Dostī kā Safar: Asif, Karachi, and I *Remembering Asif Aslam Farrukhi (1959–2020)*

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*lo tum bhī ga'e ham ne to samjhā thā kih tum ne
bāndhā thā ko'ī yāroñ se paimān-e vafā aur
yih 'ahd kih tā 'umr-e ravāñ sāth rahoge
raste meñ bichhar jā'enge jab ahl-e ṣafā aur*

FAIZ, 1983

Even you left. I thought that at least you
made promises to friends that were different—
this promise to be with me till the end of this fleeting life,
even when all other pure-hearted ones would part company along
the way.¹

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I met Asif soon after joining medical college in 1980. He was a few years ahead of me, but closer to my age (he may have received double promotions, being as brilliant as he was). I still remember being introduced to him by our mutual friend and mentor Anwer Aqil, who was an intern in the medical college hospital. Aqil was a member of a progressive student group and a number of us gravitated toward some of these seniors in those still-early days of the Zia regime. Soon Asif and I became friends and would spend our free time together, speaking about books we had read, films we had watched (or would have liked to watch), pavement book sellers we had visited, or the libraries we frequented in Karachi. Our city was perhaps the thing that fundamentally

¹ Translation by Syed Akbar Hyder.

drew us together. Of course, I also had the selfish reason of learning from this person who, although he may have been all but twenty then, was amazingly well read in English and Urdu literature, was writing short stories in Urdu, translating literary works from English, and starting to find his voice as a critic in both languages.

Looking back, in relation to Asif I considered myself to be a *paḥh*, the trainee donkey that runs alongside the cart (this is Karachi humor of a certain generation, but it holds true for me)—and I had mentioned this to him several times. I selfishly understood that by being with Asif I could learn more about the wonders of literature and the literary. We became friends, but he always remained my mentor. Soon after our first meeting, we arranged to meet at my home in the Sakhi Hassan area (a middle-income neighborhood then at the northern edge of the city) so that we could walk to the next block over in North Nazimabad to the writer and novelist Shaukat Siddiqui's house. This was going to be Asif's first-ever interview for *Herald* (the now-defunct monthly news magazine that was part of our youth). He arrived via public transport from Karachi University, where he and his family lived (his father, Dr. Aslam Farrukhi, was professor of Urdu), and we walked over to Siddiqui ṣāhib's place. I still distinctly remember the graciousness with which we were received, and when the writer found out about Asif's father and his uncle Anwar Ahsan Siddiqui (a progressive writer and journalist) during the introductions, he further opened up about his life and works—after all, Asif was now considered almost family. To be honest, I would try to follow Asif everywhere, whether to gatherings at the home of the writers Azra Abbas and Anwar Sen Rai (they may not remember me coming to their Nazimabad house), where a group of young poets and writers were experimenting with form in poetry and short story, or to the home of the poet Tanveer Anjum, where study circles of literary and political writings were regularly held. Asif was the *quṭbī sitārah* (North Star) that determined my literary direction.

At college, during the early 1980s, many of us were trying to struggle against the cultural suffocation that occurred during the Zia regime. We decided to bring out a youth magazine, *Campus*, in collaboration with students from all professional and post-graduate institutions in Karachi. Given the military government and strict censorship, we did not even try for a press declaration. Actually, being informed of his progressive affiliations during his student days, we did visit Ahmed Maqsood Hameedi ṣāhib (the brother of the author Fatima Surayya [Bajia] and the poet Zahra Nigah), who was then secretary of information for the province of Sindh to ask for his help in this matter. He was sympathetic, but politely declined. Asif was an essential part of our group and in the first issue he translated Surendra Prakash's story "Bajūkā." Asif chose

a story about a scarecrow dressed in discarded British hunter's clothing that demanded one-fourth of a peasant household's yield for standing guard on its fields. During the Zia regime, the symbolic statement of a uniformed scarecrow asking for his "cut" was quite clear. It was evident to all of us that even if we had received a declaration for the publication, this translation alone would have banned it, which we could not sustain beyond two or three issues in any case.

It was, however, Karachi and its streets that truly bound us together. In a 2019 column titled "Shahzāde kī Maut" (The Death of the Prince), Asif wrote about Karachi's Prince Cinema being destroyed (to construct another shopping mall perhaps).² Prince (which had a sister auditorium, Princess) was especially important for Asif and me, as it used to have mid-morning shows of old films when both of us, being aspiring movie buffs, would watch Pakistani films from the 1950s and 1960s. One memorable film (which we may have left halfway) was *Devdas*, with the actors Habib and Shamim Ara. Such adventures were fun: skipping classes, catching a matinee, perhaps walking around the Regal area with the book vendors and getting a bite to eat in Saddar. The column also brought me back to the Karachi he and I grew up in, where you could navigate the entire Saddar area and beyond using cinemas as guideposts. This geography of our youth has vanished and has of course been replaced by other signposts—though perhaps only a few people still walk the streets of partially abandoned Saddar (the central shopping districts of Karachi). But in those days, after watching an afternoon show we would begin our stroll at Palace near the now partially demolished Metropole Hotel and head toward Saddar. We would arrive at Rex, near the music fountain (some may still remember it), then on to Rio across from the Standard Book Company, which sold books from the Soviet Union—a particular haunt for us, as it offered the most affordable books in the city. From there we could continue on to Elphinstone Street (now Zebunnisa Street) and turn left into the Capitol Cinema lane—while Palace showed more highbrow English films, Capitol had the Westerns and perhaps the more risqué films (although Rio had the most down-market films from Hollywood). On the parallel Victoria Road (now Abdullah Haroon Road) were Paradise and, farther down, Regal. Moving on, before one reached M. A. Jinnah Road (or Bandar Road, as we called it) there were Bambino, Lyric, and Scala. Then on Bandar Road if you turned right, you had Naz Cinema, and across from that was Nishat and then Capri and Prince ... all these cinemas are now gone. In addition to the cinemas, what mattered to both of us were Karachi's excellent libraries: the British Council Library near the Metropole Hotel (before it

2 Asif Farrukhi, "Shahzāde kī Maut," *Hum Sab*, last modified September 14, 2019, <https://www.humsub.com.pk/271713/asif-farrukhi-117/>.

moved to near Cantt Station) and the American Center Library opposite Frere Hall. There were also the Karachi Municipal Corporation (KMC) libraries all across the city that we would frequently visit on Frere Road, in PIB Colony, in Liaquatabad, in Nazimabad, and many other places. These streets, cinemas, booksellers, and libraries were our world for many years. Even after most of the public libraries were closed, Asif's lifelong commitment to libraries remained evident through his continued support of the Bedil Library in Bahadurabad and the Ghalib Library in Nazimabad.

Although Asif was becoming a physician—and a good one, at that—his focus was on writing. In 1982 at the age of twenty-three he published his first collection of short stories, *Ātish-fishāñ par Khile Gulāb* (The Blooming of Roses on a Volcano), which he soon followed with his Urdu translation of Herman Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*. This amazing debut was the beginning of a literary career like no other. In the next three decades Asif went on to write six volumes of short stories and several collections of literary criticism. He wrote in Urdu and English with equal facility, translated numerous stories from world literature, and regularly contributed to newspapers as a writer of book reviews and long essays. He edited several major anthologies, edited one of the most respected Urdu literary journals, *Dunyāzād*, and headed a highly respected publishing house in Karachi called *Scheherazade*. Later, he co-founded the Karachi Literature Festival and Adab Festival with Ameena Saiyid. Where he found the energy to accomplish all this (and more) is something none of us friends could fathom.

Although we never discussed it, our friendship may have had some cultural underpinnings, since both of us grew up in the 1960s and 1970s in households that had migrated from India. Until our generation, despite the creation of Pakistan, our group of North Indian immigrants remained somewhat socially insular. Even marriages, that institution par excellence for reproducing identity, were exclusively kept within the larger network of kin and lineage—or *haḍḍī meñ* (lit., in the same bone), as my maternal grandmother, the keeper of family honor, would constantly say. However, the newness of the country also meant a certain kind of democratization where age-old customs and taboos could be broken and social station could be contested. The world was indeed changing, and the process produced acute anxiety in homes such as ours. These themes are captured in Asif's early stories; one among them that I have read many times is "Chīl-Gārī" (Airplane) which begins with the crash of a small airplane in rural UP in the 1930s. Asif introduced this unusual and spectacular event to the reader through the female voices of near and distant kin. In doing this, he also depicts how despite migration, a familiar world was recreated in the new land. In his early work, Asif excavated these stories from his own

cultural background, as most authors do. Through the use of distinct dialects and idioms and through his portrayal of rivalries, sights, smells, tastes, mannerisms, and etiquette, we are made to inhabit the company of people who insist on cultural distinctiveness while trying to reconcile with the entire experience of uprooting and resettlement. In these stories we get an intimate understanding of what it means to be from Delhi or from UP while starting a new life in Pakistan.

Some have argued that his early stories echoed the narrative voice introduced to modern Urdu literature by Intizar Hussain. This remains a larger discussion that cannot be tackled in this space, but it is clear that Asif, as an intellectual person and writer, was very close to Intizar ṣāhib both personally and professionally. In his monumental work on Intizar Hussain's writing, *Chirāgh-e Shab-e Afsānah* (2016), Asif discusses his own growth as a writer of short stories through his engagement with Intizar ṣāhib's *afsāne* (fiction writings). The attraction was not immediate, and he does mention the journey he made as a youth through the writings of Ismat Chughtai, Manto, and Qurratulain Hyder (all from his father's bookshelves) before finally rediscovering Intizar ṣāhib—but once Asif immersed himself in his writings, he never let go. It wasn't that other writers did not leave an impression on him, but Intizar Hussain mesmerized him with his storytelling, narrative structures, experimentation, humor, and sense of irony. Over the years Asif and Intizar ṣāhib would speak frequently to each other on the phone, correspond, review drafts of manuscripts, discuss, debate, visit each other in Lahore and Karachi. Asif also accompanied Intizar ṣāhib to London when *Bastī* was short-listed for the Man Booker International Prize in 2013. For Asif, Intizar ṣāhib was a dear friend, mentor, and father figure all rolled into one. If I was in Karachi while Intizar ṣāhib was visiting from Lahore, Asif always included me in his *nashists* (sessions) with the author (remember the *paḥ* that I was), which is how I also met Intizar ṣāhib and benefited from his sense of humor, his retelling of the past, his analysis of creative work, and his engagement with social issues. Indeed, in his early stories, like Intizar ṣāhib, Asif foregrounded the nuances of what it means for a group that had left its ancestral land, with all its trials, tribulations, and pleasures, to live in a new space. Intizar ṣāhib does suggest in his writings that the catastrophic aspects of Partition, with its destruction and dislocation, undermined normative values and loosened moral strictures. The violence of the mid-1940s in South Asia hence created opportunities for many to rethink past certainties and generate visions for a new future. It is true that in this new world, as in Asif's story "Chīl-Gāī" (and other early stories), there was also an attempt to hold on to past practices. Yet, similar to Intizar ṣāhib's larger oeuvre, these early short stories by Asif cannot be merely read within

the tropes of Partition literature, nor for that matter as a form of “nostalgia” (howsoever defined). Rather, Asif’s early writings, like Initizar ṣāhib’s, had a more universal tone linked to the dilemmas of displacement, of a diasporic existence, of the experience of rootlessness and vagrancy that one inhabits once one leaves “home.” These dilemmas can be depicted in stories about a certain group of people remembering a *qaṣbah* (small town) in UP, as in the story above, or can be invoked by narrating the sights and smells of distant lands by the Pashtun migrants in *baiṭhaks* (sitting rooms) of the working-class districts of Karachi. Hence for Asif as for Intizar ṣāhib, crucial questions remained about memory: How do we remember? For what purposes? Who does the remembering? In what context? Against what kinds of history is this memory counterpoised to?

That said, this was not the only way people like us, born in a new country, were engaging with our history (or memory). As we grew older the world changed around us, and with the rise of the identity-based chauvinistic politics that engulfed Karachi, we (and others from our generation) started to seriously rethink our pasts and reflect on the distance we had travelled from our parents’ generation. Undoubtedly we retained deep and enduring ties with our genealogies, yet Karachi was part of Sindh and our own social commitments needed to be expressed in our writings and actions. For Asif at least, this was an important imperative. After witnessing the violence of the early 1990s in Karachi, Asif worked as a public health physician while traveling extensively in Sindh and Balochistan. He learned Sindhi and started collaborating with writers who primarily wrote in the language. He worked on an anthology of Sheik Ayaz’s poetry and encouraged the Sindhi feminist poet Attiya Dawood to publish her translations in Urdu and English. Similarly, his engagement with scholars of other national languages of Pakistan opened up a space for dialogue and critical discussion. In a trenchantly incisive epilogue for a book of Urdu translations of Balochi short stories, he describes how Balochistan had continued to burn despite being “*nā dīdah aur nā shanīdah*” (unseen and unheard, perhaps unrecognised)—not that the embers had ever cooled down from earlier conflicts and oppressions. Similarly, he (among many others) encouraged the Punjabi novelist Zahid Hasan in his own creative journey. He worked with Dr. Fatima Hasan on editing feminist writings in Urdu and brought me into a collaborative association with the performer and feminist activist Sheema Kirmani (and her organization, Tehrik e Niswan) so that the three of us could organize a conference on gender, performance, and politics in 2010, which led to the publication of a co-edited text. His understanding of the fissures in Pakistan’s national history made it possible for him to co-edit the volume *Fault Lines* with the Bangladeshi scholar Niaz Zaman, bringing together short

stories from both countries that engaged with traumatic accounts surrounding the events of 1971 (his own story in the volume is one of the most sensitive renditions from a child's perspective). In 2011, both of us accompanied a group of Pakistani academics and writers who for the first time travelled to Bangladesh to attend a conference specifically on 1971. In Dhaka Asif was already known for his writings, empathy, and solidarity with Bangladeshi writers and intellectuals, and for this he was an inspiration for all of us.

Let me again return to the city we called our own, Karachi. Both of us grew up, as suggested above, in middle-class families where the only route to worldly success was through the pursuit of education. Our formative common experiences took place not in the localities that the elite created for themselves, so aptly discussed in Qurratulain Hyder's *The Housing Society*, but in areas such as Dastagir, Nazimabad, Ayesha Manzil, PIB Colony, Gulshan, North Nazimabad, Rizvia Colony, Firdaus Colony, and Paposh Nagar: neighborhoods where a middle-class, salaried *muhājir* (immigrant) population settled in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. These were the areas of Karachi where our friends and extended families lived. As we grew older, it was here that we participated in literary *nashists* or heard our favorite poets (Ubaidullah Aleem, Jaun Elia) in people's homes or attended the annual *Amrohah mushā'arāhs* in Federal B Area. All this coexisted in the same temporal space with the emergent sectarian and ethnic violence of this period. This experience shaped within us a nuanced and important understanding of Karachi's resilience and creativity in the face of adversities.

We also witnessed the growth of a city that alongside its history of working-class politics had a deep sedimentation of diverse languages, cultures, accents, religious beliefs, sectarian practices, culinary choices, and lifestyles. As suggested above, despite the rise of random violence and religious bigotry in the past few decades, Karachi remains a multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan city, and Asif's literary voice strongly embraced this reality. Rather than emphasizing a hierarchy of cultures, his more recent writings depict, in the linguist Mikhail Bakhtin's words, a "heteroglossia": a multiplicity, a bouquet of equally valued life experiences, cultural histories, languages, and literary traditions.

In one of his more famous short stories, "Samandar kī Chorī" (The Theft of the Sea), the title alludes to how the city is being sold to speculators and real estate developers. Yet the story is also an ode to the diversity of the city. We are introduced to multiple speech patterns, to voices of different classes, and reminded of the various pleasures the city offers us as Asif sensitizes us to the history of the poor and the working class. It is a polyphonic text (again in Bakhtinian terms), with its regional dialects, vernaculars of different age groups, and interventions by various subcultures that guide the reader

along—a commitment to the carnivalesque arena—while the authorial voice itself is humbly suppressed. There is surely the horrific (perhaps grotesque) depiction of the vanishing sea, yet Asif's own subtle voice also enables us to remember through our various senses—sight, smell, sound—triggering the realization of forgotten moments, events, times, pleasures, and sorrows. This aspect of the story also tangentially reminds us of Intizar ṣāhib's prose in terms of how memory is evoked in some of his stories and novels (e.g., *Āge Samandar Hai* [The Sea Lies Ahead]); the nightingale's singing, the sight of a tree, snakes crossing paths, or the smell of monsoon rain—all can trigger memories of a past that one has lived and experienced.

Through its imagery and other sensory details, the story expands to fill a much broader canvas, constructing a kind of visual argument: the sight of the receding sea reminds us of what is worth salvaging and struggling for. By using the metaphor of nature, Asif helps us reconsider ecology's intimate and intertwined relationship with humans. In such stories, Asif gave voice to a generation, to those of us who made this journey with him from our circumscribed households to the larger world of coexistence and commitment to a shared humanity (the distance perhaps from "Chīl-Gāṛī to "Samandar kī Chorī"). To be clear, through the use of multiple voices (polyphony), his stories continue to guide us toward creating a future embedded in varied cultural and literary traditions.

When I met Asif for the first time, he was already a person of truly global sensibilities. Due to his voracious reading habit, he had an unsurpassed command of world literature and its emerging voices, whether they were from Palestine, Iraq, Latin America (he insisted that I read Mario Vargas Llosa's *Feast of the Goat* for its resonances with Pakistan's own brutal dictatorships), Eastern Europe, East Asia, or Africa. He would not only translate world literature himself but also encourage others to do so and publish their work, creating a world of stories that were wondrous and inspirational in the process. Following the writer Claire Messud, I would submit that Asif's passion was the story. For him stories were not merely about conveying information; rather, they gave meaning to experience and helped in shaping events. Using a metaphorical style, he once wrote that there was a time when stories had not been divided: they were available to all living creatures—humans, birds, animals, trees—and all were part of these stories. In the same essay, he then shared his desire to re-collect lost stories from all parts of the earth so that we could again learn from the varied experiences, imaginations, and humanity contained within them. For Asif, the written word and stories were an invitation into a conversation, into an experience that perhaps is individual yet also universal. In such encounters, especially with those stories that are different from our own, we challenge

ourselves to a deeper and more engaged dialogue. This is who Asif was: a person committed to collecting stories. Through his efforts in translation, he sought to deepen and enrich our encounters with those whom we recognize and also those who may be strangers.

Asif's empathy and caring for those who were marginalized and neglected was evident in his newspaper columns, essays, and short stories. In another beautifully written story, "Khujlī" (Itch), he uses the first person to speak directly to the reader. It is a gesture of inclusion, but the experiment makes him as the writer more subject to interpretation and hence more vulnerable. With sensitivity and care, the story exposes us to the world of those who have missing limbs or other physical disabilities. The protagonist has a special emotional connection to the disabled people he sees each day during his travels through the city, collecting memories of them to revisit later in his mental "picture book." Karachi and its various neighborhoods play their required part here as well (for example, there are spaces like Regal, where the beggar who lost his limb during Partition used to linger). There is the soldier who had lost his fingers from a mine explosion in the 1971 war, and the leprosy patient in a hospital who had learned how to eat and perform most tasks with his feet. Finally, there is the description of the girl who had only a single short hand but could elegantly do all that was needed to lead her life. While these vignettes bring to life the individualized history of each disabled person in the story, they may also stand for the history of the country itself. These "distorted," "incomplete," "imperfect" bodies force us to remember how horrors were produced in the process of partition, in wars (1971 or any other), and through our neglect of the poor and the discarded. Yet in each case, especially with the young girl, these stories also help us appreciate the way in which people cope with their physical disabilities, their hardships, and attempt to live their lives with a modicum of dignity. During the entire story, the protagonist himself has a continuous burning itch in his hand that is not cured by any treatment, ointments, or creams. The hand eventually needs to be amputated, but despite the amputation, a "phantom" itch persists. The itch itself (which only hints at what other lingering ailments the protagonist has) and the post-amputation feeling in the protagonist's missing hand creates a space for a range of interpretative trajectories. I suggest that for the protagonist (or the writer), this pain is the embodiment of all the disability and suffering that he continues to see around him. Here, Asif (the author) connects the personal body to the social body: the individual cannot be cured as long as there continues to be suffering and pain around us.

As I move toward concluding this essay, I admit that in order to adequately discuss the breadth of his engagement with writers of all national languages

of Pakistan and his commitment to a critically attuned literature that aspired to a plural, inclusive, equitable, and just world, I will need more space and a different forum. Here I can only say that he did all this and more with his characteristic humbleness and a voice that was serious, sincere, and soft. He listened to everyone and stayed away from the limelight that many crave. In his own quiet way, through all his stories, translations, newspaper columns, and essays, his editorial functions, and his role in encouraging the publishing of books, Asif continued to educate us how civil discourse and mild manners can sometimes succeed in moving us toward our cherished goals. His old-world comportment, decency, humbleness, and sensitivity to the less fortunate were what truly distinguished him as a person.

After more than two decades working as a public health expert, initially with Aga Khan University and then with the UN, Asif joined Habib University in 2014 as a faculty member. He wrote to me then with some nervousness about the move and mentioned how Fahmida Riaz commented on it in her characteristic wry way, saying, “UN *kī* job to *koī bhī nahīñ chhorā kartā*” (Who leaves a UN job?). But Asif did leave it and was immensely happy teaching his students literature and culture. He relished the joy of teaching a challenging curriculum to eager (and a few less-than-eager) students. In the curriculum he designed, *Jahān-e Urdū* (The World of Urdu), he included entire sessions—many the first of their kind in Pakistan at the BA level—on the *dāstāns*, Manto and Faiz, Frances Pritchett, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, Shamim Hanfi, C. M. Naim, M. Askari, and a host of contemporary writers—and yes, Sara Shagufta, too! As this course grew into a major component of the liberal core at Habib University, Asif was also instrumental in bringing poets, writers, and essayists from all the national languages of Pakistan to Habib to enhance student learning.

We were close friends who shared the mood or spirit of our times, the zeitgeist. In our later years, given our history together and Asif’s stature in the literary world, we would just enjoy being in each other’s company, reminiscing about our youth, imagining future collaborations, volleying jokes back and forth (he could have you in stiches with his impersonations), sharing information about our families and friends, and indulging in gossip sessions (my favorite pastime). A year or two ago in a column he wrote about our seeing the film *The Way We Were* (with Barbara Streisand and Robert Redford) in Rex Cinema together in the early 1980s. He described that even then, I had wondered aloud how a similar movie reflecting progressive activism could be made about Karachi. This private joke, now made public through his column, was something that we would continue to share and laugh about. We were always scheming about different projects; some bore fruit, many did not. Once, we

bothered our dear friend Imran Aslam (President of Geo TV) to help us produce a thirteen-part program on rethinking Pakistan's history; another time, we went and interviewed H. Iqbal, the publisher of *Alif Lailā* digest in the 1970s and author of the risqué series of stories *Chhalāvā!* The list is endless.

A lot of our personal communication was in innuendos, inferences, allusions, and ambiguous speech. Often a lot was said nonverbally, through moods and gestures. There was comfort in being in each other's company. Deep and enduring friendships are at times maintained by the unsaid and do not need the crutch of praise, but let me end by sharing what I regret not saying to my dear friend (at the risk of embarrassing him): You are amazing and brilliant. You love books, artwork, movies, flowers, and sharing a joke and a hearty laugh. And you left us too soon!

Asif Aslam Farrukhi left us on June 1, 2020.

bas ek motī sī chhab dikhā kar bas ek mūṭhī sī dhun sunā kar
sītārah-e shām ban ke āyā ba-rañg-e khvāb-e sahar gayā vuh

NASIR KAZMI

Displaying a pearl's luster, singing a sweet melody,
 As the evening star he appeared; with the hues of the dream of
 dawn he took off.³

³ Translation by Syed Akbar Hyder.