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**From:** S R Faruqi

**Sent:** 21 August 2017 12:48 PM

**To:** 'Shweta Upadhyay'

**Subject:** RE: Interview in FountainInk

Dear Shweta, I have recorded the answers below your questions.

Yours, with best regards, SRF., Aug. 21, 2017.

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**From:** Shweta Upadhyay

**Sent:** 17 August 2017 01:59 PM

**To:** S R Faruqi

**Subject:** Re: Interview in FountainInk

Here are the questions:

1) Naiyer Masud's first story was published in Shabkhood. What was your first impression of his story? Why did you decide to publish it?

NM gave me the story quite casually and somewhat diffidently, saying that it was a translation of an English short story by an obscure writer but he liked it so much that he made an Urdu translation. He wanted me to see if it was worth publishing in Shabkhood. I forget the name of the putative English author, but according to him, the title of the story in the original was *Nowstrath* which he translated into Nusrat, a common enough proper name in Urdu. The name is used both for boys and girls. In the 'translated' story, Nusrat was a girl. I found it a compelling narrative about a girl who was brought up in something like isolation and who became sort of a mysterious, elusive girl for the narrator. I had my suspicions that it was not a translation, but an original composition and NM was the author, not the translator. But I didn't quiz or tax him with it. The story became a sensational success on publication. Then NM confessed to me that he was, in fact, the author, but he wasn't sure if I would find the story any good at all. He feared that I might reject it, and that's why he pretended to be just a translator. My whole hearted appreciation of the story and the approval that it won from the readers, encouraged him to write more fiction.

2) How was the Urdu literary scene at that time? How do you evaluate Masud's contribution to that milieu. How was he different from other writers?

At that time, the Premchand model of the short story was quite in decline. So was its extension and refinement, the Progressive model. The theory and practice of fiction as promoted vigorously by Shabkhood produced a whole new generation of

short fiction writers. The plot didn't occupy primary place in such stories, nor did characterization. There wasn't much concern for 'social realism' or 'socialist realism'. The intensity of prose, of observation, preoccupation with metaphor, or even abstraction, with oblique rather than direct narrativization, these were much in vogue in the 1970's and 1980's. NM struck quite a new note: His story had a distinct narrative, if not an organized plot; it was written in an apparently plain, unadorned, 'artless' prose, with no effort to dramatize or 'poeticize' the narrative. There was, of course, nothing like 'realism' either, socialist or social. But in all other respects, his fiction was unique; still, it was mainline modernist fiction and owed nothing to the so called 'tradition' of Urdu fiction established by Premchand and the Progressives.

3) Have you ever discussed his stories and writing process with him? What has he told you? Why was Masud so preoccupied with spaces and houses?

There was no occasion, nor indeed any need, for me to discuss his work with him in any structured way. We talked about everything at all times. He could see that I hugely admired his stories, and that my admiration was not based on 'ideology'—he was clearly non-Progressive, if not anti-Progressive—nor was he a 'modernist' in any obvious sense, but there was the unaffected beauty of his prose, which had an uncanny ability to evoke, or even create menace and alienness and undecipherability in life. These were (and in fact still are, to me) the things that both he and I found life to be full of, but I could see none in Urdu who could bring those murky feelings (or realities) out into the open.

He did tell me, once or twice, that he actually 'saw' his stories as dreams. That is, he dreamt the stories in their full panoply of detail, and could recall everything when he woke up, and thus had no difficulty in putting his story-dream on paper. I wasn't sure that I believed him literally, but I could see that something like what he claimed could happen, at least frequently, if not always, and if not always correctly to the most meticulous detail. After all, who hasn't heard of Coleridge and *Kubla Khan*, the poem that he actually saw in a dream and could remember in full detail when he woke up? But we also know about that wretched 'man from Porlock' who appeared at the door suddenly with some trivial business and the interruption lost Coleridge the poem, except the fragment that he had been able to put down on paper before he was interrupted. But could this be a habit with someone, to 'see' the story in a dream and then remember its full detail and also be lucky to find the leisure to write it down? Maybe. The labyrinths of creativity are more complicated and circuitous than the labyrinth of Minotaur.

I used to have serial dreams—always terror-filled ones—when I was a child. But I could remember only vague outlines when I woke up. Once, much later, when I was almost 65, I had a serial dream—again a horror story—but I recall very little of

it. A little while later I had a dream whose details I could cogently remember, but it didn't have a proper ending, as stories do have, or should have. Remembering NM's proclivity, I made the dream into a proper story, with a (to me) proper ending added. It was translated by Mehr Afshan Farooqi as *An Incident in Lahore* and was printed and reprinted. It is quite different from the kind of fiction that I am generally identified with, and I am not sure that many readers remember it. But there you are: if I can write a story based on a dream, so could NM, except of course he claimed to actually 'see' *the story* in his dream.

NM's stories had an uncanny power to create characters who were real (or 'realistic') to all intents and purposes, but they didn't run according to any type that one could imagine. Yet they were convincing, and had the ability to evoke strong emotions in the reader. Once during a colloquium on NM's stories in Lucknow many years ago, I declared emphatically about a certain character in one of his stories (I don't remember which), that I 'hated' him and would do my best to chastise and punish him if I found him somewhere. NM was present in that meeting. Some in the audience suggested to him that Faruqi's remarks must have been offensive to him. He replied, 'No, quite to the contrary!'

NM was passionately interested in things: small, insignificant, forgotten things: dilapidated, long unused houses, cups and glasses, medicine boxes, so forth. And those things apparently evoke Awadh and the culture of Awadh. But it wasn't just that, because he didn't have a design or scheme to write about such things so as to evoke the culture (except maybe in *The Mynah of the Peacock Garden*). It is just that he was passionately interested in small, insignificant things which have a tendency to disappear precisely because they're small. Did he love them because for him they had the flavour of Awadh, or because he found them charged with memory and emotion? I would tend toward the latter interpretation. He loved insignificant things and marginal people and mourned their loss. In spite of his apparent detachment and lack of emotion, he was the most human of writers.

SHAMSUR RAHMAN FARUQI, Allahabad, August 21, 2017.

Your response would be quite valuable for my essay. Hari sends his regards.

Regards,  
Shweta