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## **The Broken Self: Negotiating History and the Figure of the Bhikshu in Intizar Husain**

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### **Abstract:**

The stories of Urdu writer Intizar Husain (1923–2016) are often marked by a deep critique of the notion of knowledge and truth in the post-partition period. This is majorly true of the stories written after the 1970s which dealt with, as Javaid Qazi writes, “concepts of self and self-identity”. There is a tension between knowledge and wisdom in the stories of this period, where the thematic structure of the narrative expresses a deep concern, touched with sympathy, for the state of man deprived of a sense of self: his essence. This conflict is negotiated in Husain through the figure of the *bhikshu* (mendicant). It is through this figure of renunciation that this article would closely follow the dialogue between man and history in Husain’s Jatakas stories, and his appropriation of the figure in a philosophical discourse of circularity of history.

**Keywords:** being, bhikshu, identity, self, history.

The inception of the short story in Urdu is a relatively recent phenomenon within the larger context of Urdu Literature. Its beginning is often traced back to the works of Premchand whose first collection of short stories, titled *Soz-e-Watan (Burning Love of Country, 1909)*, brought about a shift in focus of the narrative, away from the romanticism that marked earlier literary works of the time (Narang 114). With Premchand, the whole attention of literary endeavor shifted to the conditions of reality in contemporary life, of which the figure of the peasant became the quintessential protagonist of his stories. As Narang writes, “He fell in love with that man, the eternal man, the peasant. That man in turn served as his source of inspiration and provided him with that sense of humanism which permeates his whole work and gives it a

touch of the universal and the enduring” (128). Yet, it was not until 1932 that, with the publication *Angaarey* (Burning Coals), a slim collection of ten short stories, Urdu literature witnessed a wind of change in the appraisal of the short story format. This collection by a set of newly emerging writers – Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jehan, Ahmed Ali, Mahmudul Zafar – revolutionized Urdu literature in its zeal for reformist sentiments. It appropriated the literary tendencies that marked Western Literature in the dawn of the twentieth century, namely modernism, and adopted the narrative strategies used by writers such as Woolf and Joyce in their crafts. This influence of literary developments in the West on Urdu literature, however, was not new at the time. Prior to its publication, Urdu writers were already familiar with the works of Chekhov, Maupassant, and Maugham among others in the West, whose writings informed many of their works in the past.<sup>1</sup> The rise of realist tendencies in Western Literature provided a fertile ground for Urdu writers in India to borrow a lens from the west and explore the existing conditions of Indian society, and formulate possible ways of reforming the politics of injustice present in it. The formation of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) in 1935 came about as a result of such enquiries which now, in retrospect, can be looked at as the period that changed the face of Urdu literature in pre-partition India. Prominent among the progressive camp, apart from the aforementioned writers, were stalwarts like Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, and Krishan Chander, who ushered a new phase in the Urdu short story platform. Yet, barring Chander, one has to be cautious while locating the former two within the Progressive fold as with time they gradually distanced themselves from the movement. This owed largely to the differences of approaches that the writers shared in their treatment of their subjects. For one, the Progressives in their critique of the socio-political issues of the time sidelined the figure of man as an independent creature with his own plethora of emotions. Literature, through the eyes of the progressives, was seen as an instrument to reform and question the ills of society whereas man was just incidental in the stories. Mohammad Umar Memon, in his introduction to the book *The Greatest Urdu Stories Ever Told* (2017), touches upon this case in a persuasive manner when he writes,

In their patriotic and humanitarian zeal, the Progressives took a minimalist view of contemporary man: a victim of socio-economic forces. That such a man could also be a psychological being with memory, desire, and history, be a part of a cultural continuum, have an inner life, a distinct personality – these questions were ignored as irrelevant (14).

At the same time, this fixation on the idea of literature as a mere tool to administer reform denied any fruitful stylistic engagement with the form of the short story. Rather, it led to a mechanical appropriation of stock patterns of narrative and oversimplified ways of dealing with issues like class, sex and violence.<sup>ii</sup> It is under such circumstances that writers like Manto and Bedi parted ways from the movement in order to experiment with the many possibilities that the short story had to offer. These writers geared their attention towards a psychological investigation of the figure of man and were invested in an understanding of the question of self in their stories. Influenced by the works of Freud, they attempted to penetrate the frame of the human mind and provide a possible answer to the ways it shapes man's behavior in society. In the words of Manto, these writers "are not Khalifas – leaders – who teach [us] the tricks of living. When [they] see someone fall in the battlefield of life, [they] try to explain to [us] . . . as to why he fell" (Manto 2016). Some of the best stories that came out under such strain of writing are 'Khol Do', 'Toba Tek Singh', 'Boo' by Manto; and 'Lajwanti' by Rajinder Singh Bedi. In their zest for a psychological exploration of the fabric of Man and society, these writers paved the way for the new generation of writers of the post-partition era who ushered in a new phase of short story writing in the 1960s. Inspired by the philosophical idiom of Existentialism in France, and the works of Sartre and Camus, these new writers - Enver Sajjad, Intizar Husain, Balraj Menra, Surinder Prakash, Naiyer Masud – to name a few, introduced a paradigmatic shift to the whole stream of Afsana writing. Characterized by elements of absurdism, surrealism and a Kafkaesque treatment of modern expression of alienation and subjectivity<sup>iii</sup>, the new short story brought to focus a new sensibility among writers of, as Memon calls, the "post-realism" era (16).<sup>iv</sup> At the same time, there seemed to be a conscious effort to re-appropriate myths and legends, also folktales from various parts of the country, as a strategic device of narration in many of these new stories. Ranging from the Bible, Upanishads, Buddhist Philosophy such as the Jatakas, the Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana, among others, the new short story created an atmosphere of artistic retelling of myths in a modern context, where the thematic structure of the narrative concerned itself primarily with a critical study of the modern man, caught in a modern space. One such writer whose works are largely informed by this new tendency of modern retellings of myth is Intizar Husain. Often laced with inter-textual references to historical events and classical mythologies, his stories are significant for their layered investigation of the dynamics of knowledge and wisdom in contemporary times, and the

existential predicament of man. It is under such light that this paper intends to engage with the question of epistemology and being as put to problem in his stories, specifically the Jataka stories - 'Leaves', 'Tortoise', 'Return' - and how it is distilled in the figure of the bhikshu. It would attempt to negotiate the dialogue between the original tales and Husain's retellings of the Jatakas, which seems to impart a more layered critique of the crisis of man in modernist Urdu literature.

Influenced by a range of folktales and myths from various parts of the world, Husain's stories are often marked by a deep longing for a lost time when fables and parables acted as the dominant strands of storytelling. Inhabited by characters from the animal kingdom – tortoise, peacocks, crows, mynah, and monkeys – his stories, more often than not, appears to be a modern retelling of old fables backed by a moral tone. In fact, the innocence with which his stories appeal to the minds of the readers often seem to sublimate the issues that it intends to tackle. Following this thought, one criticism that has resounded among Urdu critics was, and still is, that his stories are often marked by a deep quotient of nostalgia, which proscribed any form of socio-political relevance of the stories to the present-day world. It is not surprising then that Narang too finds himself caught in this oversimplified categorization of Husain's stories when he writes "he [Husain] is in search of "things that are lost," and his stories "read like elegies on the fading culture of the Muslim nobility of Uttar Pradesh" (137). Such attempts to translate longing for nostalgia in Husain often runs the risk of failing to take into account the deep epistemological significance with which his narratives are weighed in their courses. The underlying diagnosis of man and his being, which performs as the vital nerve of most of his stories, tends to get overlooked under such a lens of criticism. To underline an instance, how do we read his story 'City of Sorrows' against such claims of nostalgia and an elegiac representation of the past? Does the overarching thematic design of the story allow for such bulleted reduction of its significance? Similarly, can one attest such parameters of judgment to be the sole ground of understanding a story like 'The Tale of the Peacocks'? A careful reader would immediately respond in the negative to such reductionist attempts at categorization of these stories. For the way each narrative utilizes the trope of memory and history within its framework is remarkably different from its earlier context. The re-contextualization of the past in the present of each of the two stories provides certain freshness to the event of the past which, in effect, attains a new breath in the renewed context. Be it the reference to the long experience of Hijrat of the Muslim

people in the first story, or the re-visioning of the battle of Kurukshetra in the second, both in its revival of the past reconfigures it to understand the present rather than going the other way round. It is in this reconfiguration that the historical event undergoes a subtle change in its dialogue with the present context of the story. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard in his study of the trope of repetition wrote, “[t]he dialectic of repetition is easy, because that which is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated; but precisely this, that it has been, makes repetition something new” (19). In a similar vein, if I were to justify Kierkegaard’s metaphysical reformulation of the notion of repetition within the present context, Husain’s stories too operate as a symptomatic result of such a line of thought which could be testified in his own words as “by insisting upon the past, a creative writer does not, or at least should not, intend to revive the past as was” (401).<sup>v</sup> This renewed outlook on the whole notion of the past, of history, has, in fact, been a defining trait in Husain’s stories where he plumbs into a dialectical investigation of the question of knowledge and wisdom vis-à-vis man in his tales. Such is the case with his Jataka stories which re-appropriates tales of birth of the Buddha from the original Jatakas in a modern, post-partition context. However, it should be made clear, beforehand, that although there is an extant tendency among readers to read Husain primarily as a partition writer, his writings should be considered with a pinch of salt prior to such a topical classification.<sup>vi</sup> For, a majority of Husain’s stories, be it the supposed partition stories like ‘An Unwritten Epic’ or ‘City of Sorrows’, to name a couple, are invested more in an epistemological study of the questions of knowledge and wisdom, with reference to notion of self and man. This human subject, however, for him is the historical man who has been long driven from one point in history to another, in a continuum.<sup>vii</sup> It is under such light that his Jataka stories, ‘Tortoise’, ‘Leaves’ and ‘Return’, become significant in their appeal to an attempted redefinition of being and consciousness in the modern world. Written after the 1970s, these stories are characterized by a phase of Husain’s enthusiastic engagement with the concepts of self and identity in his prose works. It marks a departure, although less rigid than Qazi would like to acknowledge, from his earlier works in the fifties which dealt with the “social, cultural and religious symbols”, and the sixties with the “emphasis on animal imagery and metaphor” (190). Although such a categorical demarcation of the different phases of Husain’s writings is possible, yet, one has to be wary before stressing the truth of such claims in a carefully considerate study. For one, the study of self and identity has been a long-drawn theme in Husain’s stories, of which any of the stories mentioned before

provide an illustrating point. At best, what really distinguishes his stories from his earlier work is a prolonged investment in the Jatakas that surfaced at large after the 1970s. Central to these stories is the peripatetic figure of the bhikshu (travelling mendicant), who is forever in search for Truth and Knowledge in a world plagued by corruption and immorality. The tension that arises out of the tussle between knowledge and wisdom in these stories highlights Husain's obsession with the crisis of modernity that has left man severed from his own true self, and being. To illustrate this point, a closer inspection of the stories would help us understand it in a better way.

The story 'Tortoise' (1985) begins with Sundersamudra and Gopal, the two followers of the teachings of Tathagata<sup>viii</sup>, lamenting and complaining to their learned companion Vidyasagar about the existing nature of moral degeneration that prevails among the bhikshus. Vidyasagar responds to their queries with a retelling of the Jataka story about the parrot that spoke too much and had his neck wrung as a result. Similarly, the main story further strings together four other jataka tales – the story of the mynah, a monkey, the queen who was reborn a witch, and the tortoise who talked too much – in order to develop the thematic structure of the narrative as a series of questionings and responses. Of these, the culminating tale of the tortoise<sup>ix</sup> drives home the tension between knowledge and wisdom that Husain seems intent to explore within the framework of the story. For both Sundersamudra and Gopal end up in the same nets of desire that formed the tissue of their complaints at the beginning of the narrative. However, the spin Husain gives to these tales in their retellings lies in the present context of disparity between wisdom in the Jatakas and the subsequent acquiring of knowledge from them, which relays a sense of crisis that functions as the point of enquiry in this story. Nishat Zaidi, in her study of Husain's Jataka tales, points out this issue in a similar way,

unlike the Jataka kathas wherein the Buddha's rendering of tales paves the way for the dawn of wisdom among the listeners, guides them in their confusion and brings clarity, in Intizar Husain's rendering, clarity is a far cry. The polyphonic tales about eclectic living forms, not only fail to enlighten the two bewildered bhikshus . . . they also offer no solace to the wiser one, Vidyasagar, who stands divided between attachment and detachment....<sup>x</sup>

However, Zaidi falls back on the more run-of-the-mill critique of this story when she associates Vidyasagar's predicament with the "perplexity and confusion of the Muslims who envisioned a separate nation based on religious solidarity, only to realize later that religion could

not unite them.”<sup>xi</sup> The trope of loss and nostalgia resurfaces in her critique of the Jataka stories where the characters are circumscribed within the capsules of particular types, rather than being judged as a microcosmic representation of the crisis of modern man. Vidyasagar’s anguish is, in fact, a testament to the whole dialogue between man and his true nature which modernity brought about with its onset. He is caught between the two poles of knowledge and wisdom which problematize his sense of self with regard to morality and existence. This tension is mediated through the exploration of the drive of desire which, more often than not, functions as the central point of investigation in most of Husain’s stories. Without its negative connotative quality, desire in this story, and similarly the ones to be followed, functions as the dominant aspect of man’s nature. The whole epistemological structure of man’s being is predicated on desire which enables him to determine his existence in a world stricken with a sense of loss.<sup>xii</sup> Unlike modernism in the west, be it of Eliot and his hollow men wallowing in the wasteland of moral decrepitude, the crisis of man in this context, however, is not impervious to change. The character of Vidyasagar (literal meaning: ocean of knowledge) expounds this case tellingly. In finding himself on the cusp of truth in desire, he challenges the older Manichean order of existence as expressed in the earlier doctrines on morality, and ethics. Through him, Husain taps into the possibility that the original Jatakas offered, as they themselves framed an alternative order to the existing prescriptions of moral conduct and righteous living during its time of writing.<sup>xiii</sup>

Similarly, in the other Jataka stories ‘Leaves’ (1990) and ‘Return’ (1981), Husain uses the formulaic structure of the original Jataka tales, wherein a crisis of the present is resolved through the lens of the past by incorporating the pattern of a story-within-a-story format. In ‘Leaves’, the character of Sanjaya, a bhikshu, is enchanted by a woman and finds himself trapped in the nets of desire. He recounts his plight to Ananda who then offers to help him by narrating the tale of *Sundersamudra* and the two Jataka tales of the good monkeys and the clever princess. Despite his attempts to rescue him from his crisis, Sanjaya falls back on the same nets of desire in the end, where his being undergoes a realization of the self that Husain keeps unresolved in the story: “I followed the light of my own lamp. Where has it brought me? What leaves are these that I hold in my hands now” (126)? This circular nature of the narrative which marks both ‘Tortoise’ and ‘Leaves’ is significant for its emphasis on the trope of desire, which brings back the subject to its immediate world of sense-perception. This return is a metaphorical

expression of the philosophy of man which breaks the myth of transcendence and wisdom in Husain's stories. The plights of his characters are brought within the fold of the affairs of the heart where the failure of knowledge of desire obstructs their paths to wisdom. For, as Manohar's father, in the story 'Complete Knowledge', says "There is more knowledge locked in the hearts of people than in books" (22). Husain too attempts to unearth the quintessential factor that defines the self of his characters, which he professes to be the feeling of desire in his stories. For, his philosophy seems to dictate that to be wise and achieve knowledge, man must come to terms with the innate force of desire within himself. The plight of his characters stems from an attitude of denial to this dictum, whereby they fail to accept the truth of their self as something governed by the rules of desire. Yet, Husain seems to provide a solution to this whole dilemma of existence and truth in his story 'Return' which provides an alternate approach to the question of knowledge and wisdom in the form of a closure.

In this story, the bhikshus find themselves reminiscing of the great old days when the Buddha lived, and how things have changed after his death. It illustrates this through the retelling of the Jataka tales of the wise dog and the clever young prince, and moves away from the original tales in their intention and tonality. Unlike the apparent wisdom withheld in the tales, the focus in this context is demanded more on the loss of the Buddha's ideals in the present time. One of the bhikshus, Gobind, who is deeply affected by this loss, reflects upon the present situation in a way which echoes the key argument of Husain's project in his Jataka stories, "[b]ut man is no man anymore. They are apparently humans, but not deep within. . ." (87). However, what differentiates this story from the others is its inclusion of a closure where the character finds a possible solution to the crisis at hand – he returns to that time in the past when the Buddha lived. Although, on surface this might strike one as a flight of fancy which Husain exploits in the story, yet, on a larger scale, it underlines the key attitude which he offers in his philosophical treatment of the subject of man – the helplessness that stems from the failure of becoming wise.

This alternate approach to the subject of man and existence in this story provides certain richness to Husain's Jataka world, which acts as a thesis on the whole question of existence and modernity in today's world. What Husain seems to argue through this story is the need to acknowledge the change which time has brought about in the world, throughout the course of

history. Although the world of the Jatakas is an ideal of the past, it need not hold currency in the present world of modern sensibilities. Yet, being a product of a singular consciousness since time immemorial, man's present being is nonetheless informed by his past, which could help him "to understand his collective personality and, through this understanding, his own individual and unique personality."<sup>xiv</sup> This paradoxical nature of time and consciousness in Husain allows him to successfully appropriate the framework of the Jatakas to explore the fundamental issue of man in the present world, which warrants a rather metaphysical investigation of his being. Yet, the fluidity and texture with which Husain deals with such searching questions in his stories makes him a master storyteller of the present century, as it is hard to come across a writer of such caliber who has managed to revive a world of fables on such a grand scale. As Benjamin found Leskov, similarly Urdu literature found one of its greatest story-teller in the figure of Husain at a time when the Urdu short story struggled to find its way into the minds of the people. It lays the ground for future scholarship to identify the significant shift in the aesthetics of Urdu literature which was marked by a strong engagement with the human condition in a post-partition soil. Husain's stories promise the birth of a new sensibility of literature where man finds himself caught up in the struggle between the past and the future. He is at the center of this struggle from where he speaks of the loss of a moral fiber in the face of the new conditions of human existence. Husain's stories echo the eternal promise of history which pushes the angel, like in Paul Klee, towards a future of hope by making it oblivious to the trail of wreckage left behind. In the name of hope, one is left with the weight of history which constantly reminds him of a time lost forever. The fall into a post-lapsarian world is the fate of man which awaits him from here onwards. It is not surprising that his later works like *Basti* (1979), *The Sea Lies Ahead* (1995), and *Day and Dastan* (2018), to name a few, continues to echo this tone of despair where the human subject continues to deal with the promise of history, and its subsequent disillusionment. The summary of his existence is captured best in the words of Sanjaya, "I followed the light of my own lamp. Where has it brought me? What leaves are these that I hold in my hands now" (126)?

#### Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> See Asaduddin's 'Intizar Husain and his world'. Also, Azeem's 'Contemporary Urdu Short Story'. For a detailed study of the history of the publication of *Angaarey* and its importance in

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the Urdu literary world, see Shabana Mahmud's 'Angare and the founding of the Progressive Writer's Association'.

<sup>ii</sup> See Umar Memon's introduction to *The Tale of the Old Fisherman* (1999). Also, his essay titled 'Partition Literature: A Study of Intizar Husain' where he provides a critical account of the history of the PWA and its drawbacks with regard to the poetics of form and content of the short story format.

<sup>iii</sup> On this, see stories such as Surinder Prakash's 'Wood Chopped in the Jungle', Enver Sajjad's 'Scorpion, Cave, Pattern', Intizar Husain's 'The City of Sorrows' and Naiyer Masud's 'Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire'.

<sup>iv</sup> See Memon's introduction to *Greatest Urdu Stories*. Also, Vinay Dharwadker's review-article on Memon's edited book *Tale of the Old Fisherman* titled 'The Contemporary Urdu Short Story'.

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in Memon's 'Study of Intizar Husain'.

<sup>vi</sup> Memon's study of Husain directs the attention of the readers towards the problem of such classification of texts as partition literature. For him, the partition "offered a variety of facets and experiences, and different writers chose to emphasize various aspects" (380).

<sup>vii</sup> I have borrowed this concept from Husain's own comment on the idea of man and history in his essay 'Naye Afsananigaar ke Naam' (For the modern story writer).

<sup>viii</sup> Another name for Buddha in the Jatakas.

<sup>ix</sup> See 'Tale of the Tortoise' (Kacchapa-Jataka) in Cowell's *The Jataka*.

<sup>x</sup> See Zaidi's 'Partition, Migration, and the Quest for Meaning in Times of Moral Crisis'.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid

<sup>xii</sup> According to Karetzky, in his study of the concept of desire and the figure of Mara in Buddhist imagination, desire was often understood as the primordial force that conditioned human existence in the Pitakas. Hussain's familiarity with Buddhist philosophy and myths too would have allowed him to interrogate the whole concept of Mara and morality in his Jataka stories as the guiding principle of existence in modern times. See Karetzky's 'Mara, Buddhist deity of Death and Desire'.

<sup>xiii</sup> For more on this, see Kum Kum Roy's study of the Jatakas in 'Justice in the Jatakas' where she highlights the importance of the Jatakas as a response to the existing codes of justice and law, laid down by texts such as the *Manusmriti* and the *Arthashashtra*.

<sup>xiv</sup> See Memon 'Study of Intizar Husain'.

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