

Hasan Shah. *The Nautch Girl*. Translated by Qurratulain Hyder. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992. pp. 104. Rs.45.00.

The Nautch Girl is an English translation of *Nashtar*, itself the Urdu translation of a Persian original by Sayyid Muhammad Hasan Shah, entitled *Afsana-e Rangin*, written in 1205 A.H./1790 A.D. (Hasan Shah 1963).¹ It describes a tragic love affair between the author and a Kashmiri courtesan named Khanam Jan, which we infer from other sources to be autobiographical (Ahmad 1977).

Sayyid Muhammad Hasan Shah was born in 1184 A.H. (1770–71 A.D.) in Bareilly district in North India. He traces his ancestry back to the great Naqshbandi Sufi Sayyid Amir Kulal of Central Asia and reports that his grandfather, Sayyid Meerak Shah, came to India in 1125 A.H. (1713 A.D.). Hasan Shah was seven when his father died, and he and his younger brothers, Husain Shah and Qasim Shah, were raised by their maternal grandfather, Mir Muhammad Nawaz.

Mir Muhammad Nawaz was a *hakīm*, i.e., a practitioner of Greco-Arabic medicine, but at the time was in the service of an Englishman referred to in the text as “Ming Sahib” as his *munshī* and instructed him in Persian and perhaps also Urdu. (Hyder suggests that “Ming” might be a corruption of “Manning”.) According to Hasan Shah, this “Ming Sahib” was General Coote’s sister’s son and himself a “member council camp” at Kanpur. When Muhammad Nawaz withdrew himself from Mr. “Ming’s” service he had Hasan Shah appointed as a sort of major-domo of the household. Hasan Shah must have been in his late teens at the time (fifteen or sixteen, according to the date suggested by Rahmani). The printed text has an incorrect date for the beginning of the events, which cover a period of about eighteen months, though the year when they were written down is clearly given as 1205 A.H (1790 A.D.). (Hasan Shah also gives a chronogrammatic verse for the death of his beloved, but it is definitely incorrect in the published form. Consequently, it is not possible to tell the exact lapse of time between the events and the manuscript.)

The events are as follows. Hasan Shah, while working in the establishment of Mr. “Ming”, meets Khanam Jan, who is the youngest member of a party of Kashmiri courtesans in the employment of another English army officer. The two are immediately attracted to each other. When that officer leaves Kanpur, Hasan Shah manages to get Mr. “Ming” to engage their services. Now the lovers can meet more easily; they even marry secretly. After a year or so, Mr. “Ming” must also leave Kanpur with his regiment; he orders Hasan Shah to disband his household and clear all the accounts. Hasan Shah and Khanam Jan make plans: she must leave with her companions in the boat they take to go down the Ganges, while Hasan Shah will follow in another, faster boat and wait for a chance to take her away. But Hasan Shah is delayed

by the demands of his job, and never manages to catch up with them. He returns to Kanpur, broken-hearted, while Khanam Jan, distraught beyond remedy, falls sick and is brought to Lucknow (not far from Kanpur) for treatment. Her family sends for Hasan Shah's grandfather, who had successfully treated her in the past. Again a delay occurs, and Mir Nawaz and Hasan Shah reach Lucknow only after Khanam Jan has already expired.

The narrative, explicitly described by the author as a "true story", moves with the help of exchanges of letters, descriptions of dreams, and set pieces about evening entertainments where Persian *ghazals* — almost all by Ḥāfiẓ — are sung by Khanam Jan and others. There is no reason not to accept the overall veracity of the account, though some doubts are raised by Hasan Shah's statement that he was fifteen, and Khanam Jan only thirteen, when they met and began their highly intense and literary conversations and correspondence, and that their wise-beyond-words go-between, Rahm Allah, was then a mere child. Obviously the narration is by a more mature mind who is keen to tell a story and is not bothered by a few incongruities or contradictions if they help to keep the story moving. Hasan Shah did not write another prose narrative, but he did write poetry in Persian and Urdu. In Urdu, he used *Zabt* as his *takhalluṣ*.

It is a charming tale, and very moving. The Urdu translation, *Nashtar*, was done in response to demands by the translator's friends, who had enjoyed reading his copy of the original Persian. But tastes were also changing at the time, as is evident by the fact that Sajjad Husain left out quite a bit of poetry and a section about love-making that he considered too explicit, and that he felt it necessary to make frequent, sometimes nasty, comments on the hero's attitude and actions in footnotes. (Regrettably, only some of these have been included by Hyder.) Indeed, Hasan Shah is a somewhat ineffective protagonist; he is quick to feel jealous and is often rather churlish. Our dissatisfaction with him is mitigated only by bearing in mind that he was also honest enough to show himself as he was. It is Khanam Jan who almost always initiates things and also finds ways to resolve problems when they arise. Within her restricted world, she is bold and lively and capable of reasoned thought and action.

Besides the charm and pathos of the main story, one also appreciates what the book tells about the life of the English officers and civilians in India in the late eighteenth century. These were the "Nabobs", whose lifestyle in several ways was not terribly different from that of their Indo-Mughal counterparts (Spear 1963). Persian poetry and Indian music, courtesans and cock-fights, the pleasures of hookah and spicy foods, even a predilection for Indian clothes at home set these men apart in the history of the British in India. Mr. "Ming" is a bachelor who likes to keep an Indian courtesan on his payroll. He knows Persian and enjoys Persian poetry, and when he has trouble understanding any verse he doesn't hesitate to ask Hasan Shah. He is given to

pleasure, can't quite keep track of his expenses and must depend on local moneylenders, but he is also decent enough not to force himself on Khanam Jan, whom he had first chosen for his service and of whom he remains quite fond. The mutuality of acceptance between him and his Indian major-domo is also notable. But "Ming" is the master and Hasan Shah is his employee, and the delays that he unwittingly causes turn out to be fatal for poor Khanam Jan.

The manuscript that Sajjad Husain used has disappeared; but (contrary to Hyder's statement) the Persian text is extant. Iqtidar Alam Khan reports on another, later manuscript (dated 1249 A.H./1848-49 A.D.) which is in a private collection in Patna (Khan 1965). On comparison, he found that the Urdu translation was very close to the Persian original. In addition, Sajjad Husain has retained most of the *ghazals* and even some of the letters in Persian. Thus the printed text of *Nashtar* gives us much of the flavor of the original as well as a taste of its Persian prose; and that is where its greater importance lies. The original story by Hasan Shah may well be, as Hyder claims, the first "novel" in Persian, written in an "effective, realistic manner", with the additional significance that it was not written under the influence of any English novel. To that extent, Hasan Shah is an original. Iqtidar Alam Khan mentions a couple of other stories (*qiṣṣa*) having similar qualities but, as he himself notes, they come a bit later. To my mind, more than its first person narration and the degree of verisimilitude in the depiction of its milieu, it is the fact of its being a sustained prose narrative of considerable length that lends credence to the claim of its being the first "novel" in Persian. If we take into account Persian and Urdu *masnavīs* we may be able to point to other realistic narratives, but in verse. More importantly, it is an entirely indigenous development; there is no evidence that Hasan Shah had any knowledge of English language or literature.

Iranian and Western scholars of Persian language and literature have rarely shown interest in the vast body of Persian literature produced in South Asia — to their own loss. Beginning with the eleventh century and continuing to the middle of the nineteenth (and to Iqbal in the twentieth century), Persian has been a major language of intellectual and literary expression in the sub-continent. Further, it was in Indian cities like Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi that Persian literati had their first sustained encounters with the West, where the first Persian language newspapers were published and where debates took place about the form of a new, modern Persian language.²

Beside the Foreword, Ms Hyder has provided notes within the translation, an Afterword, and a set of explanatory notes at the end. These range from useful to unnecessary. In the absence of space for details, one major correction should be noted: the Urdu translation *Nashtar* was done by Munshi Sajjad Husain, Anjum, of Kasmando, not by Munshi Sajjad Husain of Kakori, the founder-editor of the famous weekly *Avadh Panch*. (It was never serialized either.)

Ms Hyder is one of Urdu's finest novelists. Her novels have won prizes; she has received India's most prestigious literary award, the Jnanpith Prize. In several of her works she has done astonishing things, creating multiple voices with a precision of tone. Her novels are permeated with insights and details that reflect a life-long interest in an amazing range of subjects. It is much to be regretted, therefore, that she has not been equally meticulous in preparing this translation. That she drastically abridged the book was unavoidable in order to make the English version more acceptable to modern readers. The events are all still there. But the translation is only too often imprecise, infelicitous, even incorrect. In her Foreword she claims that "[she has] been strictly faithful to the text and [has] not anywhere modernised either the narrative or the dialogue." In actuality, her English is frequently a jarring mixture of informal, formal, slang, colloquial and literal. One example may suffice:

The musicians came in and began to tune their instruments.

I said to myself: everybody has turned up except Khanum Jan. That's too bad.

"Perhaps the Birthday girl has no interest in tuneful activities," I uttered aloud.

"Oh no, Sir! Our Khanum Jan has not had much formal training but she is the finest crooner of us all," said Gulbadan promptly.

"In that case, I am surprised that she is not here."

Mirzai was taken aback by my remark. She asked Gulbadan about her adopted daughter.

"We were enjoying the hullabaloo of the lumpen being fed, when Seoti called us in. Khanum Jan said she had a headache and would like to be excused. . . ." (p. 22)

I, for one, found it jarring to come across "Birthday Girl", "tuneful activities", and "hullabaloo of the lumpen being fed" in such close proximity, more so in the translation of an elegant Urdu text almost two hundred years old.

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Notes

1. *The Nautch Girl* has been issued in the United States under the title *The Dancing Girl* (New Directions, 1993).
2. Prof. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi of Illinois State University is currently engaged in a pioneering study of these developments.

References

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