The Seventh Door

and Other Stories

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edited and with an introduction by
Muhammad Umar Memon

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To
Anis, Asim, Laura
with much affection

Acknowledgments

All the short stories included in this volume, except "The Seventh Door," have previously appeared in the *Journal of South Asian Literature,* 18:2 (Summer/Fall, 1983), which I guest edited; these are reproduced here with the permission of the *Journal*'s editors. In most cases the earlier translations have been substantially revised. "The Seventh Door" has also appeared previously, in the volume *The Tale of the Old Fisherman: Contemporary Urdu Short Stories,* which I edited for Three Continents Press in 1991; it is here included with the permission of the publisher.

The stories were published originally in Urdu, as follows:

"The Seventh Door" ("Sātvāṅ Dar"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Kaṅkarī* (Lahore: Maktaba-e Jadīd [1955]), pp. 179–195.

"An Unwritten Epic" ("Ēk Bin-likhī Razmiya"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Galī Kūčē* (Lahore: Maktaba-e Kārvāṅ [1952]), pp. 193–224.

"The Stairway" ("Sīṛhiyāṅ"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Shahr-e Afsōs* (Lahore: Maktaba-e Kārvāṅ [1973]), pp. 62–83.

"The Back Room" ("Dehlīz"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Shahr-e Afsōs* (Lahore: Maktaba-e Kārvāṅ [1973]), pp. 44–61.

"A Stranded Railroad Car" ("Kaṭā hū'ā Ḍibbā"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Shahr-e Afsōs* (Lahore: Maktaba-e Kārvāṅ [1973]), pp. 29–43.

"Toward His Fire" ("Apnī Āg kī Ṭaraf"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Shahr-e Afsōs* (Lahore: Maktaba-e Kārvāṅ [1973]), pp. 190–206.

"The Lost Ones" ("Vō Jō Khō'ē Ga'ē"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Shahr-e Afsōs* (Lahore: Maktaba-e Kārvāṅ [1973]), pp. 9–28.

"The Shadow" ("Parčhā'īṅ"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Ākhirī Ādmī* (Lahore: Kitābiyāt [1967]), pp. 37–56.

"Comrades" ("Ham-safar"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Ākhirī Ādmī* (Lahore: Kitābiyāt [1967]), pp. 75–92.

"The Legs" ("Ṭāṅgēṅ"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Ākhirī Ādmī* (Lahore: Kitābiyāt [1967]), pp. 107–132.

"The Yellow Cur" ("Zard Kuttā"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Ākhirī Ādmī* (Lahore: Kitābiyāt [1967]), pp. 14–35.

"The Last Man" ("Ākhirī Ādmī"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Ākhirī Ādmī* (Lahore: Kitābiyāt [1967]), pp. 1–13.

"Metamorphosis" ("Kāyā-kalp"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Ākhirī Ādmī* (Lahore:

Kitābiyāt [1967]), pp. 93–105.
"Prisoner(s)" ("Asīr"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Kačhvē* (Lahore: Maṭbūᶜāt [1981]), pp. 46–54.
"The Turtles" ("Kačhvē"), from Intiẓār Ḥusain, *Kačhvē* (Lahore: Maṭbūᶜāt [1981]), pp. 73–92.

A Note on Transliteration

Non-English words have not been transliterated in the text of the short stories, but in the critical and expository sections of the book the letters of the Urdu alphabet have been transliterated as follows:

alif	as: a, i, u, ā
bē, pē, tē, ṭē, s̲ē	as: b, p, t, ṭ, s̲
jīm, chē, ḥē, khē	as: j, č, ḥ, kh
dāl, ḍāl, z̲al	as: d, ḍ, z̲
rē, ṛē, zē, zhē	as: r, ṛ, z, zh
sīn, shīn	as: s, sh
ṣuād, z̧uād	as: ṣ, z̧
ṯ̲ōˀē, ẓ̧ōˀē	as: ṯ̲, ẓ̧
ᶜain, ghain	as: ᶜ, gh
fē, qāf	as: f, q
kāf, gāf	as: k, g
lām, mīm, nūn	as: l, m, n
vāˀo	as: v, ū, o, au

chōṭī hē	as: h
chōṭī yē	as: ī
baṛī yē	as: y, e, ai
nūn-e ghunna	as: ṅ
hamza	as: ʾ
iẓāfat	as: -e

Word-final *h* is indicated only when it is pronounced, e.g., in *nigāh* but not in *ghunna* or *qaṣīda.* The *vāʾo* of the conjunction is written *-o-*.

Perhaps the poet knows, as well as his audience, that the picture presented is not the actual story. Yet while the *taʿziyah majlis* lasts, myth transcends itself; for the moment, it becomes history. For the historian of religion, however, the myth actually becomes part of history; the history not of the event, but of the community's understanding and interiorization of it, the history not of historical facts, but of the way the community has lived them. This interiorization of the drama of Karbalāʾ is powerfully expressed in the *zīyārah* ritual. Through this ritual the community renews its covenant with and its loyalty to the *imāms,* and in a very personal way renews its own participation in this drama.

—Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*

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Introduction

If I hold so firmly to the inheritance of Kafka, if I defend it as my personal inheritance, it is not because I think it useful to imitate the inimitable (and to discover again the Kafkaesque) but because it is such a formidable example of the radical autonomy of the novel (of the poetry that is the novel). Thanks to that autonomy, Franz Kafka (or the great, forgotten Hermann Broch) has told us things about our human condition (as it reveals itself in our age) which no sociological or political reflection will ever be able to tell.

—*Milan Kundera, "Somewhere Behind"*[1]

I

Imagine a pair of young lovers. Alone—finally. Breathless. But he pulls away. He pulls away not because he is shy. He is wearing "an inelegant and shabby pair of undershorts," which he is reluctant to peel off in her presence. A shabby pair of undershorts? Well, those were the only kind available after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. No history book will tell us about this sad little tragedy of life. Milan Kundera will.[2]

Or take the delicate young wife Lajvanti. Torn away from her home in the bloody aftermath of the partition of India in 1947, she is finally reunited with her husband, but only after she has been gang-raped by her Muslim abductors. Her silent suffering prompts her husband to treat her with all the tenderness he is capable of—more gently, perhaps, than he would the fragile plant *lājvantī,* whose leaves curl up and fold when touched. Indeed, he looks upon her as a goddess. But with all that, he is unwilling to resume conjugal relations with her, afraid that she might have been—perhaps—defiled. Lajvanti, on the other hand, longs, indeed she passionately yearns to be treated harshly by him, abused,

even beaten—as she had been, daily, or almost daily, before her abduction. Not because she is masochistic; rather, because such behavior, however cruel and demeaning, still carried some tactile sensation of living, promised, at the very least, some human contact and warmth, some affirmation of her identity as a physical being, a woman, awaiting fulfillment through love and embrace—yes, quite earthy love. Again, no history book will tell us about this sadness of life. Rajinder Singh Bedi will.[3]

And Pichwa? Ah yes—Pichwa. The stuff epics are made of. Larger than life. A wrestler, an adept club-fighter, who did not allow "his *art* to be tainted by purposiveness." Who thought of the newly created Pakistan not in political, nationalistic, religious terms—as a homeland for disadvantaged Indian Muslims—but purely as an opportunity to perfect his art. A Pichwa treated poorly by Pakistan, humiliated, vanquished. A Pichwa betrayed. Intizar Husain will recount this "unwritten epic," even if no historian would ever know about those myriad, unsung, tragic heroes—forgotten in the commerce of history, in India's "tryst with destiny."[4]

Or, finally, why have the trio in "The City of Sorrow" been divested of all particularizing detail, without personal attributes and names? What robs an individual of all sense of personality?[5] Little did Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto—the ex-premier of Pakistan, hanged in 1978 by General Zia-ul-Haq, who himself one scorching day in August ten years later disintegrated in mid-air aboard his C-130 transport—know the price of his arrogance, his unyielding nature, which, combined with other factors, resulted in the dismemberment of Pakistan. But Intizar Husain, the writer, knew. In fact, he knew all too well. Or, perhaps he did not know, just as Kundera and Bedi did not know; perhaps instead, each in his own way and under some inexorable inner pressure tried to know, to articulate in the process of writing the meaning of it all, to remember, to chronicle the demoralizing, often quite comic, effects of politics on the individual psyche.

So if you want to know how simple, ordinary lives are wasted by politics and history, read a novel, a short story, a poem.

Which is not to suggest some inevitable causality between politics and creative endeavor, or that fictional aesthetics invariably do or should lie in the socio-political reality that in fact inspired a work. Of course something of the empirical will always survive in a fictional piece—however oblique and tenuous its ascription to the times—if only because fiction knows no way wholly to transcend temporality; even the best attempts in the "spatial form" have not accomplished that. But a

writer's world is a radically autonomous world. It is equally fictive. An act of the imagination. It will always be different from the sum of its empirical parts. In the final synthesis of the real and the fictive, objective truth will always be subverted, almost of necessity, in favor of a fierce personal vision. Nothing, however, can stop this "personal vision" from providing insights into socio-political reality that are truer than any afforded by even the most objective chronicle of events.

Milan Kundera, in response to a question by Jordan Elgrably, has put the matter quite clearly:

> Recently I asked myself, quite suddenly, Lord, where on earth did you get the character of Lucie from, this Lucie in *The Joke*? . . . Well, where *did* I find her? The answer is that of all the women I have known in my life, Lucie represents the only type which I have not encountered. Never, in reality, have I known a truly simple woman. . . . But because Lucie was precisely the kind of woman I'd never known, something drew me to want to discover her. Lucie is a woman who is at once simple and enigmatic, and enigmatic because she is so simple. Normally you would consider that which is complex to be enigmatic, yet Lucie is so simple that I did not understand her. A positive simplicity, a simplicity adored, Lucie was a kind of counterbalance to my own visceral cynicism; she was an experience beyond my own experiences. Here is the most imaginative and inventive part of *The Joke*. Lucie is true poetry; she is not *Wahrheit* but *Dichtung*. (Elgrably 1987:23)

Poetry—indeed! Not *Truth*!

Intizar Husain articulates the multifaceted character of reality somewhat differently. Trees always fascinated him as a child—they were the object at once of longing and awe. The mangoes, the goutiered fruit of the tamarind, the birds fluttering and twittering in the foliage represented only the visible aspect of a tree's being. He rather wished to know the mystery crowding its invisible core, its impenetrable interior. And so:

> behind the trees were the stories and legends I was told as a child. In a certain tree there lives a headless man whom I never did see. I heard from others that behind another tree there lives a ghost of a woman. Where was the headless man? Where was that ghost? Where was the genie who lives in a tree and who could catch you if you passed under it on a Thursday evening? I longed to see these unknown creatures. Those things I could see and those things

> which lay behind them I couldn't see. . . . All of these things together are for me a *vāridāt,* an almost spiritual experience. (1983:160–161)

Reality is both the visible and the invisible. And more. Sometimes reality is also that which does not as yet exist in either realm—awaiting discovery in the process of writing. Thus it would be counterproductive to depend too closely on sociopolitical reality for the final meaning—rather, the experience—of a fictional work. Kundera, Bedi, and Husain might draw, as indeed they do, upon the external, but once the external is added to the creative amalgam, it is distorted beyond all recognition. And for the better. Fiction is thus a way of deliberately losing the "straight path"—the *ṣirāṭ-e mustaqīm*—for a ride along a tortuous, bumpy dirt road, of divesting oneself of the common truth, of defamiliarizing oneself with the norm.

But neither must one wholly disregard the sociopolitical reality, especially where it could conceivably augment one's potential to experience a work's aesthetic more fully. One must only be aware that the key to a work's mode of being does not lie in the external, but is inherent in the work itself. The fallacy is too apparent to need comment. But if it should, here is one. One may not be quite as lucky in the case of past writers. One may not have enough information about their sociopolitical reality. What then? Must their creative world therefore remain entirely unintelligible? And in the case of contemporary writers, who is to say that the explosion of information that quite overwhelms us is free of all emotive or ideological distortion? That politics does not decide what truth is, or ought to be? Add to it the personal reality of the writer. His or her eccentricities, idiosyncrasies. It could complicate matters further. (Imagine the dilemma of trying to psychoanalyze writers who have read Freud and thus play the same games consciously.)

In the case of a writer like Intizar Husain, some reference to sociopolitical reality is perhaps unavoidable. One of the reasons has to do with the development of modern Urdu fiction and the politicization of the literary scene during the years of Husain's apprenticeship. Premchand (1880–1936), the father of the Urdu short story, refused to see fiction—the novel, the short story—in any but a dialectical relationship with the social and political aspirations of the Indian people. Literature as an instrument of protest, reform, and redress. This conception proved normative—not because there weren't alternative voices, but because Premchand's was the most vigorous. It was also the most sustained. More importantly, it blended so well in the emergent symphony of nationalism.

When the Progressive Writers' Movement got underway in the last year of Premchand's life, when Intizar Husain must have been a child of ten, it took over intact the former's views on the role of literature in society. The Progressives dominated the literary scene entirely right up to the partition of India in 1947, and in a somewhat diminished capacity until the late 1950s. Again, there was no dearth of independent-minded writers during this period (for instance, Ahmed Ali [d. 1994], Saadat Hasan Manto [d. 1955], and Muhammad Hasan Askari [d. 1978], among others), but their individualism was unable to make any but the most diffused impact amid the pervasive influence of the Progressives, who were not only more numerous but also better organized. They could denounce with impunity whoever didn't conform to their notion of literature. In fact, they did indulge in polemics and innuendo. If some of the individualists, averse to utilitarianism, still felt compelled to associate with the Progressives, it was because the Progressives embodied the popular hope of freedom from British subjugation.

These developments, perhaps less important from a literary point of view, command considerable significance as the immediate backdrop against which Husain started his literary career. In fact, he too had come under the Progressives' influence. Soon, however, he broke with them. What alienated him most was their attitude vis-à-vis the partition of India and the formation of Pakistan. He found the literary treatment of the religious riots in the Progressive writing dogmatically liberal, lacking in depth and therefore in art (cf. 1983:160). Since then, consciously or unconsciously, Husain has been haunted by the specter of the Progressives, and has been fighting it in both his creative and critical work, most unequivocally in the latter. The passion and vehemence of the battle might appear somewhat puzzling and anachronistic today—long after the Progressives have made their exit from the scene. Yet Husain's tenacity is not without a certain value: at its root lies an unrestrained belief in the radical autonomy of literature, in a poetics of fiction disengaged from extrinsic criteria and pointed, inexorably, to what is inherent in the work itself.

The other reason for discussing sociopolitical reality stems from the necessity—or the desire—to introduce a literary tradition to a readership little familiar with it. Urdu literature continues to be a neglected field in the West. It is less known than even its other "exotic" sister-literatures—Arabic, Persian, Turkish.[6] Yet it is equally sophisticated, if not more. Some introductory information about its origins and its cultural matrix is indispensable.

To these extraneous reasons may be added a third, vitally important one. Of all the Urdu fiction writers, past and present, only Qurratulain

Hyder[7] and Intizar Husain represent the most cultured—and culturally open—personalities. Husain's memory is phenomenal and his reading, extensive. Which makes it possible for him to draw freely from a variety of sources: memories, beliefs, dreams, visions, legends, and stories from Middle Eastern oral traditions and native South Asian (Hindu and Buddhist) mythology. But this ability also invests his creative work with an allusive richness not easily accessible to a non-native Urdu reader. Practically all of Husain's fictional characters, from the most naïve and uneducated to the most sophisticated and erudite, stand in exact antipodal relationship to the minimalist conception of man fostered by the Progressives—viz., man as an economic being, alive in the present moment, aware only of the most pressing physical needs, indifferent to culture. Husain's characters are inevitably more than the sum of their parts. Each is a cultural microcosm, breathing in an instant of time. Each defies temporality through memory and desire. Hence the need to pursue *memory* and *desire* (allusion) and, of course, *temporality* (the concrete historical situation)—their mortal enemy—which activates them, brings them into play in the creative space of a short story, a novel, if only to attempt to kill them in the end.

While concrete historical situations might possibly have some relevance to Intizar Husain's creative world, they cannot be expected to expose the artistic potential of that world fully. The external is absolutely transcended in Husain's finer work, and only rarely does it threaten seriously the artistic integrity of a piece.[8]

II

In the aftermath of the turmoil of 1857—the "Mutiny," as the British still call it, but the first war of independence to most Indians—the British colonial rule became more firmly entrenched in India. It was there to stay—or so it seemed. The year 1857 was the darkest moment for the Indians, more so for the Indian Muslims. After all, the British had wrested power directly from the Muslims, and it was the latter's emperor whom they had deposed and exiled. The Muslims emerged from the "Mutiny" in a politically weakened state. Their confidence was shattered and their pride severely injured. While most drowned themselves in self-pity, and others plunged into a romantic recital of the days of their former glory, some others, like Sir Saiyad Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), thought more pragmatically. This pragmatism would become the foundation of the efforts that eventually led the British to fold up and leave their prized colony.