

Day and Dastan: Two Novellas

by Intizar Husain, translated by Nishat Zaidi and Alok Bhalla; introduction by Nishat Zaidi
New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2018. 190 p.

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In her introduction to this set of two novellas, Nishat Zaidi describes Intizar Husain as cultivating “the aesthetics of the banal.” She finds that *Day*, the longer and more realistic of the two novellas, “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” (p. 7). I wouldn’t go that far, but it’s certainly true that Intizar Husain has no objection to repeating himself, not only through the recurrence of many small everyday events within a work (like the children’s obsessive pursuit of butterflies in *Day*), but also through the recycling of major structural features among his works.

For example, take one central episode in *Day*. The two cousins Zamir and Tahsina have grown up as playmates in a joint family setting, then they uneasily experienced a sexual awakening. When Tahsina once climbed a tree and her clothing was lifted by the wind, Zamir felt “as if lightning had flashed across his brain”; he found himself “unable to move” and “stood beside the well for hours” (p. 29). Readers of Husain’s novel *Basti* will recall the two very similarly situated cousins Zakir and Sabira: when Zakir once accidentally caught a glimpse of Sabira bathing, he too was instantly dazzled and petrified by a bolt of lightning.

Many other such parallels among the novels and stories could readily be adduced. Husain has been accused not only of “nostalgia” for the pre-Partition past, but also of writing the same story (or handful of stories) over and over. But especially since his death (in 2016) his stature has continued to increase. There have long been a number of good translations of his work, including *A Chronicle of the Peacocks* (2002), a collection of short stories translated by Alok Bhalla and Vishwamitter Adil. (In fact their subtitle, “stories of Partition, exile, and lost memories,” could serve as a concise description of the author’s whole oeuvre.) Muhammad Umar Memon has given us *The Seventh Door and Other Stories* (1998) and *An Unwritten Epic and Other Stories* (2007). Most comprehensively, Alok Bhalla, Asif Farrukhi, and Nishat Zaidi have edited *Story Is a Vagabond: Fiction, Essays, and Drama by Intizar Husain* (2015).

Of the three major novels—which do not, in Husain’s own view, form a trilogy—*Basti* (1979) has long been available in translation. Rakhshanda Jalil has translated *Age samundar hai* (1995) as *The Sea Lies Ahead* (2015), and most recently Matt Reeck has given us *Tazkirah* (1987) as *The Chronicle* (2019). The present two novellas, *Din* and *Dastan*, are the latest addition to the growing body of Intizar Husain’s work available in English.

Day and Dastan illustrates a recent trend in translations from South Asian languages: that of retaining in the text a great many untranslated words. It’s easy to understand the theoretical appeal of this practice, since it can be seen as resisting any overly smooth “appropriation” by English, and thus as preserving the cultural particularity of the Urdu. On the other hand, it could also be criticized as a form of “exotification” of things that are often quite ordinary in their own context. Like almost every tactic used by translators, sometimes this word-retention tactic works effectively, and sometimes it doesn’t.

The cases in which it works are those in which the term in question is culturally specific, is significant within the work, and is carefully defined in the glossary. Some examples: “Amil” (p. 25) and the

