

DAY AND DASTAN

Two novellas

INTIZAR HUSAIN

TRANSLATED BY

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Introduction

by Nishat Zaidi

The fictional world of Intizar Hussain [1925–2016], one of the greatest Urdu writers, and most certainly a world writer, is as enmeshed in the cataclysmic events of the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent, as was his own life. Born in the small qasba of Dibai, in Uttar Pradesh, Husain migrated to Pakistan in 1947. This radical transition forced Husain, an aspiring literary critic, into writing stories through which he hoped to fathom the meaning of existence and the myriad ways in which external events exert themselves upon existence. Husain's narrative journey evinces his lifelong engagement with questions thrown up by the Partition and his subsequent migration, as he admitted in one of his interviews, 'Explaining the experience of migration intellectually is a difficult task for me. I have been attempting to comprehend this experience through my stories.'¹ To Husain, storytelling was a journey, a quest, a spiritual experience or drawing from

1 Bruce R. Pray, trans., 'A Conversation between Intizar Hussain and Muhammad Umar Memon,' *Journal of South Asian Literature* 18, 2 (1983): 165.

Sufi traditions, what he chose to term as *Varidat*. Speaking of the indispensability of stories for understanding human experiences, Charles E. Winquist writes, ‘Without a story we are bound to the immediacy of the moment, and we are forever losing our grip on the reality of our own identity with the passage of discrete moments. We are unable to speak of primordial or eschatological time.’² Husain opted for the genre for it allowed him to understand the chaos and the commotion around him.

Partition and the spurious cultural geography it produced made a sensitive writer like Intizar Husain profoundly cognizant of his role as a writer, which was to remind his generation of its losses and instill some wisdom in the process. This choice, however, was not without challenges. ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,’³ wrote Theodor Adorno. Embedded in Husain’s choice to write stories in order to make sense of the chaos around, were similar complex, ethical questions that urged for answers. Intrigued, Husain forged his own path on his creative journey.

A sceptic Husain eschewed formulaic rendering of events like progressives, which he considered vulgar. He rather chose to deal with events, howsoever despairing, head-on without glossing them over. He channelised his energies to comprehend experiences by placing them in their historical perspective.

2 Charles E. Winquist, ‘The Act of Storytelling and the Self’s Homecoming,’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, 1 (Mar. 1974): 103.

3 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society,’ translated by Samuel Weber and Sherry Weber Nicholson in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 162.

I wanted to find out how and why all this is happening. In my attempt to trace back our history, I began to read history books...It is through my stories that I try to reach an understanding of what happened in 1947, in its own terms and against the background of those other migrations which have occurred in the history of Muslims.⁴

To Husain, if turning away from the past implied ignorance, remembering it selectively or total surrender to it, in exclusion of the immediate present, was no less vulgar, as he wrote, 'It is a continuing tragedy of our history that we never managed to bring about a synthesis of the old and the new ways of thought. We either become completely modern, intent on forgetting our history, our tradition or we become reactionaries who shun the fresh breezes of new ideas and knowledge which are all about us.'⁵ Past, to Husain, was necessary to illuminate the present, even if by its sheer absence or unreachability. It intensified an awareness of the present and prepared one for the journey ahead. Written retrospectively, all Husain's works open prospectively. Accused of being decadent for turning to the past, both personal and communal, Husain always retorted, 'I am trying to understand my history in terms of what is going around me and in terms of those problems which affect us as a community.'⁶

4 Pray, 'A Conversation between Intizar Husain and Muhammad Umar Memon,' *Journal of South Asian Literature* 18, 2 (1983): 165.

5 Ibid. p. 157.

6 Ibid. p. 159.

Intizar Husain's stories weave a rich tapestry of dreamlike surreal existence, around people, places, trees, birds, forests, bastis, flowers, temples, dargahs, imambaras, and other banal aspects of ordinary lives. Baffled by this banality, his critics are quick to castigate him for elements like nostalgia, attempts at retrieval of a lost world, and even passivity born out of Husain's Shia world view. However, one only needs to step back and consider Husain's entire fictional world to reckon that events and characters drawn from his past lives may or may not be a retrieval of his childhood days spent in his basti in pre-Partition India; they may or may not be an expression of nostalgia or a longing to go back to the lost world or even attempts to enlighten path for future based on an understanding of the past; in fact they may or may not even have any link to the lived experiences of the author. In Husain's fiction these questions have been rendered irrelevant, given the writer's engagement with deeper and immensely convoluted moral universe of the modern man. A 'vernacular cosmopolitan',⁷ Husain's explorations into the local, native, and personal are guided by his quest for the universal.

The two novellas presented here delve into the ethical questions raised by the violent event of the Partition by turning to the past and situating the personal experience in historical perspective. They follow two different routes to come to terms with the cataclysmic events of the Partition. While *Din*, the story of Zamir and Tahsina and their repressed

7 See Homi Bhabha, 'The Vernacular Cosmopolitan,' in *Voices of the Crossing: The Impact of Britain on Writers from Asia, the Caribbean and Africa*, ed. Ferdinand Dennis and Naseem Khan (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000), pp. 133–142.

emotions, captures the personal past in all its drudgery and banality, *Dastan* moves beyond the personal to the realm of the historical and communal memory. Both these novellas capture Husain's unflinching faith in storytelling as a means of coming to grips with chaotic realities.

The Aesthetics of the Banal

Husain debunked the notion of anything like 'Islamic culture'. He rather upheld 'Indian Muslim Culture' which he thought was best exemplified in Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia and Amir Khusro, a culture that was a product of years of living together in India with Hindus and assimilating many of their practices. He was pained to see this culture getting lost to Pakistan, a Muslim nation, under the influence of purists. In *Din*, he retrieves this culture in all its ethnographic details. The afternoon escapades of Zamir and Tahsina through the Kunjdon wali gali, qasai ki gali, and thatheri wali gali, beyond the Lal Mandir, Anjanharis, khandal trees, colour-changing chameleons, and countless other insects, flowers, and trees are conjured to life in vivid details. In the midst of all this unfolds the human drama of a growing intimacy between Zamir and Tahsina, Ammi's acerbic disapproval, Tai Amma's family anecdotes, the leisurely gossips of Badi Apa, Tai Amma and Ammi, the uneventful life of Hira and Gandal, the lawsuit concerning the haveli, Baba's decision to build a new kothi, and the eventual shifting of the residents of the haveli to this kothi followed by Badi Apa's stubborn refusal to shift. The novella abounds in such enervating details of the daily and the mundane that at times the reader feels suffocated, much like the characters in the novella,

struggling with the pankha on sultry days when the wind is still. However, Husain believed that it is only by struggling through the quotidian that the short story writer arrives at the truth, ‘The short story writer arrives at some truth—some awareness only after slogging through all the monotony and boredom of life and through all the realities surrounding him.’⁸ Husain transforms the banal and the eventless into an aesthetic principle.

The narrative voice keeps shifting between the first person and the third person, blurring the distance between the omnipresent narrator and the protagonist Zamir. This deliberate ambiguity allows the authorial self to merge in the character and lends an autobiographical touch to the narrative, even as the author remains noncommittal and distant. Incidentally, the choice of the protagonist’s name Zamir, meaning ‘conscience’, also hints at the inwardness of the story.⁹

As the adolescent Zamir journeys back to his basti along with his Baba and Ammi after receiving the news of his grandfather’s demise, he is overwhelmed by the memories of the past—his childhood spent in his ancestral haveli, his memories of his affectionate but authoritarian grandfather,

8 Pray, ‘A Conversation between Intizar Husain and Muhammad Umar Memon,’ *Journal of South Asian Literature* 18, 2 (1983): 171.

9 Though Intizar Husain carefully chooses names of his protagonists in the context of his narratives, critics tend to over-interpret it. Zakir, the central character in the novel *Basti*, a history teacher, has been interpreted as a typically Shia name by some critics. However, Zakir is a common Muslim name, less so a Shia name. Zakir Naik, a controversial salafist preacher, and Zakir Hussain, the first Muslim president of India, are quick examples, while there are hardly any prominent Zakirs among Shias. It is an overly popular name in Bangladesh, a predominantly Sunni country.

his loving paternal aunt, his tender emotional bonding with his cousin Tahsina, and his distant observations of the nationalist politics, wherein the entire town including Abba Mian (who disapproved of Ali Brothers' support to Ibn-Saud) and Baba bemoaned the death of the Khilafat leader, Maulana Mohammad Ali. This past collides with the narrative present as the family arrives in the haveli. Zamir's modern, English-educated father opts for voluntary retirement and decides to build a modern-style kothi. Zamir becomes a witness to this painful transition marking the erosion of the old world. Even as Zamir and Tahsina experience the first flowering of adolescent love, they fail to articulate it. Constantly under the watchful gaze of their elders, they resign to the prevailing moral order. Steeped in an acute sense of dislocation, the overpowering code of morality which the majority of the characters adhere to, the novella has been accused of being soaked in despair, hopelessness, and obsessed with the world of dead people. "This acceptance of the tyranny of the mundane is horrifying,"¹⁰ writes one critic.

Intizar Husain, however, remained undeterred by these charges. In a note titled 'About My Characters,' he underscores the futility of this idea: 'Had Tehsina wept, what would she have got, or Zamir, what would he have achieved had he declared himself?' He goes on to add, 'I did not advise them at all in the matter. Zamir's decision is quite his own. I had no say in the matter. I am not Zamir.'¹¹In the overarching logic

10 Waqas Khwaja, 'The Lost World of Intizar Husain,' NP. Web. DoA 3/05/2007.

11 Intizar Husain, Apney Kirdaron Key Barey Mein, 'in *Janam Kabanian* (Lahore: Sang-e-meel, 1987), p. 751. Cited in Waqas Khwaja, *Ibid*.

of the novel, individuals like Zamir, Tahsina, and others do not matter as much as their situations. The characters of the novel are victims of their situations. Like other writings of Intizar Husain, the novella too refrains from making any direct reference to the Partition and the trauma of migration, but it does deal with a world changed by it.

Intizar Husain is interested in mapping the ethical anxieties of the human conscience located in a morally debilitating universe. In his essay 'Literature and Love',¹² Husain speaks of war and political instability having a direct impact on the ability to love. He feels that unlike pre-1857 when love was a full-time engagement, Urdu literature of the colonial period succumbed to Victorian morality. In Husain's view, the subordination of love to morality is as much of an immoral act as the immorality of segregation of sorrow born out of political turmoil from the personal sorrow. He idealises Mir in whose poetry 'personal sorrows and the sorrows of the age dissolved into one and all sorrows, when blended into one, became the sorrow of love'.¹³ In the same vein, the pervasive note of sorrow in the novella can be seen as an outcome of the atmosphere of political turmoil and the novelist's own sense of dislocation. The protagonist's urge to shed the burden of the past and fix his mind on the journey ahead is symptomatic of this split between the lyrical emotion of love ['gham-e-mohabbat'] and the banal ['gham-i-rozgar']. The banality and the suffering and wretchedness

12 Intizar Husain, 'Literature and Love' in *Story is a Vagabond: Fiction, Essays and Drama by Intizar Husain*, ed. Alok Bhalla, Asif Farrukhi, and Nishat Zaidi, *Manoa* 27:1, pp. 220–225.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

of characters is an outcome of the horrors of the Partition and a decline in humanist traditions. At the core of it lies the loss of meaning. The narrative's engagement with Zamir's mind, which is a ragbag of poetic images surrounding his tender romantic encounters with Tahsina, contradicts its other—the banal or the mundane, wherein Zamir must leave to find employment, manipulated through his father's connection, and make a living. Husain refuses to relieve the everyday with the dramatic, or allow the trivial to become an object of reverence, in the manner of myths and legends, by infusing any elevated sermon or lesson into his story.

Possibilities of Conversation between the Human and the Non-Human

The ethical question in Husain's stories is not anthropocentrically framed, but rather encompasses the flora and the fauna, the entire landscape, and all things living and dead. The ecosystem exists contiguously with the human world. It is not a metaphor. Human and non-human agents are part of one scene, wherein they exist separately and yet act upon each other, forming one syntagm.

In his essay 'Vikram, the Vampire and the Story', Husain argues that 'in a world containing only people, there is room for journalism to grow but not for poems and stories'.¹⁴ He laments the fact that unlike ancient stories which thrived on communication between the human and the non-human, and in which man appeared as part of the universe, the new-age storyteller 'began to write tales of only the human

14 Intizar Husain, 'Vikram, the Vampire and the Story' in *Story is a Vagabond: Fiction, Essays and Drama by Intizar Husain*, *Manoa* 27:1, p. 241.

world'.¹⁵ The tragic outcome of this loss of the non-human is that man himself has metamorphosed into a demon. The loss of the ability to listen to stories with wonderment is the greatest tragedy of modern man.

In the narrative of *Din*, the life in a qasba is magically recreated without turning the attention away from the story. The story is achingly mired in quotidian details. However, the ordinary becomes enchanting when seen through the childhood gaze of Zamir and Tahsina. For instance:

Passing through the temple lane, he was filled with awe. The red-stone temple radiated heat from a distance. It always mystified him. He wondered who lived in it, human beings or djinns; who blew the conch shells, played the cymbals and rang the bells at day break and again at dusk. High above, attached to a tiny window, there was an iron pulley which remained at rest during the day, but the moment the sun set, it began to turn on its own; and a bright polished brass pot, attached to a white rope, descended from the window and fell into the dark well with a splash, as though someone had spun gold coins chiming and ringing through the air. After a while, sparkling with overflowing water, it resurfaced, ascended to the window and suddenly vanished. Who released the rope down the pulley, who pulled it up, and where did it come from?

15 Intizar Husain, 'Vikram, the Vampire and the Story' in *Story is a Vagabond: Fiction, Essays and Drama by Intizar Husain*, Editors, Manoa 27:1, p. 243.

Zamir and Tahsina, and later Achhe and Bunni, sending their salams to Allah Mian through the butterflies, the bees, the mud lanes, the vacant buildings, dense trees, the neem flowers, and birds nesting in the neem tree, the stories of Tai Amma about Amils and faqirs, are all part of the story and constituent of the temporality of the narrative.

The presence of the non-human is more pronounced in the second novella *Dastan*, which follows the pattern of a traditional dastan. It has a mysterious black river which forces gallants to jump into its dark waters, a throbbing desert and a rotating tower, an empty city with vacant houses, faqirs who appear and disappear mysteriously, a horse whose neighing foretells events, a parrot that shows directions, etc. The novella is replete with such references to the non-human world that co-exists with the human world and interacts with them. Tote Mian lives in the midst of parrots. When he relates the story of his youth, he describes how he spent his youthful days flying pigeons. Tote Mian's Amil father echoes the sentiments of Intizar Husain, when he warns him:

Forests are cut down and cities are built; cities are destroyed and forests regrow. Everyone mourns for cities which are now desolate; but friends, take care to also recall those forests which were cut down to build cities. What happened to those tall trees? Each tree was a city, each leaf a neighbourhood, each bud a lane. Vanished!

To Husain, cutting down of a tree was no less of a tragedy than the loss of a human life. After the Partition, when he

migrated to Lahore, he experienced the loss of home not only in terms of friends and folks left behind but also in terms of tamarind trees, birds, fruits, flora, and fauna that were a part of the scene he left behind in his basti. Husain's resolve to write stories is rooted in his resolve to retrieve those trees, and not let them wither. He says, '...why do I persist in writing my stories? Perhaps because a neem tree was once outside me and a neem tree is still inside me. Whatever may have happened to the outer tree, let the inner core not wither. My commitment is to my neem tree, with its bitter fruit. 'Cling to the tree,' to the neem tree and to the stories, 'without any hope of spring'.¹⁶

Husain does cling to his commitment by telling stories, and telling them well. He does not adulterate his stories with a message or a lesson, much like his inspiration, Gautama Buddha, who told stories of his past lives as birds, animals, or trees, and never used them to preach or sermonise.

Between the Fantastical and the Real

Unlike *Din* which delves into the personal past and uses ethnomethodology in its efforts to make sense of the chaotic reality, *Dastan* connects disparate temporalities and spaces and blurs the line between the real and the fantastic, or history and fiction. Written in the classical prose of the dastan tradition, the frame narrative here consists of people displaced by *fasad* (riots).¹⁷ Hakim Ji's entire library of dastans

16 Intizar Husain, 'Vikram, the Vampire and the Story' in *Story is a Vagabond: Fiction Essays and Drama by Intizar Husain*, Manoa 27:1, p. 244.

17 The novella does not specifically mention the period when these riots took place, thus circumventing a direct reference to the Partition and leaving a silhouette of ambiguity.

was burnt in those riots. Thus, the riots caused the loss not just of lives and property, but also of stories. Bereft of their stories, the characters wander without direction. However, with some effort, Hakim Ji does manage to recall a few of these stories he claims are not fantastical but real: 'In Hakim Ji's mind, the thin line which separates a dastan from reality was almost obliterated. Countless people and incidents from his dastans seemed and felt real and while so many real incidents receded into fiction.'

Written in two parts, 'Jal Garje' [The Thunder of Rivers] and 'Ghode Ki Nida' [The Scream of the Horse], the novella, with its embellished, lyrical prose, has layers of stories moving backward in time, each providing a context to the other, illuminating the frame narrative and in turn illuminated by it. In the frame narration of the first part, Samand Khan takes us through a world where historical facts, legends, and the fantastical collide into each other: the desolation of the rebel soldiers of 1857 led by Bakht Khan, the legend of Sher Shah Suri's fantastic tower in the middle of a desert that once throbbed like a heart, the dark and mysterious black river whose waters roared like thunder, and beyond this a desolate city with deserted streets and houses and palaces in ruins. Similarly, Tote Mian, the narrator of the frame narrative of the second part, takes us through his youth when his mother saw a blood-dripping Alam in her dreams, and had a premonition of the impending tragedy. His Amil father told him the legend of the 'riderless' horse of Imam Husain that is awaiting a rider who would end the atrocities and injustices. The horse is the cause of Haider Ali's success. Tipu Sultan's fall is attributed to his failure to

recite Naad-i-Ali (a prayer, calling Hazrat Ali for help) before climbing this horse.

Throughout the novella, facts and historical events are woven into the essential threads of the dastan,¹⁸ that is, *Razm* (war), *Bazm* (assembly), *Husn-o-Ishq* (beauty and love), and *Tilism* (enchantment). The episodes of Samand Khan sleeping with Gulshan-i-khoobi with a naked sword between them or Tote Mian's liaison with Shahzadi Mahal are also in conformity with the dastan convention. Formulaic openings, interminable wanderings, fabulous characters, and many more such elements that defy the 'logic of causality'¹⁹ aim at interrogating the nature of the real, for, as Husain would say, 'The external world possesses a type of reality for me, but I want to know, what lies behind that reality, what are the sources of that reality.'²⁰

In the enchanted world of a traditional dastan, 'nothing is what it seems',²¹ and the protagonist has to break the

18 The Persio-Arabic tradition of dastan travelled to India and Urdu has a rich tradition of dastan. For instance eight Daftars of *Dastan-i-Amir Hamza* published by Naval Kishore Press between 1881-1917, Rajab Ali Beg Suroor's *Fusana-i-Ajaib* published by Naval Kishore Press in 1867, Mir Amman's *Bagh-o-Bahar etc.*, For more on dastan see, Frances Pritchett, *The Medieval Persian Romance Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's *Amir Hamzat-zubani Bayaniya, Bayankunina, aur Samaiin* (New Delhi: Maktaba Jamia, 1998); *Sabiri, Shahi, Sahibqirani: Dastan-i-Amir Hamza Ka Mutalaba'a* (Delhi: Qaumi Kauncil Barai-Farogh-i-Urdu Zuban, 1999), and Gyan Chandra Jain's *Urdu ki Nasri Dastanein*. (2nd ed. (Karachi: Anjuman-e Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1969). Musharraf Ali Farooqi, 'The Simurgh-Feather Guide to the Poetics of Dastan-e Amir Hamza Sahibqiran,' in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, 15:1 (2000): 119-167.

19 '... instead of the Law of Causality, it [a dastan] is subject to Law of Possibility,' Shamsur Rahman Faruqi is cited in Musharraf Ali Farooqi, 'The Simurgh-Feather Guide,' *ibid.*, p. 135.

20 Pray, 'A Conversation between Intizar Husain and Muhammad Umar Memon,' *Journal of South Asian Literature* 18, 2 (1983): 160.

21 Frances W. Pritchett, 'Amir Hamza' in *South Asian Folklore An Encyclopaedia*, ed. Margaret A. Mills, Peter J Claus, and Sarah Diamond (New York & London: Routledge, 2003), p.15.

tilism, kill the magician before he can return to the normative narrative space and time. Underlying this world of ajaib and gharaib is the Sufi philosophy that views this universe as an illusion, a tilism. This structure of freely flowing imaginative narrative, with no moral obligation, and marked by humour and optimism is replaced in Husain's dastan by an overarching sense of fear and suspense, by a sense of foreboding, and a looming tragedy. The traditional dastan plunges the reader into a universe of infinite possibilities, of unbridled emotions, an ever-expanding world of sights and sounds, and rids him/her of all feeling of powerlessness or helplessness. In Husain's dastan, however, the reader is deprived of this redemptive transformation, as the heroes (of dastan) as well as the reader/listener remain bewildered at the end of their adventure. The rich descriptions, enchanting details, and fantastic exaggerations woven in a language that is given to excessive verbiage and internally rhyming sentences do not lead to the revelation of a sign as such in Husain's novella. Although the adventurous journey of the hero of a conventional dastan marks a release from reality, his return to the normative narrative is accompanied by a new knowledge which sharpens his and the reader's perception of reality. It facilitates a firmer grip on reality. However, for the heroes in Husain's dastan, no such solace is available. They either get killed in their adventurous expedition or lose their moorings and end up spending their days in anonymity like Tote Mian or the faqir of Hakim Ji's dastans. Akin to a traditional dastan, Husain's dastan too evades an organic ending with Ghani dreaming of the sound of the galloping horse which inspired generations of people to take up arms against oppression.

Abandoning the world of evincible logic, Intizar Husain here moves to construe Islamic history as a continuum by tracing back the present moment of post-Partition crisis marked by migration and homelessness, to the desolation of rebel soldiers of 1857 led by Bakht Khan, anti-British battles of Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan, the glorious reign of Shershah, and finally back to the martyrdom of Imam Husain in the battle of Karbala. The figure that links all these stories together is the figure of the riderless horse of slain Imam Husain. Having disappeared after the Imam's death, the horse reappears recurrently across the various times and locations to aid the brave men in their fight against injustice. This seems like Husain's ostensible attempt at conceptualising a history of the subcontinent Muslims in Islamic or rather Shia terms. Husain concurred with this possibility when he said, 'When I came to Pakistan and felt myself to be a Pakistani, I was thinking as a Pakistani.'²² In fact, this is further borne out by the fact that 'Ghode ki Nida' (The Scream of the Horse) was written to commemorate the centenary celebration of 1857 and was first published in *Naya Daur* (v. 11–12: 19–45) in about 1958 or 1959. However, a closer attention makes it evident that far from resurrecting a monochromatic, singular past, Husain, by locating this view of history in the realm of the fantastic, underlines an inherent futility of this vision.

Conclusion

The two novellas may appear to be diametrically opposed to each other—one steeped in the nostalgia of a personal past,

22 Asif Farrukhi, 'Talking about *Basti*: Intizar Husain in Conversation with Asif Farrukhi,' Lahore 2005. Web. DoA 12/04/2007. http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/basti/00_background.html.

the other randomly moving from the historical to fantastic; one marked by a colloquial language rooted in the local and the other written in high style, elite [*Ashraf*], classical idiom; one marked by eventlessness, the other following a narrative style that is inextricably event-bound. However, like Milan Kundera's character Sabina in the novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, who explains her paintings to Tereza, 'On the surface the intelligible lie; underneath an unintelligible truth showing through',²³ Intizar Husain also paints the phenomenal world only to peer through its illusions to reveal what is hidden beneath. By clothing experience in the language of myths and legends, and putting language to its ontological use, Husain's stories, even when they relate a sense of futility and nothingness, are a positive affirmation of the act of storytelling. This manifests, what Winquist calls, 'an active response to the desire to know'.²⁴ It is this that makes Husain a thoroughly modern writer.

Traversing at the cusp of two identities, a Pakistani national and an Indian migrant, Hussain's fiction dwells on the futility of identity politics, and undergirds the need for intersubjective accommodations. His stories, ranging from the personal to the political, the local to the mythic, the individual to the communal draw from a wide range of narrative traditions such as Western traditions of Kafka, Indo-Persian *Dastan*, Buddhist *Jatakas*, and the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* and *Singhasan Batisi*. They debunk the

23 Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), pp. 63–64.

24 Charles E. Winquist, 'The Act of Storytelling and the Self's Homecoming,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, 1 (Mar. 1974): 104.

anthropomorphism of the Habermasian communicative rationality, social realism of the Marxist Progressives, symbolism of his contemporary Urdu writers, and uphold identity as 'beholden and responsible first and foremost to the other'.²⁵

By simultaneously engaging with local culture, nationalist politics, and universal ethics, Husain's fiction exemplifies the best in the world literature.

25 Jeffrey Thomas Nealon, *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 4.

DAY



One

The past was, for him, a sequence of long nights and scorching afternoons. In between, an odd wet morning or a rain-drenched day seemed like a precious pearl. His days were spent rambling from lane to lane and field to field. His nights were blank and meaningless. He was like a drifter. When he was awake, he heard stories. When he slept, he wandered in his dreams, but he did not know how far he had come or how much further he still had to go. At night, when the entire haveli was asleep, and the streets outside simmered in silence, Mir Bu Ali's groans could be heard from quite a distance.

Next to the haveli was a semi-concrete kothari with an open courtyard. All through winter, summer, and rain, Mir Bu Ali slept under the open sky, or rather groaned and sighed. During the few nights, when it rained or drizzled, and Mir Bu Ali slept under the roof of the kothari, the sequence of snores, snorts, and hiccups became so loud and prolonged that the entire mohalla would wake up. In his sleep, Mir Bu

Ali screamed wild prophecies which somehow turned out to be true.

One night, at first he whimpered, but then began to scream, 'He has gone, he has gone.' In the morning, news arrived that there had been a robbery in Kankadkheda. Tai Amma informed us that, since the time Mir Bu Ali's Jalali Wazifa had gone wrong, his hamzad was uncontrollable and did not let him sleep at night. Zamir and Tahsina were always alarmed at the mention of Jalali Wazifa and hamzad. Tai Amma was herself bewildered. All she knew was that on the fortieth night of the ritual, Mir Bu Ali began to scream in his kothari, 'It has fallen, it has fallen!' Then he banged at the gate of the haveli. Bade Abba was still alive and used to pray the whole night. He quietly got up from his prayer-mat and opened the gate. Mir Bu Ali continued to bang at the gate and scream, 'It has fallen, it has fallen!' Irritated, Bade Abba glared at him and asked, 'What has fallen?' Terrified, Mir Bu Ali replied, 'The roof.' Ever since that day, he hasn't had the good fortune to sleep under a roof. Whenever he slept under a roof, he whimpered, screamed, and disturbed the sleep of the entire mohalla. The next day, when the sun rose, he looked like a corpse; no screaming, no groaning, not a word to anyone. He merely sat on a string cot like a bundle all day and dozed. Zamir and Tahsina stood outside the courtyard and watched him in fear and awe for hours, and then quietly slipped away.

And then, there was Gadhhe Shah. Only Tai Amma had seen him. Mir Bu Ali was real; Zamir and Tahsina had seen him with their own eyes; Gadhhe Shah was a legend, narrated by Tai Amma. A fervent devotee, Gadhhe Shah had

built a shelter by the boundary wall of the haveli. He sat there all day digging a pit with his hands, and if someone asked, he'd reply, 'This fakir is building a house to live in.' When the pit became deeper, he sat inside it. One day Bade Abba went up to him and pleaded, 'Shahji, the haveli is at your disposal. Please come inside.' Gadhhe Shah responded indifferently, 'The haveli is under the ground.' Offended, Bade Abba reacted sharply, 'Then go live underground.' The next day, there was no sign either of Gadhhe Shah or the pit.

Zamir and Tahsina listened and wondered. Tai Amma quietly marvelled at the story for some time. Then, breaking her silence, said, 'Our Abba was a renowned Amil. In fact, Bhaiyya, ours is a family of Amils. In those days there was always an Amil in each generation. But that tradition ended with Bade Abba.'

'Why?'

'There was no one to succeed him. Abba Mian's pursuits were different. And because he never paid any attention to his father's knowledge, it was passed on to others. It so happened that when Bade Abba took to bed, a naked fakir appeared from somewhere. He pitched his tent in front of the haveli. Bade Abba's condition continued to deteriorate and he was on the verge of death. For three days he was in a bad shape; he gasped for breath; he was in such pain that only Allah could help. Bibi, it so happened that on the third day, that stark-naked ascetic, stout and well-built like a bull, barged into our house. Women began to scream, but Bade Abba signalled to let him in. Everyone was shocked. Ai Bibi, he went straight to Bade Abba and embraced him. Bade Abba shivered and...died...the fakir left. And, then, the