



“Maṣrūf Aurat” © 2023 by Khalida Hussain introduced and translated by Sabyn Javeri is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

“Maṣrūf Aurat”¹

Khalida Hussain

Introduced and translated by
Sabyn Javeri

Introduction:

Khalida Hussain (1937–2019) was born in Lahore and started her literary career by publishing short stories in the journal *Adab-e Latif* during the 1960s. She took a break from writing for more than a decade after her marriage. She remerged again on the literary scene in 1981 with the publication of her short story collection, *Paḥchān*, followed by five more short story collections and a novel. Hussain is known for introducing a new trend on the Urdu literary horizon as she experimented with the idea of abstract and non-linear narratives. She was very skillful in her craft, using a technique, John Gardner calls ‘the psychic lens’. Every now and then she would draw the reader in to her thoughts then zoom out and offer a more aerial view of the plot. Her technique differed from stream-of-consciousness, which her contemporaries employed, as she was careful not to isolate the reader into the confines of her mind. She was also one of the few writers who despite living in intolerant times under dictatorship, was not afraid to draw on Hindu mythology or Sufi traditions as she explored spirituality in her writings, particularly the concept of *wujūd* through existentialism.

Her literary odyssey commenced during her student days, with her debut short story, “Naḡhmoñ ki Tanābeñ Tūt Gayīñ” published in 1956 in

¹ <https://www.rekhta.org/ebooks/masroof-aurat-khalida-hussain-ebooks>

the Lahore-based journal *Qandīl*. Subsequently, her stories “Dil Daryā” and “Munnī” graced the pages of the prestigious journal *Adab-e-Latīf*. Renowned poet Nasir Kazmi remarked that “Munn” was the “kathā of lone souls.”

During this period, Intizar Hussain, the editor of *Adab-e Latīf*, noted the emergence of Hussain's unique storytelling style. He observed that her work marked a departure from traditional storytelling, giving rise to a fresh literary wave. As Hussain's narrative voice evolved, she penned “Sawarī,” a milestone story in her literary journey. However, after she married in 1965, for about twelve or thirteen years, her literary quill remained still as she relocated to Karachi with her husband and children, taking up a teaching position at PAF Shaheen College, and adopted the role of what Virginia Woolf mockingly calls, “the angel of the house.”²

After a decade long hiatus, during which she suffered many tragedies including the death of her son, she reclaimed her pen and authored “Maṣrūf Aurat” (Busy Woman), “Haiñ Ḳhvāb meñ Hanuz” (We, Yet Exist in Dreams), “Maiñ Yaḥāñ Hūñ” (I Am Here), and “Jīne kī Pābandī” (Limits on Living). These were not just stories; they were manifestos of human resilience and to some extent, attempts at raising feminist consciousness. “The Busy Woman,” for example, clearly questions, why women who have busy lives are only expected to be preoccupied with a particular kind of duty associated with household chores. She calls out implicit gender bias when she asks the reader to imagine her as a busy person and not as a busy woman because of the limiting association of women with domesticity. Her idea of *persona* in the story further questions why gender demands that women adopt certain roles at certain times instead of being their complete complex selves like men are allowed to be.

Likewise, her novel, *Kaghazī Ghāt* (Paper Wharf), paints a vivid picture of women battling the constraints of patriarchy amid the shifting sands of society. Her narrative highlights patriarchal bias, and the oppression as well as the empowering transformations her characters experience during the feminist struggle but in a subtle manner through existential philosophies.

² Woolf, Virginia. *The Death of the Mother: and other Essays*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942.

Hussain died in 2019 and left behind a comparatively small but incredible body of work. Sadly, she remains one of the most underrepresented Urdu female writers on her era. Reading her stories today is a compelling endeavor for several reasons. Her narratives, infused with a strong female perspective resonate in our modern world where oppressive gender norms remain a pressing issue. She was not just a storyteller but a feminist visionary who wove narratives that transcended the boundaries of tradition and challenged oppressive cultural practices against women by advocating androgyny. Although many critics argue that as she was not part of a women’s movement group nor did she grapple overtly with women’s rights issues, her stories cannot be deemed feminist. Nasir Abbas Nayyar wrote in her obituary that Hussain’s stories were devoid of common feminist themes. He went on to argue that ‘Though her stories revolve around exploring and interrogating the dark side of self, she doesn’t situate self within a feminine ambience. She doesn’t consciously escape femininity; rather she seems to cuddle a genderless, human self. This way she took a path distinct from the one taken by her predecessors and contemporary women writers. She appears to emphasize that there exists a ‘continent’ within the being or *wajood* of humans that remains unaffected by gender-based identities and confinements. She made her male and female characters discover that ‘continent’, reside there, breathe there, imbibe its ambience so that they could interrogate everything surrounding them from an ‘immeasurable’ perspective. All her six collections of short stories—*Paḥchān* (1981), *Darwāzā* (1984), *Maṣrūf Aurat* (1989), *Haiñ Kḥvāb Meiñ Hanuz* (1995), *Maiñ Yaḥāñ Hūñ* (2005) and *Jīne kī Pābandī* (2017)—and a novel *Kāghazī Ghat* (2005) tell the story of the human self.

But in doing so Hussain humanized the ‘female condition’, the very otherness that French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir argued separated women’s stories from mainstream literature and therefore universalized the male experience. ‘And like Virginia Woolf, Hussain advocated the idea of androgyny through her pen, freeing the feminine norms that imprisoned women. Even in the story “The Busy Woman” she requests her readers to stop thinking of the protagonist as a woman and imagine her as a person, therefore calling out the biases we are socialized into attaching with women’s lives.

In addition, by exploring spirituality and existentialism through capitalism and modernity, her literary tapestry became a call to arms against both dictatorship and male dominance in a society struggling to

find its national identity against rising religious and ethnic tensions. She weaved the personal with the political, in her stories about urban working class women and mothers who were suspended between tradition and modernity, struggling to find their own identity. Beyond their socio-political relevance, her stories showcased artistic mastery, with intricate narratives, symbolism, and vivid characters that appealed to literature enthusiasts but also provided historical context for how Pakistani society evolved. Therefore, translating her stories into English, so they can be accessible to a wider audience, contributes not only to preserving her legacy and introducing her work to a global audience, but to fostering cross-cultural understanding. Moreover, her exploration of universal themes like spirituality, self-love, identity, and resilience make her stories accessible and relatable to readers from diverse backgrounds.

Ultimately, Hussain's narratives serve as a source of inspiration for challenging societal norms and advocating for positive change, making her work profoundly relevant in today's world. Her compact yet dazzling body of work endures as a clarion call to raising feminist consciousness, destined to inspire generations in the quest for equality and freedom. She wasn't just an author; she was a humanist icon, her stories, a powerful voice for change.

The Busy Woman

I am a busy woman. Now, I would request you to put this word ‘woman’ in brackets. Why? Because is it not possible that I could be just ‘busy’. If we were to drop the word ‘woman’ from busy, how would it change the perception of what I am or should be, busy with? Okay if not in principle, then just for the purposes of this story, imagine I’m a busy being. Necessarily, conditionally, hypothetically, just for the sake of the narrative, let us put the word woman aside and imagine that I speak for all mankind.

So, that decided – I’m a busy person. I am not repeating myself over here because I have doubts about it. No, I do so because I once read a bit of logic and now I try to instil a threefold rationality into all my arguments. Actually, I’m trying to approach things factually so that the argument I’m about to make appears justifiable and rational. The reason for this is that although your instinct right now would be to dismiss what I say, the logic of my arguments would compel you to reflect on what I say, later.

You see, I have grown up in an atmosphere where people constantly contradict themselves. First, they believe something to be the ultimate truth and then they become most sceptical and cynical about it. In that spirit I’m asking you to listen to me in good faith. So that temporarily, at least, you are engrossed in what I have to say, and accept the logic of my ideas. Thereafter, you can keep trying to prove me wrong.

I have always experienced this cynicism in my life. In fact, I have come to expect it. First prove a point, then challenge it. This is the reason why, till today my existence hangs in between being sure of myself and doubting myself at the same time. A mentor once told me that, that which is a roof for you can be a floor for someone else. Then how can you determine the height or the distance between the ceiling and the floor, the earth and the sky? But he also said that while we are alive, we are in a dream and it is only in death, that we will gain true consciousness.

I have given a lot of thought to the different ways of seeing or understanding and for some reason, I’m reminded of bats. The bat is such a useless, non-productive, pathetic creature. Yet, despite being so hopeless, it mocks the hyper productivity of our world by pointing out our shifting parameters. The bat, in her stillness, is indirectly indicating that the infinite possibilities of movement are simply never ending. Our goals and our aspirations, are endless. However, , what else can she do, but point at the futility of our pursuits! On that note, another story that comes to mind is that of the ghost of Betāl. Legend has it that if interrupted during his narration, he immediately flew away and hung himself upside down from a tree, and perhaps, began imagining new stories all over again. No matter how much the listener begged him to come down and finish the old one, he did not. Instead, he went into his deep upside-down meditative state of stillness. Anyhow the reason I bring up these two upside-down creatures is because to them, the state of being upside-down is the most natural upright state. According to them, their inverted state of hanging upside-down from a tree is the right way – the only way – to be. Maybe, because this is what works best for them – perhaps they are able to think more clearly, be more creative in this posture. Indeed, Betāl’s best stories are devised in this inverted state of hanging. I would even go so far as to say that it is only an excuse that once interrupted, he takes offense and abandons his audience. Because, if one thinks about it, when he begins to get bored of the story he is telling, he interjects an unfathomable twist that the listener can’t help but react to. He then takes the listener’s query as an interruption and goes back into his upside-down meditative state to

imagine a new story. So, it is, in fact, an opportunity to recharge. Does that then mean that one has to remain still, in order to be creative, to let the imagination flourish?

In that case, this state of being reflective, being still and introspective is not easy for us, busy beings. In fact, for extremely busy people, breaks between work are most unwelcome! After proving a hypothesis, when they realize that its possibilities are over, they go on, in search of new possibilities, new arguments. It is a different matter that some people cannot turn away from this search and become extremely busy in ‘being busy,’ Remaining engrossed in their original, natural state, in a flurry of activity, where being busy becomes a state of mind.

So, I am a busy being. I have very important work to do. My list of tasks is very long and unending. Once, I tried to make a list of the things I had to do, so I could check them off once I had finished with them, but it was so long that it seemed futile to even try and keep track. The truth is that with every passing moment, we evolve into a new being. From one age to the next, we are constantly engaged in an exploration of the way we interact with the rest of the world. Our constantly churning minds, our busily productive hands, our constantly evolving thoughts keep us distracted and in a state of constant flux. We tell ourselves that we are working but we are not the same as we were before and therefore every moment is a new existence for us. All the time our nature is changing. All the time we grow distant from our true selves.

But don't panic. Not yet. I am not saying anything wrong. And if you have any doubts about me, postpone them for now. I was just pointing out that it is not possible to compile a busy man's to-do list because our tasks are never ending. That's why, personally, I have adopted the method of tackling whatever task comes up before me. This has made the flow of my work much better and everyone is surprised by my performance. However, my rule of productivity is simply to get things done without overthinking. There is no order except, ‘first come, first serve.’ But for this to go smoothly, I have adopted a strategy of flexibility. I put my personality aside, and I change roles as required.

There is a dark and silent room in my house. Its walls have niches craved from bottom to top. And in all of them there are masks that I wear one by one as I go about my work during different parts of the day. There is no other option. For every job I have to use the appropriate ‘persona.’ I

keep switching from one persona to another and get all the work done, frame by frame, scene by scene. Like the fast-changing motions of a movie. Now you will ask, but what is the urgency? Why am I in such a hurry to perform these tasks?

So now I come to my real problem. Actually, I am in a hurry, not from today, but from eternity.

I have been in a hurry since the first breath I took, to get all my pending tasks done... so I can do what I really want to do. That's why I have to do everything in a hurry, to carve out time for what is really important to me. Now, you will ask why you don't do this important task first?

Here you are being illogical. Because the task that I really want to perform has no persona available that I can take on to perform it. This task requires me to be true to myself. This is the only work for which the entire being is needed, not a persona. That's why I deal with all the small tasks that come my way so quickly. These are actually the weeds of the forest which I have to clear to reach the path of performing myself. This is a long and difficult path. It lies at the end of a thicket around the line where the earth meets the sky, the realm where all convictions and yearnings end.

But before one can reach that clearing, a lot of work has to be done. One thing that's bothering me right now is my memory. I forget things. There was a time when remembering was a curse. Everything, every moment, lived on in my mind. It was like a constant sound that swirled around me like a whirlwind. A multitude of voices that, day and night, sounded like a constant buzzing in the ears. There was awareness even in sleep. I was like a library catalogue that lists every tragedy. Every moment, numbered and listed, was recorded. My mind could summon anything at any given time. But this was a very dangerous state for me. Whoever is afflicted by this state knows that the past, the future and the present all become rolled into one and a person cannot distinguish between them and this effects one's output and performance. And we all know that productivity must never be affected.

At that point in my life, I was not aware of putting away my true self and putting on other faces. I was not familiar with the use of 'persona'. This is the reason why my work was neither completed correctly, and nor

on time. Because during every job I was doing, I felt I should be doing something else. I approached each task with my full self, my roles and aspirations as a woman, worker, writer, all my duties combined into one person and therefore I was unable to do justice to any. I would rush towards my work, but after completing half of it, realize that another important task had been neglected. The whole day was spent in a state of flux, rushing from one task to another. One after the other; one before the other. I’m reminded now how years ago; our psychology teacher took us to a hospital for the mentally challenged. We saw this scene through a window with iron bars – a woman was rushing around in a confined room. Moving quickly along the walls, from one to the other, from the second to the first, back and forth, again and again. The woman continued back and forth in a state of flux, till she collapsed. She had been confined to this room for fifteen years.

But thankfully I discovered the artistic persona in time. Now my day is divided into different parts, my roles categorised into different acts and time passes quickly. I accomplish all my tasks, without having to go on, till night descends. It’s at night that I feel bare, stripped of the different personae I adopt during the day. Like I said, night is the time for introspection, especially for those who see the world differently. Night is day for those who hang upside down. But I don’t have a persona ready for the night yet.

In those few moments before sleep, I explore the nooks and crevices of my mind, searching, inspecting, and exploring. I find myself stripped of all identities and personalities, confronted by my bare face. And it is at this time that I can find nothing to hide behind. I keep cutting down the forest of my tasks, trying to reach that clearing at the end when all small tasks collapse and there is a clearing for creativity. But this forest of tasks is quite astonishing because even when you cut down all the little tasks by nightfall, they have grown all over again, by the next morning. And the next day, another giant forest awaits me and by the time I cut down the wild growth, it is night again.

In spite of all this, I have now mastered the art of forgetting and focusing only on the task at hand, and things have become easier. But it wasn’t always like this. Moving from one to the other and multi-tasking was a task in itself. Initially, once I got the hang of it, I was amazed how easy it was to forget what one really wanted to do. The thoughts that were like boiling lava in my suddenly calmed down and cooled. The sensational

buzzing in my ears subsided. The sense of urgency in the hands, feet, arms and neck, the exhaustion, the rapid breathing, the heaviness of the chest, all disappeared. Instead, I felt cocooned in a cosy blanket of soft white cotton wool; weightless, blinkered and focussed only on the present.

“Begum Sahiba! Just imagine for a moment that fear is not a feeling but a mere word!” These were the words I heard him speak, after he told me to lie down on the operating table. Those words were my first steps into the magical power of forgetting, even the present. Little by little, I began to slip away from everything. I became detached from names, goods, experiences. Sounds faded. My mind cleared. The states which were my constant companions, worry, fear, anxiety and constant self-scrutiny.... What was happening to all of them?

Gradually they disappeared from the crevices of my mind and only traces of dust were left behind in the spaces they once occupied. Now, seeing that empty space I think to myself, *does this mean that I have finally crossed the forest? Am I free to now truly be my authentic self? Has that time finally come? Did I really cross this forest? Is all my other work done and am I free to do what I really want to? Could it be that this morning, that forest of tasks would not be standing in front of me twice as thick?*

“Nature automatically creates ways for the completion of its plan,” I hear the doctor’s voice from far away as he leans towards me. “Man does not have to exert the slightest effort on his own,” he says as he prepares the anaesthesia. “*Gah ba zor mī kushad*”³ I hear him recite a Persian line by the poet Iqbal, and laugh devilishly.

“Just take a deep breath now.”

Suddenly, it seems as if the sun shining in the window outside was beginning to dip and bend towards me. There was no forest now, no path . . . only a long, grey emptiness stretching endlessly ahead.

³ “... and sometimes it forcibly drags me”