

Oral History, Conventional Morality and Intizār Hussain's Fictional Beauty

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Abstract

The article examines Intizar Husain's fiction in relation to the mythological, folkloric, and oral narrative traditions that shape his storytelling. Placing Husain alongside his predecessors Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann, and his contemporary Italo Calvino, the study explores how each writer engages with the past to construct meaning in the modern world. While Kafka, Mann, and Calvino reinterpret myth and tradition to illuminate the complexities of modern consciousness, Husain's narratives remain confined within a nostalgic attachment to cultural and religious memory. His inability to transcend this fixation results in stories that lack the multilayered narrative depth characteristic of his Western counterparts. The comparative reading, particularly with Thomas Mann, further reveals that Husain's fiction often advances a culturally and religiously biased worldview rather than a universal human vision...

Keywords: Dāstān, Mythic consciousness, Oral tradition, Narrative ethics, Religious and spiritual biasedness..

INTRODUCTION

Memory constitutes the primary ontological distinction between the human and the animal, for it is through memory that the human subject is able to transmit experience in the form of narrative. Storytelling, therefore, has persisted across centuries and undergone continual transformation. As it moved from orality to textual inscription, it assumed multiple forms: the tale that once evoked an unseen and unheard world of the distant past gradually reoriented itself to imagine trajectories from the present into the future. When folktales and myths entered the domain of writing, literary critics sought to delineate their poetics, while modern artists consciously benefitted from the folk tradition. The thematic horizon of oral narrative was grounded in universal ethical concerns—the perennial conflict between the forces of good and evil culminating in the triumph of truth. Such narratives did not necessarily correspond to the empirical immediacy of everyday life but rather drew upon the imaginative and metaphysical dimensions of human existence. Unlike modern fiction, whose distinguishing feature is the causal logic of cause and effect, the folktale is exempt from this demand, and its very freedom from causal determinism gives it a distinctive aesthetic charm. The human imagination, inexhaustibly generative, became the matrix in which stories proliferated. These narratives assumed, often in an unassuming manner, the pedagogical responsibility of shaping the individual. In later stages, religious and spiritual elements were assimilated into them, though their essential function remained unchanged. The resilience of the oral tradition is evident in the fact that even modern storytellers continued to remain under its formative influence. Indeed, this tradition has been benefitted from in diverse ways.

From a semantic perspective, there exists a crucial distinction between written literature and oral narrative. Literature signifies an act of reading, whereas oral art is primarily performed for the purpose of being heard [1]. The storyteller is not an ordinary individual but rather a sage-like elder, who, under the guise of parables, assumes the responsibility of moral correction and pedagogical guidance for the listeners. His speech is attuned to the affective responses and cognitive capacities of his audience; in selecting both theme and mode of narration, he remains to a considerable degree dependent upon them. He is never truly alone, for his very existence as a narrator cannot be realized in the absence of an audience—or at the very least, a single listener [2]. This listener could even be a child cradled in its mother's lap. The storyteller knows that those seated before him belong to different stages of life, with varying intellectual capacities, and that he must shape his tale in such a way that it provides satisfaction for all. The story itself usually refers to a remote past or to unseen worlds—domains in which the human being may accomplish anything. The storyteller frames his narrative in light of traditional ethical values. He faces the challenge of maintaining, through persuasive reasoning, the line of demarcation between truth and

falsehood, good and evil. Yet the act of narration remains inherently flexible: the tale can be channelized into any direction the storyteller desires, the order of cause and effect may be inverted or twisted.

For the creative writer who seeks to draw upon folk wisdom, it is seldom easy to maintain an entirely objective perspective. Sayings, parables, and stories—whether short or extended—are almost always composed upon some moral foundation. Within both the consciousness of the character and the imagination of the listener, the concepts of virtue and sin are deeply ingrained and clearly delineated. There is no ambiguity. The distinction between truth and falsehood is inculcated from childhood onward. Because the storyteller is bound to the same tradition, deviation from it does not emerge as a pressing concern. The folktale does not extend to the length and intricacy of the grand epic; it nonetheless belongs to the same genre of oral narrative in terms of both subject matter and mode of presentation. The written narrative, by contrast, is produced in solitude and addresses a reader who likewise engages with it in solitude. Oral narrative is not primarily concerned with probing the depths of human psychology; rather, it draws upon the manifest utterances and outward actions of the individual. The established concepts of ideology, tradition, and ethics preexist the act of narration, and for the storyteller, the question of transgressing or overturning them simply does not arise.

In contrast, written literature is always produced within a specific age and temporal horizon. It remains, directly or indirectly, bound to time and space. Just as social practice, the character of modern fiction transforms its ways of life and perspectives across epochs. By contrast, the character of oral narrative is entirely the creation of imagination; it does not sustain a direct relation to history or geography. Its canon remains unaltered. If a character embodies goodness, he will promote the cause of good and ultimately ascend to the stature of an angel; if he embodies evil, he will advance wickedness and, in the end, acquire the status of a demon. The tale concludes with the defeat of evil, thereby eliciting in the listener both an affirmation of goodness and a rejection of wickedness. The universal concept of poetic justice is present in these stories—sometimes overtly, at other times in a latent form.

With the advent of the industrial age and the rise of modern fiction, writers also drew upon the resources of the oral tradition. Yet those who appropriated this tradition encountered a number of challenges. This is because the characters of folklore and myth, owing to the force of their cultural and symbolic backgrounds, tend to constrain the perspective of the author. Unless the writer situates the story within a temporality and spatiality familiar to him, it resists being freed from the hold of its inherited resonance. For the modern author, the central challenge lies precisely here: if one is to draw from folklore, how can it be reconfigured with innovation and harmonized, at some level, with the experience of one's own age?

At times, the writer finds himself suspended between the traditional and the modern modes of narration, sustaining with folklore a relation of both estrangement and intimacy. The short story writer possesses an individual position within his own historical moment, whereas the folktale is extra-individual—that is, it is unbound by temporal constraints [3]. Though it is always linked to its teller, the story is never the teller's property. A single tale may be altered and reshaped according to the needs of the moment by different narrators. To adopt a story without a determinate author, and through it to fashion something new that, at the same time, acquires universality, is an uphill task. The writer must possess extraordinary imaginative powers; otherwise, he will remain a mere imitator of the folktale. Deviation from the ethics of folk wisdom becomes possible only when such wisdom is actively challenged. By aligning narrative with the moral codes of one's own time and culture, the writer allows it to resonate with the present so powerfully that the work becomes a mirror through which the future seeks guidance. By contrast, the simple repetition of an inherited tale, even with minor variations, cannot be considered an auspicious achievement. At the time of transposing a folktale, myth, saying, or oral narrative into the form of a short story or novel, if the writer does not carefully designate its temporality and spatiality, and furnish it with raw material grounded in a specific historical and cultural setting, the story may lend itself to metaphysical or symbolic interpretation, its assimilation into contemporaneity becomes exceedingly difficult. This difficulty, in fact, is not the responsibility of the critic but the burden of the artist. The "death of the author" signals the possibility of an impartial interpretation of the artwork; it does not imply that the author is non-existent, nor that the story has come into being in a void.

Writers of the modern age, across the world, have drawn upon fables, folktales, oral sayings, myths, and epics, for it is impossible to sever oneself entirely from the past. Yet to seek refuge in the past is hardly an impressive accomplishment. In the agrarian age, the course of imagination was oriented upward, from the earth to the heavens; in the industrial age, however, the artist was so entangled in the problems and dilemmas of his own time that he cannot, even if he desires, pursue the path of escape. When a powerful creative mind engages with the imaginative material of the past, it does so not to idealize history but to render the present meaningful, and its direction is toward the possibilities of the future.

In our own literary tradition, the most significant name among those who have benefitted from the oral narratives of the past is Intizār Hussain. There is scarcely a domain he did not draw from in his fiction: Semitic and non-Semitic religious narratives, folktales, myths, epics, and oral sayings all found their way into his art. To a large extent, this was a conscious endeavor. His departure from the realist tradition of the Urdu short story was equally

deliberate. Intizār Husain belonged to the class of Urdu readers who regard style of expression as the very essence of narrative. For him, every piece of finely wrought prose could yield the aesthetic pleasure of the novel. The finely wrought prose, he believed, was the distinctive feature of the *dāstān* and the folktale. To his sensibility, even the prose of Ghālib's letters seemed to approximate the novel form, and he maintained that it was precisely from this point onward that the practice of the novel became widespread. As he wrote: "Ghalib, after all, had no acquaintance with the form of the novel. In fact, it was as if Ghālib's pen, without informing him, had already begun writing a novel. In its search for expansiveness, that pen strayed far beyond its initial bounds" [4]. Intizār Husain expressed a similar opinion regarding *Āb-i-Hayāt*, observing: "I see within it an entire age, alive and breathing. In this sense, I consider it a novel" [5]. Such reflections of him cannot easily be dismissed. For Intizār Husain, the conception of complete art rested upon the idea that any piece of writing which, by virtue of its style, produces aesthetic delight should be considered a novel. He belonged to that generation of Urdu writers who valued manner of expression above subject matter itself. For him, the refinement of language, the craft of syntax, the apt deployment of simile and metaphor, and the appropriate use of idiom and colloquial expression formed the criteria by which he was prepared to classify the above-mentioned texts as novels. Yet such views have offered limited benefit to readers. No novel or short story can subsist on style alone. Who, after all, is unfamiliar with the prose styles of Yildirim, Krishan Chander, or Sharar? These writers were celebrated in their own time, yet today their names occupy only the margins of Urdu fiction. The significance of Ghālib's letters lies precisely in their spontaneity and stylistic vigor, but they cannot be compared with *Umrā'o-JānAdā*; rather, they should be evaluated alongside the letters of other writers. A novel is, at its core, a story written on the basis of imagination, but one that is nonetheless situated—at some level—in the recognizable time and space of lived reality. Hence, the value of Ghālib's letters must be measured against those of other literary figures, while the charm of *Āb-i-Hayāt* should be weighed against that of earlier *tazkirahs* (biographies). Likewise, the aforementioned storytellers must be assessed within the constellation of their contemporaries—Manto, Bedi, Ghulām'Abbās, and Premchand.

On the basis of his distinctive conception of style, Intizār Husain levels two different objections at a stretch—first at Munshi Prem Chand, then at Rajinder Singh Bedi. Of the former, he remarks: "In his work, human life is not a complex web of relationships, nor is the human self a layered entity. The cruel landlord, the oppressed peasant: a curse for the oppressor, a few heavy tears for the oppressed—this, in sum, is the total capital of Prem Chand's insight." Turning from Prem Chand, he directs his attention to Bedi, observing that Bedi "writes exactly in that language of which all the joints are loose, and every sentence collapses before it can stand upright" [6]. What Intizār Husain overlooks here is that style, like the story itself, does not preexist the act of narration. It emerges only through the interplay of temporal setting, spatial orientation, and the kind of characters a narrative constructs. The style of *Kafan* or *Lājwanti* cannot possibly originate from the same locus as that of *KayāKalp* or *ĀkhiriĀdmī*. Munshi Prem Chand, despite his pronouncedly progressive outlook, remains an unforgettable short-story writer. The reason for this lies not in the reader's sympathy with Ghīsu and Mādhav, but rather in the anguished recognition of the psychological condition of the father and the son by the sheer weight of social pressures. Here, the narrative is less about the division between rich and poor and more about how two individuals, compelled by hunger, are driven to negate the very value of human relations. The story shows rather than tells the event. In Prem Chand's major stories and novels, despite theoretical disagreements, the narrative always manifests itself with full attention to detail. As for Rajinder Singh Bedi, Intizār Husain's objection to his language is equally difficult to comprehend. Diction has no autonomous existence outside of the story itself. The world's greatest stories were written in the plainest and most fluid prose. Where a writer lacks a coherent, well-knit story, he often attempts to make for this deficiency by indulging in verbal ornamentation. But Bedi's prose is neither loosely connected nor structurally unstable. Indeed, he does not craft his stories sentence by sentence in an artificial manner; rather, the story comes to him in a complete form, and he transfers it to the page without excessive embellishment, yet with all the essentials intact. Intizār Husain's objection is not directed at narrative as such, but at the realist tradition of storytelling. His critique does not pertain to the intrinsic value of the story but to the mode of realism itself. For him, the true short story is that which contains symbolic resonance: "Depth and intensity are generated by symbol—both in literature and in life—and symbols are disappearing from both realms" [7].

The question that arises is whether symbolism is necessarily the product of a deliberate, conscious act. Does realist fiction stand entirely bereft of symbols? Must one turn to the oral narrative tradition to engage in the production of symbols? And is it essential for symbolic construction that the story be situated in some remote, unseen past? The answer is in the negative. A multi-dimensional story always carries a symbolic stratum, and it is the critic's task, rather than the storyteller's, to excavate it. Furthermore, there are as many modes of narration as there are stories themselves. At some level, every narrative possesses symbolic resonance; it is not necessary that only those stories written in a deliberately obscure or essayistic style lend themselves to symbolic interpretation. Were that the case, every narrative produced under the banner of modernism would automatically qualify as a masterpiece.

It is worth recalling that Intizār Husain himself began his career employing realist techniques. Yet, owing to his particular temperament and the formative experience of migration, he consciously dispensed with this mode. At the height of his creative powers, the stories he produced were, at some level, deeply engaged with the oral narrative tradition. To enter into a dialogue with oral narrative is one thing, while to accept its authority and dominance is quite another. In Intizār Husain's case, it is clearly the latter.

In this article, we shall examine a selection of Intizār Husain's short stories whose source lies in the oral narrative tradition. In this regard, we will also compare Intizār Husain with certain Western fiction writers in order to render our argument more meaningful. Among those who have drawn upon this tradition, one important name is that of Italo Calvino. He is among those writers who, rather than inheriting the moral didacticism of folk narrative, have engaged directly with story itself—integrating it into the novel form and aligning it with contemporary realities. In folktale and *dāstān*, causality is either altogether absent, or, if present, is retroactively sought only after the event has occurred. Supernatural and unseen forces intervene, and events occur suddenly. Modern fiction, by contrast, operates in the opposite register: in it, every event is the consequence of some preceding action. No astrologer or fortune-teller awakens the reader's curiosity by predicting the future; instead, the story is tethered, at one level or another, to the surrounding, living world. Suspense arises from within the narrative itself; the storyteller is not required to arrange it in advance. Such a writer borrows a story or theme from the oral narrative tradition but constructs a new edifice upon it. For this reason, the story is interpreted too in the light of a new intellectual horizon.

In *The Cloven Youth*, a witch punishes a pregnant woman, who had stolen ajwain from her field, with the decree that the child she bears—whether son or daughter—will, after seven years, be divided: half hers, half the mother's. On the appointed day, she lays the child upon a table and, with a knife, cuts it from head to foot into two parts [8]. One half she keeps for herself; the other is returned to the child's mother. The time and place of the story remain unknown. It is an oral narrative: good and evil stand in opposition. Evil prevails at first, only to be vanquished by good in the end. The story concludes happily. There is no psychological conflict; the mother of the child is not depicted weeping or lamenting. She remains resigned to her fate, prepared for the punishment that she had brought upon herself. The tale belongs to a remote past; neither present nor future constitutes its horizon. Italo Calvino drew upon precisely this tale for his novel *The Cloven Viscount* (translated into Urdu as *Do Lakht Sūrma*), erecting an entirely new fictional edifice upon it. His narrative is set during the wars between Italy and the Turks. The narrator's uncle, Viscount Medardo, participates in the war, is struck by a cannonball, and is literally split in two from head to foot. One half of him becomes the embodiment of good, the other of evil. Only when humanity itself is cleaved into two, Calvino suggests, can good and evil be separated; otherwise, they remain inextricable. The capacity for the pandemonium of thoughts is what distinguishes human beings from other animals. The novel has been written in the mode of realism. It portrays a living society, a social milieu recognizably our own. The people who encounter the bifurcated viscounts are more astonished by their behavior than by the physical fact of their division. One part is wholly good, the other wholly evil—one angelic, the other demonic. Together they make life unbearable for the inhabitants of the region. Both extremes represent deviations from the rhythms of ordinary life. Normal life is that which is rooted in a determinate place, town, society, or historical moment. Such a narrative, while animated by creative imagination, is never merely fantastic; its roots are embedded in time and space. For this reason, people cannot easily accept such absolute polarities of good and evil. When, after their mutual struggle—which is in fact the struggle of two halves of one and the same body—they rejoin and become whole again, the community breathes a sigh of relief. The narrator, too, shares this relief: "Thus my uncle Medardo became once more a complete man, who was neither good nor evil, but a compound of both" [9].

In the folktale, the character is cloven in two by an act of magic, whereas here the bomb brings about the division. The entire landscape of the folktale is imaginary, devoid of any specific time or place. Calvino's novel, however, though drawing upon the raw material, stands entirely distinct from the folktale and functions as its written extension. The war unfolds in the present, and the narrative gestures meaningfully toward the possibilities of the future. By inserting a magical element into lived reality, Calvino transforms the novel into a remarkable specimen of modern fiction. He derives energy from the past, yet his journey is not a return to it; rather, it is a movement from the present toward the future. The writer borrows a glimmer from the traditional narrative but lights his own lamp. The devastations of the modern age provide the raw material, even as the rhythms of everyday human life—those unaffected by war or catastrophe—continue to flow uninterrupted. The novel thus is an amalgamation of oral and written wisdom. The distinction between good and evil corresponds to traditional morality, yet their recombination into a composite form of good-and-evil reflects a distinctly modern perspective.

Beyond Calvino, the modern and prolific writer who most fully brought in the wisdom of the past is Franz Kafka. His story *The Metamorphosis* is, without question, one of the most powerful narratives of the twentieth century. Transformation is a favored motif of folktales and romances; it is an element that recurs in almost every other tale or legend. Apart from Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis, the entire narrative setting—the city, urban life, and the surrounding reality—remains firmly anchored in the real, much in the same way as in *The Cloven Viscount*, where,

apart from Count Medardo's splitting into two, everything else is grounded in reality. Kafka radically overturns the folktale's conception of transformation. Samsa, though turned into an insect, retains his human memory and consciousness—an ordeal of the most excruciating kind. In the folktale, by contrast, once a human is transformed into an animal, memory ceases, and the subject is freed not only from every form of torment but also adopts the instinctual life of the creature into which he has been changed. In Kafka's narrative, the city persists, life continues, yet a single figure, as the result of unbearable affliction, becomes vermin. In the literary imagination of romance and folktale, the human, once metamorphosed, is animal even at the instinctual level. Two of Intizar Husain's stories, *Kāyā Kalp* and *Ākhirī Ādmī*, exemplify this tendency. Both, in theme and substance, bear the temperament of oral narrative. In *Ākhirī Ādmī*, there is an admonition concerning those very emotions that distinguish man from angels—anger, hatred, envy, joy, and so forth. Should man fail to cultivate moderation in those passions, he will devolve into a monkey; that is, he will meet his punishment in this very world. The prince of *Kāyā Kalp* is a paradigmatic instance of inaction: owing to his cowardice, he is transformed into a fly and thereby freed even from the burden of human memory. The oral narrative always carries its answer in advance; the story is but the justification for the answer. For instance, in *Ākhirī Ādmī*, when the people rejoice that the monkeys have vanished from the settlement, the figure who prohibits fishing on the Sabbath addresses them, declaring: "The monkeys are in your midst, only you do not see them." The people take offense, retorting, "Do you mock us?" To which he replies, "It is you who mocked God, for He forbade fishing on the Sabbath. Know, then, that He is the greatest of mockers" [10]. The language is the same, and so too is the logic: the transgression of preordained metaphysical ordinances is destined to seal mortal man's fate. The beginning of the tale is already the announcement of its end. The princess of *Kāyā Kalp* possesses the power to turn the prince into a fly, yet she does not attempt to rescue him from the ogre's clutches. This princess is the very figure who, passing from *Alf Laylawā Layla* into the *Gulzār-e-Dānish*, endures as the allegory of guile. Like the sorceress of Apuleius's Golden Ass, she can transform herself into a bird and take flight or commit infidelity against her husband. Is she not here, too, betraying the prince? Her bond with the ogre is stronger than with him. She plays the decisive role in rendering the prince permanently a fly. Nor does she hesitate to share the ogre's bed. Within her there is no sign of psychological or spiritual conflict; rather, it appears as though she derives a certain spiritual pleasure from holding two men in captivity. She deceives the ogre, while Āzād Bakht submits entirely to her will: "Without her command he would not pluck a leaf. With a single breath she could make him a fly, and with another restore him to the form of a man" [11].

In contrast to these two tales, Kafka's Gregor Samsa is subjected, with relentless consistency, to inhuman treatment in his office—treatment so severe that one morning he awakens to find himself transformed into an insect. Yet the irony is that within him the human soul still persists, while his superiors remain unwilling to grant him even the reprieve of life. Gregor Samsa's predicament has nothing to do with good and evil, or with sin and virtue. His only desire is to escape from a system that regards him not as a human being but as mere vermin. Ultimately, his deliverance comes only in the form of his becoming an insect.

This is the modern city, with real time and space, and with the life that surrounds it. It is not a mythical or conventional setting, but a concrete one, and the pain of it can be felt within the chest of every human reader. Intizār Husain, however, does not step outside the bounds of oral narrative and traditional wisdom; he speaks from within it. Kafka's insect announces the future of human exploitation, whereas Intizār Husain remains absorbed in the revival of traditional religious morality. His devotion to oral narrative compels him to pour all his energy into the mode of expression. His stories thus become exemplary attempts at restoring ancient ethical frameworks. The coordinates of time and space, and the manner of narration, remain precisely those characteristics of such tales. His language is polished and fluent. Yet the very charge he levels against Prem Chand—that human life for him is not a dense and intricate web of relationships—can equally be brought against Intizār Husain's own stories. His narrator, perched at an elevated vantage point, presents his characters as if they were a spectacle to be observed, rather than entering into their suffering as Bedi or Prem Chand would. Like the teller of the folktale, he maintains an existence apart from the story itself, addressing his listeners from outside the narrated world.

The Yellow Dog is perhaps the finest example of this tendency. One encounters a system of discourse within discourse that continues until the story's conclusion. The language is graceful and fluid. Its central theme is that no matter what a human being does, he cannot master his own carnal desire. Moreover, the symbolic use of the dog and the fox remains tied to traditional religious narratives: the dog signifies impurity, while the fox embodies cunning. These figures are invoked to ridicule or degrade human beings, precisely as in folktales. The coordinates of time and space are absent, and the storyteller subtly instills fear in the listeners. Intizār Husain's vast engagement with myth, folktale, *dāstān*, and religious allegories often becomes an impediment in the process of his short-story writing. In his craft, he never quite severs himself from traditional moral frameworks. Nāṣir Abbās Nayyar has argued that his stories do not revive tradition but rather retrieve it [12]—an assessment that does not seem entirely accurate. In such stories, Intizār Husain appears to be reviving the oral-narrative tradition itself. Unlike Kafka or Calvino, he does not reconfigure oral narration to attune it to the new age; instead, he seeks refuge within the past.

Let us turn to another of his stories. This one derives from Mazhar Alī Wilā's *Baitāl Pachīsī*, specifically its sixth tale, which corresponds to the second story in J. A. B. van Buitenen's *Tales of Ancient India*. Intizār Ḥusain's *Nar Nārī* is not merely inspired by this tale; rather, he has transcribed it almost verbatim, expanding it slightly into the form of a short story. In both Buitenen's version and in *Nar Nārī*, the relationship between the male characters is that of sālā brother-in-law (wife's brother) and brother-in-law (sister's husband), whereas in *Baitāl Pachīsī* and in Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*, the central characters are portrayed as close friends. Like Calvino, Mann adopts the central idea from a folktale, yet he reworks it within the framework of modern fiction, deploying the artistic and technical demands of the contemporary novel. His characters move forward according to the logic of causality. Both friends—Shridhiman and Nanda—see Sita bathing at the same time. Shridhiman falls in love with her, and in due course marries her. Later, when they are traveling to her in-laws' home in a carriage, Nanda, who is driving, is liked by the couple. It is precisely at that moment that the "impossible" enters the scene. Wishing to conceal himself from Sita's gaze, Shridhiman takes up the reins himself, and thus the three lose their way. Yet this straying is less about an external detour than about a deviation from the straight line of kinship roles. They did not set out to visit the temple of the goddess Durgā, and yet she appears to be drawing them inexorably toward her. Shridhiman goes inside to perform worship, where he severs his own head. The man (Nanda) and the woman (Sita) remain outside together. When, after a long time, he does not return, she addresses Nanda—not by naming her husband, but deliberately leaving the name unspoken—and says: "You are a strong man. Even if he does not wish to return, bring him back" [13]. Thomas Mann diverges from the traditional narrative and advances the story in precise accordance with the modern conception of fiction. The subtle transformation arising within the characters—followed by Nanda's act of entering the sanctuary after Shridaman and cutting his own throat—along with Sita's exchange of their heads, all occur through a strong causal logic. In *Baitāl Pachīsī*, by contrast, causality operates entirely within the framework of the traditional narrative: characters, without deliberation, surrender themselves as offerings to the goddess. Here, however, everything is tied to fate. Sita falls in love with Nanda, and she does not allow this opportunity to slip away. Her exchange of the two men's heads is not performed in a state of compulsion but, at one level, with conscious intent: her husband is weak, while Nanda is stronger and more attractive. Belonging to a traditional society, she cannot commit infidelity outright, but the goddess Durgā, her fellow woman, comes to her aid. Let us now turn to Intizār Ḥusain's *Nar Nārī*. He begins his story precisely where the earlier tale ends, yet he does not break away from the logic of the oral narrative to forge a new path. Instead, he resolves the problem with ease—or perhaps evades it altogether—much as he seems to do in his story *Sewiyāñ* (Vermicelli). In his version, the torso belongs to the woman's brother, while the head belongs to her husband. Both men are ensnared in the dilemma of determining who the "real" man is. When they approach Rashi (sage) to present their case, he addresses them brusquely: "Fool, why have you fallen into such confusion? In short, the man is the man, and the Madan Sundari is the woman. Go about your business" [14]. Now see the answer given in the *Baitāl Pachīsī*: "Among the limbs, the head (mastak) is supreme. Therefore, the woman belongs to the one whose limb is supreme" [15]. Intizār Ḥusain accepts the logic of the oral narrative in its entirety, and for this reason the meaning of the story remains unchanged. The nārī of *Nar Nārī* is caught in moral conflict; she seeks expiation for the error she has committed. When the sage declares that the head is of greater importance than the torso, she is reassured. With reference to the relations of husband and brother, she finds peace, and thus what had transpired in the past is once again accepted in the present.

In oral narrative, events occur without a discernible causal logic and are subsequently interpreted, whereas in written narrative every incident unfolds as the outcome of some cause. Thomas Mann certainly draws upon oral narrative, but not in the manner of Intizār Ḥusain. The deaths of the two male characters and the subsequent exchange of their heads become, for Sita, a gift from the goddess Kālī. What matters for Sita is not the two deceased companions themselves but rather the oppressive familial structure that has exploited her; when this rupture occurs, she is determined not to let the moment pass. The goddess Kālī, as her female counterpart, recognizes her suffering. Though Sita loves Nanda, she is married to Shridhiman, and she silently accepts the marriage. Had this extraordinary event not taken place, her life would have continued in the same cycle of submission. Aware that no one is concerned with her inner turmoil, she seizes upon the moment when her repressed desire rises to the surface, exchanging the two heads and thus attaining fulfillment. Her declaration about Nanda is of crucial importance: "He could be the man to elevate my happiness to the level of desire" [16]. A contingent accident thus becomes the means for the realization of a long-suppressed wish. The narrative progresses towards a necessarily tragic conclusion. Mann draws illumination from the past, yet constructs an edifice of his own. Like Calvino or Kafka, his narrative is not bound to the realist coordinates of time and space, yet the psychological dilemmas of his characters remain connected to our own age. When Sita is given the chance, she articulates her deprivation and desire openly. Since her addressee is not a human being, this expression takes the form of a dramatic soliloquy in which she discloses her inner self and demonstrates her capacity to alter her fate. The character of written narrative changes with time; he or she carries certain psychological or social conflicts, and it is the struggle to resolve these that propels the story forward. By contrast, the character of oral

narrative moves according to a predetermined plan. Whether Kafka, Italo Calvino, or Thomas Mann, all drew from folktale traditions, yet they diverged from the dynamics of oral storytelling. Their characters are not entangled in metaphysical enigmas of which they remain unaware, but are conscious of their actions, bear responsibility for them, and understand which deed constitutes the response to which situation.

The stories of Intizār Ḥusain belonging to this category are fundamentally concerned with the ethics of oral narrative and the metaphysical dilemmas of human existence. As we have already noted, their temporal setting belongs either to a distant past or to an unseen world. In the very act of fiction-making, he remains bound to the same principle of causality that constitutes the aesthetic of oral narrative. This also explains why the language of his stories is equally refined and polished, untouched by the roughness and abrasiveness of modern idiom. Intizār Ḥusain's creative sensibility remained persistently under the sway of religious ideas and traditional moral frameworks; hence in his stories he aligns himself not with modern critical thought but with inherited wisdom. His fascination with myth, legend, and scriptural narrative is profound. Though he certainly read the modern novel and short story, in his own fiction he not only turned back to the older literatures but also employed precisely those dynamics that are the hallmark of oral traditions. The ethical foundation on which this corpus of stories rests is likewise derived from the same sources. In oral narrative, the narrator's preferred mode is to captivate the listeners by the modulation of words, which is why the language employed carries an element of poetic resonance. Within this context, Intizār Ḥusain's critique of Bedi's language makes sense. Yet, owing to the experiences of migration and to his specific range of readings, Ḥusain was unable, unlike the creators of world fiction, to affect a full transfiguration of oral narrative into new forms. As Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Askarī observed, although he possesses a strong sense of character and a fluent command of language, he failed to overcome his memories [17]. Whether individual or drawn from his readings, these memories continually intrude, and he has been unable to escape them. His stories lack the objectivity that characterizes the modern mind. His perspective on life is shaped by a particular vision which reappears in story after story. He privileges the ethics of the past over those of the present—whereas the modern ethic is oriented less toward belief and more toward the psychological and existential conditions of human beings. In reviving the folktale, his fiction reconstructs a world shaped exclusively by folk wisdom. In his quest for the lost, he turns away from contemporary ethical concerns. Consequently, his stories can only be interpreted according to the critical criteria that are applied to oral narrative.

In this article, it is believed that Intizār Ḥusain's stories that are directly linked to folktale, myth, or scriptural sources. The other mode of his stories must, of course, be read and interpreted on different grounds and by distinct standards..

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