab-

sence of a decent, up-to-date, and user-friendly Urdu dictionary. I'm not denying the value of the *Urdu Lughat*, produced by the Urdu Dictionary Board. But imagine 22 humongous tomes, each weighing easily 10 pounds and elephantine in size. It is practically unusable, and it is only good up to a certain point. Even so, I asked Jamiluddin Aali, who was the director of the Board in 1998, and every successive director since, to think of putting this mammoth dictionary on a CD, but no luck. Why can't we come up with a useable work that incorporates all the new words that have entered the Urdu vocabulary in the last 100 years? We also need a dictionary of literary terms. I was recently translating a piece by Roger Boase about the Arab influences on European love-poetry and the term "courtly love" became a real headache to render adequately in Urdu. But not just literary terms, try to translate "calling" and "vocation" in the sense Llosa uses them, or the very common word "passion," or an everyday sentence such as "I've got a surprise for you" and you will know what I mean. I wish that when Jamil Jalibi Sahib produced his dictionary for the Muqadira he had included some individuals, such as Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman, experienced in translating modern Western fiction.

I might also mention here that often "eloquence" and "elegance" are no more than euphemisms for "ornate" and "florid." I hope you didn't mean it that way. In any case we need an eloquence and elegance born of simplicity and economy—a sharp, clean, cropped and stark language, and confidence in its ability to produce an effect. If you want to see such language at work, read Naiyer Masud's short stories. He shies away from using even adjectives and still manages to convey an effect which is simply amazing in its power. Another writer who consciously strove to write with austere language was Zamiruddin Ahmad.

I don't know whether I'm able to "maintain the drama, humor and pathos of the storyteller and characters." What I do know is that I try very hard and I'm aware of my frustrations and failures.

AK: What is the importance of translation to literature? As a writer, does your influence show in the translation? Similarly, how is your work influenced by the pieces you are translating?

MM: Well, I suppose, translation from another language allows us to experience the world, virtual or real, in ways we had never thought existed. I told you, I'm not a fiction writer anymore, whatever I may have gained from translation shows, rather, in who I have become and in everything I did as a teacher.

Translation of fiction especially is even more important for Urduwallahs. Many fictional forms have come to Urdu from the West. It will always be useful if our own fiction writers could see, if not in English, then at least in Urdu translation,

how far along these forms are in the West and how far they themselves still have to go. Good models always help, don't they?

AK: A question now about the politics of language. The general impression is that Urdu is a sophisticated urban language and often it is argued that the domination of the urban has prevented rural culture from coming into Urdu literature. How do you as a writer break those barriers? Previously in your interviews you have talked about the "secular traditions of Urdu literature." Could you explain what those traditions are?

MM: Let me answer by quoting a few lines from Intizar Husain's short story "An Unwritten Epic." The narrator of the story remarks: "'Literature is neither constructive nor destructive; it's just literature. [...] What is this animal called "constructive literature?" ... I've never yet seen anything destructive in literature. If literature isn't destructive, how can it be constructive?'"

Wouldn't you say there is wisdom in this remark? So let's disabuse ourselves right off the bat that "politics," "urban," "rural" are or can ever be literary terms and categories. They may tell you more about the academic needs of university campuses (*rootii to kisii taur kamaa khaa'e machhendar!*) than the inherent character or purpose of writing. A writer preeminently and necessarily fabricates, brings into being worlds that exist nowhere, worlds that only shimmer faintly in the complex and labyrinthine architecture of the imagination, along with all the vagaries and eccentricities of the writer. Fiction cannot transcend time, so some resemblance to a given time will always be there. But that is not the purpose of writing; it is the limitation of its medium, its form. I might even say that it is the limitation of prose. Milan Kundera has warned against reading his novels as history. They only strive toward exploring the existential situation of the character within the confines of the narrative, which is its whole world, quite independently of whether this world also has an analog in reality. Now if someone wants to theorize about politics, society and what not using the novel as the medium, well, good for them. But let's not think the product of their analysis is illuminating even the remotest corner of a creative work. I sometimes even wonder about literary criticism, which seems to me something derivative and reactive in nature, devoid of any ontological mass of its own. It can exist only laterally, always coming after what precedes it. A contingent existence at best.

So, it is the substandard author who writes a novel specifically to portray urban or rural culture, since these, at least in my opinion, cannot be the valid subject of a fictional work. They can be the space in which the story of the individual unfolds. What label are you going to stick on Naiyer Masud? Is his landscape rural?

Urban? None of these? Then what? Or take the warm and breathtakingly crafted story by Asad Muhammad Khan, “Burjiyan aur More” (Of Turrets and Peacocks). It is set in the red-light district of Karachi. Would you call it a story about the seamy side of a metropolitan culture? Or would you call it the story of a former veritable diva—stellar singer of *kajaris* in pre-Partitioned India, Laji Bai Aseergarhwali, who is reduced to being the Madam of a bordello in her new homeland—and the unflinching devotion of a bank officer, Mazhar Ali Khan, a real connoisseur of music, to this musical prodigy?

I have also regretted reading recently some stories by an Indian writer which were widely touted for their philosophical content. If that’s the case, why not write philosophy, especially when the venerable writer himself teaches philosophy at a university? Philosophy, per se, cannot be the subject of a story, but it can play a secondary role in providing insight about the personality of the story’s protagonist, provided it satisfies the narrative need and is subordinated to the story’s plot rather than riding roughshod over it. “Kafan” (Shroud), a story Premchand wrote towards the tail end of his life has always intrigued me. Contrary to the author’s view of fiction as a vehicle for social amelioration, the two main characters somehow get away from the writer’s avowed goal and attain a measure of independence. The rural, feudal setting is still there, and you can read it as a story of exploitation of the poor and the have-nots if you like. Granted, it doesn’t take much to detect the overt and covert moralizing of the writer, but in the end it is a story about two characters each with a distinct personality. They etch themselves relentlessly and inexorably on the reader’s consciousness, not what made them who they were. Though many of my students have felt dismayed by their crass lowliness and ethical bankruptcy and inhumanity, no serious reader can walk away gushing with hate for them. This is exactly what good writing does: it invites you to participate in a fabrication, a lie, a make-believe, not to sit in judgment about its morality. Precisely Esther’s attitude with regard to Lajos in the Hungarian novelist Sandor Marai’s *Esther’s Inheritance*, which must be its reader’s attitude too.

My basic gripe with the Urdu Progressives also springs from their overemphasis on social reality to the exclusion of the individual as a complex being hurled across time, history, and desire. Humans, in their writings, are brutally divested of their individuality and reduced to being mere instruments for the moral and economic reformation of society. But I don’t deny the very substantial contribution made by the Progressives. At the very least, they nudged the Urdu short story from its earlier cloying romanticism to a more recognizable human landscape. At the same time I might add that some fiction writers with a pronounced individual streak, working somehow under the umbrella of the Progressive Movement in the initial period, soon broke ranks with it precisely because of its tendency to force

literature into the suffocating cul-de-sac of societal causes. I do not subscribe to reading literature as a social document, for this never was its *raison d'être*. I would rather see it read as literature, as the possibility of human ingenuity and the urge to fashion worlds that exist in the imagination, and to make readers believe in its seductive fabrication by the sheer power of persuasion.

Once the true purpose behind fictional production is understood, it is clear that the description of what you have termed “rural culture” has not been suppressed in favor of “urban culture” in Urdu fiction. There are any number of writers who have written against the backdrop of rural life, Premchand preeminently. Hidayatullah Ansari and Ahmad Nadim Qasimi have also frequently structured their stories in rural settings.

Yes, I truly believe that Urdu literature is essentially liberal/secular in spirit. All you need to do is read classical poetry, preeminently the ghazal. Do you find in a Mir, Sauda, Momin or Ghalib any trace of narrow religiosity or what might be described in contemporary times as “fundamentalism”? You haven’t forgotten the plight of a *wa'iz* and a *shaikh* and a *zahid* in Urdu poetry? And Ghalib, who thinks that paradise is merely a figment of the imagination, something to amuse yourself with, and the entire universe no more than the span of a single stride before man’s indomitable, expansive desire? If this is not a secular spirit then what is? (The moment you move away from narrow religiosity and predestination and place your faith in human volition and freewill, you necessarily move into a liberal space. And the novel as a form, as perceptively remarked by Milan Kundera, was invented precisely to allow competing verities room to coexist in a single space, without any one truth trying to annihilate the other, and to doubt and question what Bakhtin would call the dialogic form.) All this in the premodern period to boot. And today ... well, for a trip to Pakistan I once randomly picked two books from my library to read on the long plane ride. One was Witold Gombrowicz’s *Pornografia*, a novel I had bought in 1964 but for some reason hadn’t yet read. The other was a more recent addition, *L’Abbe C*, the first work, a novella, of the erotic writer Georges Bataille. Both played out against tensions existing between faith and whatever else that is not faith. Nothing like this exists in Urdu fiction. Religion doesn’t make even an appearance, however hesitant and tentative or fleeting, is not even a bit player in much of Urdu fiction, but it is hard to read much of Western literature and walk away feeling that it isn’t in some way foreshadowed by some religious impulse, imaginative or reactive. Please don’t misunderstand me, I’m not suggesting that Western literature is “fundamentalist” in essence or champions ecclesiastical authority, but only that, by comparison, Urdu literature has in its greater part shown a marked indifference to religious themes as they inform and shape individual lives and propel them toward an autonomous narrative goal. I guess this has something

to do with the very notion of literature that predominated Muslim culture. Literature, here, was anything but a representation of reality, or mimesis, an activity that found its principal justification, as much as its domain, in the imagination. Maybe some residual element of that attitude toward literature still persists with us. I may have felt disappointed by our contemporary fiction but not on account of its preoccupation with religion or religious themes.

It is amazing, in our day-to-day existence, religion—Islam—plays such an overbearing role and yet none of our writers have attempted to write a major, expansive novel in which conflicts between religious and personal morality are acted out in the lives of characters in a major way, just as happens, for instance, in the lives of the two brothers, Robert, a priest, and Charles, a libertine, in Bataille's *L'Abbe C*. Sometimes I regret this absence profoundly. Of course I'm aware of Nazir Ahmad's didactic novels, but they do not deal with religious conflicts and should be considered exceptions.

Urdu poetry may have borrowed many of its conventions from Persian, but Urdu as a language is purely Indian. Even its former name was Hindvi, Gujri, and what have you. Since I work with translation, I can tell you something which might surprise you. Notwithstanding the claims that Urdu is a Muslim language (as if it were anointed in Mecca), it is amazing that the entries for eight specific Arabic letters, from *suad* to *qaaf*, take up a total of 56 pages in John T. Platts' 1259-page dictionary, some letters no more than one or two pages, while *gaaf* alone occupies 52 pages. My own feeling is that about 80 percent of Urdu vocabulary is Indian in origin. No wonder that some of the greatest writers of Urdu, until roughly 1947, have also been Hindus and Sikhs, and not in negligible numbers. Muslims should have shown some maturity and clear-headedness in claiming it as a Muslim language. This is an example of linguistic nationalism retroactively applied. Of course it is too late now. I need not tell you the plight of Urdu in India, where it may or may not die eventually, but it will continue on in Pakistan torn from its cultural and literary moorings. In a recent e-mail from Karachi, one gentleman wrote to me "Ji zaroor mein ap ko akhbar *send* kar don ga [*italics, mine*]." A future Ghalib will write in this language. Lest you think I'm against borrowing vocabulary from another language and assimilating it to one's own, actually, languages rarely borrow verbs, but mostly nouns and adjectives. I can think of only "filmaanaa" from "to film" in Urdu. There may be a few more, but not many.

AK: Do you see yourself as a social realist, as someone whose primary aim is to depict the existing social relationship of time or space? Your translation work is quite varied in nature. How do you select works for translation?

MM: I don't want to be a realist, socialist or any other kind of "ist." I just want to read fiction, and not as an analog of reality but as an unexplored terrain existing in its distinct mode of being. Since I no longer write fiction, fortunately I'm excused from bearing such immense responsibility. But, as I said earlier, fiction will reflect to some degree or other the nature of social relationships particular to a time and space, but only obliquely, not as its principal objective.

Actually, reading is an enjoyment for me and, generally speaking, sometimes what I like to read I also feel like translating. More specifically, my translations from Urdu fiction were done (1) to teach courses, and (2) to give the West some idea about modern Urdu fiction and its producers. The things I've translated into Urdu are either fiction or articles dealing with Sufi metaphysics and the intellectual contributions made under the aegis of Muslim—Islamic if you will—culture, as reflected in literature, philosophy and science. One other major reason was to regain some control over the Urdu idiom, which was fast slipping from my hands.

AK: Could you talk about literary labels, for instance "colonial," "post-colonial," "Third World," and so on? How does one move beyond these labels? What are the importance/ significance of such labels?

MM: From my vantage, none of this is in the nature of a literary category. Then again, I'm not sure a writer sets out to write a "colonial" or "post-colonial" novel. These are labels appended to the work by those who do not look at the work as existing in its own autonomous imaginative space. Take for instance much of Nayer Masud's work. Could you say that any one of the five stories in his collection *Seemiya* is located in any known geography? His minimalist, threadbare prose is culturally neutral and non-specific, without the least precipitation of any kind of rhetoric, and yet is charged with a stunning emotional energy, such that it overwhelms without being mushy. So where, exactly, would you locate his clinically sterilized fictional landscape? No Urdu critic has succeeded, to my knowledge at least, in determining the *meaning* of his fictional world, yet none has walked away from it without *feeling* its overwhelming, grim existential weight. And how would one classify Kafka? Yes, one may say that his work is his emotional response to objective reality as he experienced it, but none of the features of this external life are discernible in his work. And what will you say about the very ordinary office

clerk Munawwar Khan, the protagonist of Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman's short story "Siberia." He is mortally afraid of some unspecified but palpable fear and, while returning from work one evening, sees snowflakes drifting down relentlessly in a city where it has not snowed since the beginning of time? A city at the back of beyond, in a country we know nothing about, in a century which looks like our own simply because we think so? Except for the snowflakes, every last detail in the story is exactly a mirror image of objective reality—a snapshot taken through a powerful lens. Yet the picture emerging from the developer distorts this reality beyond recognition because of the psychological/emotional solutions it has passed through. The distortion creates a reality more credible than objective reality itself. You may read it as a story of political oppression if you like, but you have no proof to support it. All this transaction between the writer and his reader takes place in the fictional realm, a realm in which our label-makers will find no purchase, and is credible and meaningful even in one's failure to comprehend it clearly. So you see, the minute you concede to the autonomous existence of fiction and look for its coordinates in its native soil, and analyze it using critical concepts and categories organic to its mode of being, you inevitably realize that none of the labels you have enumerated help much. A writer is just a writer; his relationship with his work does not change depending on whether he comes from the "First World" or the "Third." Basically the same urge propels the individual to write, regardless of where he or she may be situated: the urge to fashion a world different than the real one, because the latter makes him uneasy, because it is lacking in some way or other. The writer cannot change the real world, but he can create an imaginative world according to his specific blueprint.

AK: You were a participant of a unique scholarly panel entitled "Literary Responses to Political Events: Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu Literatures." Could you elaborate on what the literary response to political events is? Considering the last few years of Pakistan's political cataclysm what has been the literary response?

MM: Actually, I organized that panel in what I now look upon as my "days of ignorance," in my innocence, yielding to the imperatives and pressures of academic life, when I didn't know any better. I had written an article on how the event of 1971, when Pakistan split, was perceived in Urdu fictional writing. I had read a book by H. Stewart Hughes about intellectuals and intellectual history. It's all very hazy now, but the thought that political events are foreshadowed in creative writing much before their occurrence appealed to me and I wanted to analyze Urdu fiction to see what reverberations of the coming storm could be felt. (The article was later

published in the *Journal of Asian Studies*.) Then I became ambitious, all right, curious. How do Iranian, Arab, and Turkish creative writers deal with political events. Hence I decided to organize a panel during the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association on this theme. Noor Yalman of Harvard ran overtime and I didn't even get to present my paper.

Since the topic no longer interests me, I haven't tried to pursue it, so I wouldn't be able to tell you what treatment current events have received in Urdu fiction, other than to give you a very general impression. My feeling is that Pakistani Urdu fiction has mostly steered clear of dealing with political events, quite apart from the question of whether political events in themselves can or ought to be the subject of fiction. The situation is somewhat different among Indian Urdu writers. Salam Bin Razzack, Syed Muhammad Ashraf, Ali Imam Naqvi, and others have written some excellent stories which may be considered to have resulted from their experience of communal riots, the Babri mosque incident, etc. But a marked difference can be seen in the way they have creatively handled the material compared to the way in which the majority of Urdu writers, except Saadat Hasan Manto, Asfaq Ahmad, and Rajinder Singh Bedi, dealt with the Partition of India in 1947. A political event can be used in fiction, but not for its own sake, to send a message. What needs to be done instead is exploit the event's creative potential to achieve a narrative goal. Razzack, Ashraf, and Naqvi do just that. They have produced stories that are accomplished works independently of any message. Even regarding the breakup of Pakistan, I cannot think of any equally accomplished work produced by Pakistani writers, with the sole exception of Masud Ashar's "Of Coconuts and Chilled Bottles of Beer."

AK: In Western literature the experience of prison has been an important contribution to the many academic debates and disciplines that utilize prison letters for theoretical support. Antonio Gramsci's strikingly vivid letters for example have illuminated ideas on politics, philosophy, literature and social theory. Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Ahmed Faraz contributed in somewhat the same manner for Urdu prose. Why did you decide to translate Gramsci and Leo Tolstoy rather than Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Ahmed Faraz when they too provide penetrating look into the intellectual, spiritual and political ethos during their tribulations as political prisoners in Pakistan? Would you consider translating their works?

MM: When I read Gramsci's prison letters, I was overwhelmed and overawed by his immense erudition, his razor-sharp perception and what all he was able to accomplish in the dreary confines of a slammer in extremely poor health. I have seen

Faiz from up close, back in Hyderabad when I taught at Sind University and he came to participate in a *musha'ira*. Yes, he is a poet well liked by people, and yes, he also went to prison. And, yes, I've read his prison letters, but the thought that I might translate them never crossed my mind. However, back in the early 1960s, after Faiz returned from his trip to Cuba, he wrote a series of very penetrating articles on Cuban life that were published in the newspaper *Jang*. I was profoundly affected by his insights. I might translate them. Don't misunderstand me. I too have enjoyed and loved his poetry, mostly when I was a young man. I now feel that his poetry is too accessible for my comfort. It leaves no distance between itself and the reader. When that happens, I'm afraid a poet becomes dated. This does not happen with Ghalib.

Anyway my choices tend to be quite whimsical. I just liked Gramsci. The man had not the slightest trace of obscuring lyricism or maudlin self-pity. On the contrary, he had an endearingly steely resolve, an obsessive desire to learn, a discipline the likes of which are not easily found. A rock-solid and authentic personality right down to the hilt, so I selected a few letters and translated them, as my homage to a profound genius. I must admit I'm woefully ignorant of Ahmed Faraz's prison letters, and somewhat happy in my ignorance. Now and then a line of his poetry glows for me, and shocks me with its perceptive brilliance, its sheer poetic luster.

AK: You have been editing *The Annual of Urdu Studies* for a number of years now. How do you manage such a voluminous yearly publication?

MM: Next year we will be publishing our 25th issue. Managing it hasn't been easy, and I might have folded it up years ago had it not been for the uncommon dedication and devotion of my assistant, Jane Shum. Without her diligence and prodigious sense of responsibility, I wouldn't have managed to continue publishing. Our constant problem is finances. So far we have been lucky. For a few years the Center for South Asia at the University of Wisconsin helped us a bit. Later the University's College of Letters and Science and its Graduate School gave me a 33 percent-time project assistant, but this support was withdrawn a few years ago because of the University's fiscal problems across the board. Fortunately the support from AIPS has been unwavering and quite substantial from the start, although for the past three years I've been frequently warned that the AIPS may not be able to support it in the future. This is a very real possibility. When that happens, I will have no choice but to close it down. Who knows, the 25th issue may be our last. As you probably know, the *AUS* is a not-for-profit enterprise. We can barely recover the cost of printing from the sales, which were never substantial to begin with and have steadily dwindled since we put the journal on the web free of charge, a move necessitated

by the economic condition of our South Asian readers. We have also not raised the price of the journal itself (sometimes as many as 700 pages and usually not less than 400) since 1993. The only increases have been to try to offset, as much as possible, the never-ending increases in postage for shipping. What is deplorable is that many university libraries have canceled their subscriptions just because it is now available for free on the web. And it might surprise you to know that Urduwallahs, otherwise vociferous in defending Urdu, are the least inclined to buy it just to keep it afloat, the worst culprits being the Pakistanis. Not a single educational institution or individual in all of Pakistan buys a copy. All the copies sent there are gratis. On the other hand, half a dozen libraries in India, including a Sikh library and one in Maharashtra, do buy it, and now and then an individual subscription from India also wanders in. Another major problem is the dearth of high-quality scholarly articles. This is a constant headache.

AK: Are there other volumes in the pipeline for the Oxford University Press's Pakistan Writers' Series for which you serve as the General Editor?

MM: Let me give you a little background on this series. In 1998—or was it 1996?—the OUP asked me for publication ideas. Among other possible projects, I suggested a series on Pakistani writers because they deserved attention and recognition before anything else. I wasn't sure OUP would accept it, and least of all ask me to serve as editor for it. But this is precisely what they eventually did. I accepted but it didn't take long for frustration to set in. By Pakistani writers I had meant just that, writers in all genres and all languages of Pakistan, including English. OUP wanted me to edit only Urdu fiction. Anyway, I managed 7 volumes despite formidable problems, finding good translators being the most daunting one. Few Pakistani's who write good English are interested in translating from Urdu, especially for a fee that only amounts to peanuts. And fewer still are crazy enough to do it just for the love of Urdu. Among others, I had selected Fahmida Riaz's novella *Godavari*. I first asked Aamer Hussein and he accepted, but later I couldn't even get him to respond to any of my many letters, much less deliver the translation. Then I approached Umber Khairi. She also accepted, translated a few pages and then bowed out. I next asked my friend Juan Cole, who knows Urdu and was willing to do it with his wife, who is a Pakistani. If you know anything about Juan, you will know what a big name he is in Middle Eastern Studies and how busy. He had translated some 50 pages when tragedy struck. Fahmida ended up in Michigan, saw him, found out about the translation and recited her tale of woes and the need to have the translation "pdq." That's when he wrote to me saying that, after learning how important the translation was for Fahmida's immediate plans, he realized he could not do it fast enough to sat-

Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies Vol. 1, No. 2 (2009)

isfy her. He was willing to give me the 50 pages and let someone else carry on. So that was that. Just to coordinate the activity exhausted me. So now the series is in limbo or suspended animation. My friend Faruq Hassan and I have now translated enough stories of Ikramullah to fill a volume. As soon as I can find the time to edit it, we may end up with volume 8, but what will come after that, or indeed whether anything will come at all, only God knows.

AK: Now that you are retired, what next?

MM: Actually, I'm busier than when I was teaching. I now have the time to do what I want. At the moment I'm trying to put together a special section on Urdu writing from India for *Words Without Borders*, a web magazine of world literature, which I've been invited to guest edit. It will feature a few stories by old masters but the balance will comprise writing by post-1947 and especially more recent writers, plus some poetry. Eventually I want to expand this project and publish a whole volume, mostly my translations. The next is to polish my Urdu translation of Toshihiko Izutsu's delightful little book *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things: Essays in Islamic Mystical Philosophy*. I have already translated half a dozen other essays on certain Muslim philosophers and the transmission of Muslim philosophy to the West. Then I have Llosa's book, which I mentioned elsewhere and five or six other novels that need to be cleaned up and published. So, you can see, my plate is full. But I'm happy when I'm busy doing what I enjoy most.