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A Lament with a Hole at its Center: Naming and the *Shahr-āshob* in Zaki Naqvi's *Diyār-o Dasht* (Abodes and Wilderness)¹

Review article by

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A Labyrinth without a Map

Zaki Naqvi's first collection gathers twelve pieces of short fiction written over roughly a decade, most of them first published in the Karachi quarterly *Āj*. Naqvi was born in 1987 at Abbaspur in the Thal and has served both as a soldier and as a teacher. The book won the Asif Farrukhi Ilm-o-Agahi Award and was launched at the Lahore Literary Festival; it has had almost no notice in English. The pieces are formally restless: a soldier's diary, a village chronicle, a fable set in a cavalry stable, a romance written in the manner of an Urdu digest, a memorial sketch. Read one at a time they look like a miscellany. They are not. Almost every story in the book turns on a name: who gives it, who is made to carry it, and what it hides.

Naqvi states his subject plainly at the start of the second story, "Chāchā Ellis Kadūrī" (چچا الیس کدوری, Uncle Ellis Kadoorie). The district, he writes, lies on the linguistic border of Saraiki and Punjabi, and because it is poor and backward, no language and no political group has taken it up; it is *ek šaqāfatī bhūl bhulaiyāñ* (ایک ثقافتی بھول بھولیاں, a cultural labyrinth) whose people do not themselves know who they are. Then comes the sentence on which the book rests: "*is gumshudagī kā apnā ek kalchar*

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hai” (اس گمشدگی کا اپنا ایک کلچر ہے) (27).² The preceding page gives the region’s speech the only name it has. At the tent-pegging fairs the announcers call out to the riders in “the Jhangochi tongue, of the mingled accent of the Thal and the Bar” (*Thal aur Bār ke mile-jule lahje kī Jhangochī zabān*, تھل اور بار کے ملے جلے لہجے کی جھنگوچی زبان) (26) – a language named for a district town and described as a mixture.

The history of the two language movements between which the district falls bears Naqvi out, though not exactly, and the difference is instructive. Tariq Rahman shows that the Siraiki movement was itself an act of naming. The creation of a Siraiki identity “involved the deliberate choice of a language, called Siraiki, as a symbol of this identity,” and with it “the renunciation of both the local names of regional dialects ... as well as the all-inclusive label of Punjabi” (Rahman 174). Among the local names the new term displaced, Rahman lists “Thalchari” (173). For Rahman, “Southern Punjab is known as the Siraiki area,” with its centers at Multan and Bahawalpur (173), while the Punjabi movement remained “a weak, middle-class phenomenon, concentrated mainly in Lahore” (209). Yet on paper the most ambitious Siraiki map does reach this far: Taj Muhammad Langah’s proposed province takes in the Sargodha division and the Jhang district (178). Naqvi’s country, then, is not so much unclaimed as claimed on a map and adopted by no one. It has been named from outside without being spoken for.

Naqvi knows that his district has been named from outside before. In the same paragraph he reaches for colonial ethnography, citing Sir Denzil Ibbetson for the claim that the Baloch who founded the villages were “the largest caste of the Punjab, spread over the Rohi and the Bar” (روہی اور بار میں پھیلی پنجاب کی سب سے بڑی ذات) (Naqvi 27). For an account of his own people, in other words, Naqvi turns to a colonial document: the caste survey Denzil Ibbetson compiled from the Punjab census of 1881. And the settlements he goes on to list, Kot Niazi Khan Baloch, Dera Shakir Khan Tatari, Basti Ali Khan Sial, carry in their names the men and clans that held the land (27).

The labyrinth returns at the close of “Hamrāhī” (ہمراہی, companion or fellow traveler) where the narrator, among the passengers of a village

²Translations from the Urdu are my own. Page references to Naqvi are to the printed pages of the 2025 edition.

bus, concludes that they share one boat and one destination but travel by separate roads: *hamārī apnī apnī bhūl bhulaiyāñ haiñ* (ہماری اپنی اپنی بھول بھلایاں ہیں, each of us has a labyrinth of his own) (156). Between these two uses of the word the book assembles what I take to be its real subject. It is an anatomy of a place where the names that carry authority are issued by power, from the census to the identity card, and the names that tell the truth are unofficial.

A Lament for a Place with no Name

The longest piece in the book is called “Shahr-e Madfūn” (شہر مدفون, The Buried City), and it carries a subtitle: *Ek nāṣṭaljiyā, ek shahr-āshob* (ایک ناسطلیجیا۔ ایک شہر آشوب), a nostalgia, a lament for the city (88). The “Shahr-e Madfūn” of the title is a village. Naqvi says so at once, and with some relish: his village, which it would perhaps be an excess still to call a *qaṣbah* (قصبہ), is known only by its nearness to a *qaṣbah* that it would be an outright excess to call a city, “and people have now begun to commit this excess openly” (لوگ اب یہ زیادتی سرعام کرنے لگے ہیں) (91). The first thing the subtitle does, then, is overreach. A village that is not a town and is known by a town that is not a city is given the name of a genre made for cities.

The *shahr-āshob* genre has a long history, and its history is a history of naming. In Persian the *shahrāshūb* or *shahrangīz* was the “city disturber,” the beautiful young tradesman whose charms threw a city into uproar; Sunil Sharma calls it “more often a topos than a literary genre” (73). From the fifteenth century such poems came to be written “for a city and ruler who are named therein” (74). In eighteenth-century Urdu, the city disturber became the disturbed city: the Persian city poem turned into the *shahr-āshob*, “a lament for a declining city” (Sharma 77). Na‘im Ahmad, introducing his 1968 anthology, defines it as the classical form in which, “without any particular constraint of form,” the ruin of common people and elite alike, brought about by political, social and economic crisis, is set down (9–10). The poems he gathers are tied to named places: Delhi, Awadh, Bihar, Akbarabad, Hyderabad, Rohilkhand (10). Eve Tignol adds the other half of the definition: the Urdu genre was marked by a mood, melancholy, “and especially by a particular subject: the city” (562). Frances Pritchett, summarizing the critical consensus she goes on to question, describes the poems as “extremely localized”, a phrase she takes from Fritz Lehmann (37, 41n4), each poet lamenting “the past greatness and present decline of his own particular city” (37).

The *shahr-āshob*, in other words, presupposes a place that had a

name worth losing. After 1857 the poets of Delhi pressed this further than ever. Tignol notes that earlier poems had left their ruins “metaphorical, abstract and anonymous,” whereas the contributors to *Fughān-e Dehlī* (The Lament for Delhi), compiled by Tafazzul Husain Khan Kaukab in 1863, named particular monuments and sometimes described them (568). One of them, Hakim Muhammad “Ahsan,” makes the name itself the last thing standing. In Pasha Mohamad Khan’s translation, the *lām* (ل) in the written name of Delhi becomes a flagpole and the *he* (ہ) a flag, “now that nothing’s left but Delhi’s name and trace” (Khan 107). The classical lament ends with the name; the city has gone, the word remains.

Naqvi’s village does not have even that. His grandfather, one of its first settlers, proposed a name for it and had it approved in the government’s papers, “but to this day nobody calls it by that name, so why should I?” (92). Naqvi himself, “a small and cowardly storyteller” (ایک چھوٹا اور بزدل کہانی کار), gives it and the towns around it invented names, and places it vaguely between two others (91–92). The local landmarks are named by talk, not by record: the well of an unknown Sayyid, where the cattle always sickened, came to be called the “sick well” rather than the Sayyids’ well (”ڈکھی“ سے زیادہ ”سیدوں کا کھوہ“). Delhi’s poets mourned a city whose name outlived it. Naqvi mourns a place whose official name never lived at all. This is what makes the subtitle audacious. It is not simply that Naqvi gives a prose collection the nomenclature of a verse genre, or that he brings a metropolitan form to the countryside; Na’im Ahmad’s own definition imposes no particular constraint of verse form. In other words, he borrows a lament built around a named center for a place whose center has no name. The lament has a hole at its center: the classical *shahr-āshob* mourns a city that had a name to lose, and the place Naqvi mourns has no name that anyone uses. The hole is the point.

Naqvi is aware of what the subtitle commits him to, and he returns to the word *shahr-āshob* twice within the story itself. Recalling elections and the police station, he calls them “the lines of the *shahr-āshob* written on my heart, from which the spring of this pain wells up” (میرے دل پہ لکھے شہر) (103). And after one of his digressions, he explains why the personal keeps breaking into the public genre: *ham dehāt vāloñ kī shahr-āshob meñ āp-būtī is liye bhī dar ātī hai* (ہم دیہات والوں)

کی شہر آشوب میں آپ بیتی اس لیے بھی در آتی ہے when we villagers write a *shahr-āshob*, our own lives find their way into it), because “we cannot be seen apart from our soil, nor our soil apart from us” (ہمیں ہماری مٹی سے جدا کر کے اور ہماری مٹی کو ہم سے جدا کر کے نہیں) (دیکھا جاسکتا) (116). The sentence is the book’s apology for its method and its warrant. The genre converts into public grief that which might read as private grievance – the narrator’s memories of his village on the bus out of it. The *shahr-āshob* is the form in which a community’s ruin, not one man’s, is set down; by claiming it, Naqvi claims that the unnamed village is a community and that its ruin is a public fact.

The public facts are there. On the road out of the village, tin boards outside every settlement carry a local painter’s portraits of the district’s soldiers, sent off by their mothers “with great pride or out of great necessity” (بڑے فخر سے یا پھر بڑی مجبوری میں), who came home wrapped in the flag from a war fought, ostensibly, for *amn-e ‘ālam* (امن عالم), the peace of the world) (133). The portraits multiply day by day, and beside them now hang those of the politicians, with thanks and flattery in large letters, and boards announcing the millions of rupees spent on development along the same road (133). The road is the development; the boards are its advertisement. The boards do what the classical poet did: they name the dead and the powerful, and they name them in public. What they cannot name is the place itself. The fullest statement of its condition is given, fittingly, by a barber. Iqbal Nai tells the gathering that the road looks to him like the greedy tongue of city people, outside settlers and occupiers, stretched this far *hamārī zamīnoñ ko chāṭne ke liye* (ہماری زمینوں کو چاٹنے کے لیے), to lick up our land) (137–38). The barber is a stock figure of the old *shahr-āshob*, where his idleness and blunt razors stand for a ruined economy (Ahmad 17). In Naqvi he has a voice. Naqvi hands the genre’s argument to one of its old emblems of decline.

If the book is a *shahr-āshob*, its catalogue is not of trades but of names: the names the state issues, the names men take for themselves, and the names a village gives its people when no one is looking. This catalogue is the subject of the next section.

A Census Kept by the Village

The Urdu *shahr-āshob* catalogued a ruined city trade by trade. Sharma notes that the same catalogue device anticipates the ethnographic surveys of the colonial period, which mapped Indian society by caste and community across “a larger socio-geographic region” rather than a single

metropolis (76–77). Naqvi's book keeps a catalogue too, but its entries are names. They fall into three kinds: the names men take for themselves, the names that power issues, and the names a village gives its people when no one official is listening.

The first kind is the oldest figure in the genre. Na'im Ahmad observes that the pre-1857 poets treated the rise of low-born men to wealth and status as the age turned upside down, and met the newly risen with contempt (Ahmad 20–21). Tignol describes the same poems as picturing a world "turned upside down," with "the morally and occupationally 'inferiors' rising in status" (563). The colonial census recorded the process in prose. Ibbetson quotes a Panjabi saying, "Last year I was a weaver, this year I am a Shekh; next year if prices rise I shall be a Saiyad," and adds that the true Saiyads, "after waiting for a generation or so till the absurdity of the story is not too obvious, accept the fiction" (10).

Naqvi's version runs to schedule. A *mīrāsī* (میرائی, hereditary musician and genealogist) from across the river settles in the district and first becomes "Mian." He cultivates the local notables and becomes "Hashmi." After a year of ridicule people begin to call him "Shah Sahib," in sarcasm; and once his business grows and he attaches himself to a politician, "within five or seven years" he is called a Sayyid "with full majesty" (پانچ سات سال کے اندر ہی پوری جلالت مآبی سے سید کہلانے لگا) (36). The village's real Sayyids, Urdu-speaking *muhājirs* (مہاجر), are too poor to fight him: "all they had left, after all, was their honor" (آخر لے دے کے ان کے پاس بھی تو وہی ناموس ہی بچی تھی) (36). Up to this point Naqvi could be a classical shahr-āshob poet, sneering at an upstart from the safety of an old name.

He does not stay there. The narrator of "Bholā Gujjar Shahīd" (بھولا گجر, Bholā Gujjar, Martyr), a journalist who signs himself Malik Shaukat Ali Rehmani, explains in passing that his own grandfather "went from Manna Kumhar to Malik Manzoor Hussain Rehmani" (میرے دادا مٹا کمہار سے ملک منظور حسین رحمانی بنے) through the favors of a Gujjar patron, and then declines to go on: "well, that is a long story" (خیر وہ تو لمبی کہانی ہے) (63). The potter's son has become a Malik, by exactly the route the *mīrāsī* took. Even the narrator of "Shahr-e Madfūn" admits that "the virtue of being a Sayyid" got him into the village's secret video screenings free of charge (سید ہونے کی فضیلت کے ناتے) (112). The upstart, in this book, is not only the other man. The classical poet mocked the newly named from the security of an old name; Naqvi's narrators have no such security. This is why the book's

names cannot simply be sorted into outside and inside, official and true. What they have in common is that the names which carry weight are conferred by power: by a patron, a politician, a government office.

The second kind of name is issued directly by that power, and it is the most violent. Adnan Gujjar, known to everyone as Bhola, gets his post in the police through a relative who has just been made a provincial minister (64). He has already killed one man when he kills his own sister: when Farhana refuses to close her beauty parlor, he calls it a *chaklā* (چکلا, brothel); she answers that the brothel is his police station, “where the law dances like a whore” (جہاں قانون رنڈی بن کر ناچتا ہے); and he strikes her on the head with his hockey stick (72). The heirs forgive him and he is back in uniform within three months (73). When he is killed during an attack by men from a proscribed militant organization, nobody can say whether the bullet that killed him came from the attackers or from the police; the Chief Minister and the Inspector General each in turn lay a hand on his widow’s head and are photographed doing so, and the state names him *shahīd* (شہید, martyr) (75). The narrator apologizes, with savage courtesy, that his “unsparing pen” has not spared even the policeman “whom God had chosen for martyrdom” (میرے بے لحاظ قلم نے اس تھانے دار سے بھی رعایت نہ کی جسے خدا نے شہادت کے لئے چن رکھا تھا) (75).

“Qaumī Shanākhṭī Kārḍ” (قومی شناختی کارڈ, National Identity Card) is the clearest case of a name issued by the state. Manak, a young Musalli³ who sings *Hīr* (ہیر) at the village well, is persuaded that the identity card will make him a citizen with rights. When the police need a suspect, he walks into the station holding it. “What does it say?” the SHO laughs. “Is it an MPA’s card, or an MNA’s?”⁴ (ایم پی اے کا کارڈ ہے یا ایم این اے کا؟) (86). His tongue is cut with a blade; when he can walk again, he throws the card into the stove, and the village renames him Gūngā Musalli (گوگامصلی) or Manak the Mute (87). The card names him a citizen and cannot save his tongue; the name the village gives him, Gūngā, the mute, records the loss of it.

Names issued by power need not come from the state. In “Zanjīr” (زنجیر, chain), Sonia, the daughter of Master Rehmat Masih, converts to

³Musalli: in the Punjab, a Muslim community of landless laborers, descended from converts from the sweeper (Chuhra) caste and placed at the bottom of the village hierarchy.

⁴MPA: Member of the Provincial Assembly. MNA: Member of the National Assembly.

marry Tasawwur Ali and becomes Sadia Fatima. On the morning of the wedding, he tells her: “In the privacy of this room you will stay Sonia; outside, in the eyes of the world, be Sadia Fatima if you must” (تم اس کمرے کی (195). The name is split between the room and the world, and the story, written knowingly in the manner of an Urdu digest, keeps both. In “Ashfāq aur us kā Dost Mangol” (اشفاق اور اس کا دوست منگول), the soldier the two recruits call Mangol, who is “certainly not a Mongol” (157), is later identified as “M. K. Sherani, *Tamghah-e Basālat*” (ایم کے شیرانی تمغہ بسالت) (172), with a gallantry medal in his official name (172).

The third kind of name is given by the village, and it is the book’s counter-record. Karam Khan Baloch was once “Sardar Karam Hussain Khan Baloch of Kot Sukhay Khan, former chairman of the Union Council” (سردار کرم حسین خان بلوچ آف کوٹ سکھے خان، سابق چیئرمین یونین کونسل) (154). The bus in “Hamrāhī” belongs to a Baloch but is still called “Bhatti Time” (بھٹی ٹائم), after Amir Bhatti, who ran the first such bus on the road some twenty-five years ago; the narrator shrugs, *khair, nām meñ kyā rakhā hai* (خیر، نام میں کیا رکھا ہے, well, what’s in a name?) (152). In “Nām Bakhtāvar Singh” (نام بختاور سنگھ, Name: Bakhtawar Singh), a young man called Mir Khusrau Talat is known as Bakhtawar Singh, “the fortunate,” because his luck is the opposite of what the name promises, and the nickname shortens to “Bakhtu” (223).

These names are not kind. Gūngā is a cruelty, and so is Bholā. What I have called their accuracy is something narrower: they record what has happened to a person rather than what he claims or what he has been assigned. The official name asserts; the nickname remembers. Ibbetson’s census and the shahr-āshob’s catalogue of trades both sorted people from above. Naqvi’s catalogue is kept by the village, and it is less flattering and more exact than either.

1971: From the Ranks

The book’s most sustained act of naming concerns a war that Pakistani literature has been reluctant to name at all. Writing in 1983,

Muhammad Umar Memon found the Urdu treatment of 1971 “both sparse and casual” (107): “a few diaries, two to three dozen short stories, and a handful of elegiac poems” (108). The one public debate among writers, held in Lahore in July 1973, was about their apathy to the plight of the Pakistani prisoners of war rather than the meaning of the separation (107). Cara Cilano, writing almost three decades later, still describes the literature as “at times, modest in quantity” and its criticism as scant (5–6). Memon’s own map of the corpus does not identify an enlisted writer. His writers fall into three groups: Urdu speakers living in East Pakistan, West Pakistanis stationed there, and, the bulk of them, West Pakistanis who never went (108). The one writer he names who was taken prisoner, Masud Mufti, was a civil servant (108 n. 7). With few exceptions, Memon concludes, “cliches and stereotypes predominate” (108), and most Pakistanis share the ethos of the weaker writers rather than the “solitary concerns” of Intizar Husain (125).

Naqvi opens his book with a sepoy. “Sipāhī Tanvīr Ḥusain kī Dā’irī” (سپاہی تنویر حسین کی ڈائری, The Diary of Sepoy Tanvir Hussain) is a war diary in dated entries, beginning on 3 December 1971 with the declaration of war, and it is written in the English the army lent to Urdu: formations receive “orders,” the companies Alpha, Charlie and Delta are to “move” to the border, Tanvir’s company is to “hold” the village of Rahimpur, the men are “fallen in” after the morning parade (آرڈر، موو، ہولڈ، فالٹی) (9). The prose does not comment; it records. Its authority is the ordinary man’s. When word comes that Captain Durrani has been killed, Tanvir writes that he has no strength left to cry, and then: “God knows what will be written in the books about whom Captain Durrani, who used to curse the government, gave his life for, but I know that he gave it only for his *javāns*” (کتاؤں میں) (24). The books will name a cause; the sepoy names the men.

The diary ends with the surrender, and the story ends in another voice. A short third-person note, in the manner of a service record, reports that most of Tanvir’s platoon were handed over by the Indian army to the Mukti Bahini and later killed; that Tanvir suffered a stroke in the prisoner-of-war camp at Agra; that on his return in 1973 he was retired on medical grounds; and that “both sons of Sepoy (Retired) Tanvir Hussain” (تنویر حسین کے دونوں بیٹے [ریٹائرڈ] سپاہی) could not study beyond middle school and now farm the family land (25). The last name the story gives him is his rank, with a bracket.

The same war returns in “Chāchā Ellis Kadūrī” as a charge, and the man who brings it is the mīrāsī who made himself a Sayyid. When Karam Khan stands again for the chairmanship of the union council, Mian Ghaffar Shah petitions the court that he deserted the army in 1971 and is unfit to stand. Karam Khan tells the judge that he was the only son of a well-off family, that he enlisted at seventeen against his mother’s wishes, and that when he came back from captivity in Bengal his mother had died waiting for him; heartbroken, he never returned to service. He lays before the judge her last letter, which had reached him through the Red Crescent at Ranchi, and the judge’s eyes fill up with tears. But the judge’s answer is procedural: “whether it is the motherland or a loving mother, in love of either a man may do anything” (مادر وطن ہو یا مادر مہربان ہو، دونوں کی محبت میں انسان کچھ بھی کر بیٹھتا ہے), but Karam Khan had better withdraw his papers, or the case must go to the regimental center for verification (36). Ghaffar Shah, now “Mian Ghaffar Shah Hashmi” (میاں غفار شاہ ہاشمی), is elected chairman (37). The sepoy is left with the name *bhagorā* (بھگور) or deserter; the name that wins the election is Hashmi. “Shikast” (شکست, defeat, breakage) turns the view round. Its central voice, a retired Indian Gorkha colonel, Ranbir Thapa, working as a security officer at an oil refinery in Iraq alongside a former Pakistani squadron leader, Shahid Laghari (139), tells his guests that “perhaps” *shikast* is a Persian word and means not only “defeat” but also “breakage” and “damage” (شکست فارسی زبان کا لفظ ہے شاید۔ اس کا مطلب Defeat ہی نہیں، Breakage بھی ہے، Damage بھی۔) which are what a soldier’s share always is (141). Then he tells what he did. After a battle with a Pathan company, Diler Singh ordered the wounded to be finished off with bayonets; when Thapa drove his bayonet into a wounded Pathan, the man gripped it with his bloodied hand: “he was a lance naik” (اس نے اپنے خون سے لتھڑے ہاتھ سے میری سنگین کو پکڑ لیا۔ یہ لانس نائیک تھا) (143). And he explains his silence in terms that make the essay’s point for it. Squadron Leader Laghari will not talk to you about 1971, he tells the others, perhaps because the faces that swim before your eyes are General Niazi’s and General Arora’s; “but I will not talk because the Pathan lance naik and Captain Hashim are etched deep on my conscious and my unconscious” (میرے شعور اور لاشعور پہ پٹھان لانس نائیک اور کیپٹن ہاشم کے نقش گہرے ہیں) (148). The generals have names that every reader knows. The man who haunts the colonel is known only by his rank and his people.

The book does not leave 1971 in 1971. In “Ashfāq aur us kā Dost Mangol,” two young recruits serve in a cantonment at the start of what

Naqvi calls “that ugly century” (وہ بد صورت صدی), when soldiers no longer went to a battlefield to fight, and “an absurd and entirely unsoldierly death” (ایک بیہودہ سی اور بالکل غیر سپاہیانہ سی موت) found them instead at the cantonment gate, in the mess hall, on the seat of an army lorry or in a bazaar crowd: “so ugly a war that no one will want to write a novel about it or make a film of it” (یہ اتنی بد صورت جنگ تھی کہ اس پر کوئی ناول لکھنا چاہے گا نہ کوئی فلم بنانا پسند کرے گا) (159). When Bobby is killed and his body is flown home from Jacobabad, his father turns out to be a retired *ṣūbedār* (صوبیدار) who was taken prisoner in both 1965 and 1971 (181). The father belongs to the war that Pakistani fiction wrote about only sparsely; the son to the war that Naqvi’s own generation fought and that nobody, he says, will want to write either. Between them the collection claims both wars, and it claims them from below.

Form and its Evasions

The collection is formally restless. “Zanjīr” is subtitled *ek kahānī, dā’ijast ke rang meñ* (ایک کہانی، ڈائجسٹ کے رنگ میں), a story in the manner of an Urdu digest) (193), and it borrows the popular magazine’s plotting without apology.

The longest piece is where the form strains. “Shahr-e Madfūn” runs to fifty-one pages (88–138), held together only by a bus ride out of the village, and its memories are arranged by topic rather than by any narrative logic. Naqvi closes three of its digressions with the same formula, *kḥair, yeh jumlaḥ-e mu’tarīzah thā* (خیر یہ جملہ معترضہ تھا), well, that was a parenthesis) (112, 116, 129). Each time the formula comes immediately after the most personally exposed material in the story. The first follows his admission that being a Sayyid won him free entry to the village’s clandestine video screenings (112). The second follows a confession of lost faith: the decades that shattered the idols of every creed, “even of the gods” (حتیٰ کہ خداؤں کے بھی), have left standing only the shrine, the *ṣanam-kadah* (صنم کدہ), in which the martyrs of every religion, color and race are enshrined (116). The third follows the plot to throw acid on the procession of Ashura, the tenth of Muharram, after which Ashura was no longer a memorial the whole village shared (129). The formula is at once an admission and a hedge. It calls a parenthesis what is in fact the argument, and it lets analysis arrive as commentary rather than as story. The proof is the exception: where Naqvi dramatizes instead of explaining, as with the barber’s speech about the road (137–38), the story

is at its strongest.

The finest scene in the book is also in “Shahr-e Madfūn.” In the month of Ramzan, the period of obligatory fasting, the village’s second television set shows a documentary about Madina, and someone tells the narrator’s grandmother to look at the beautiful streets of the Prophet’s city. She looks. Yes, they are beautiful, she says; but if Husain had to leave them, what kind of beautiful streets are they? And she turns her face away and weeps into her *chādar* (چادر) (119). The scene needs no gloss. Naqvi supplies one anyway: “to this day even my atheism envies that faith” (119) (آج تک میرے الہاد کو بھی اس ایمان پر رشک آتا ہے).

The grandmother’s grief belongs to another genre, and the book knows that too. Tignol shows that from the late eighteenth century the shahr-āshob began to take on “the ‘colour’ of the marṣiyah,” becoming a “secular marṣiyah” (563) and binding the lament for a city durably to the marṣiyah (572). Naqvi’s book turns to that register near its end. Its penultimate story, “Imām Bāre vāle Zaidī Sāhib” (امام باڑے والے زیدی صاحب), Zaidi Sahib of the Imambargah, remembers Syed Panah Hussain Zaidi, a soldier from Faizabad who settles in the narrator’s village and retains his Lakhnavi style of speaking to the end. At a *majlis* (مجلس) in the Punjabis’ imambargah, when the reciter, a Baloch from the next village, rebukes him for keeping his crested turban on at a mourning assembly, he answers: *yih tere jadd-e amjad kā sog hai yā mere?* (یہ تیرے جد امجد کا سوگ ہے یا میرے؟, is this your forefathers’ mourning or mine?) “This is my household’s affair” (یہ میرے گھر کا معاملہ ہے) (217). The Punjabi mind, the narrator observes, was still far from the tradition of mourning that “Mir Mustahsan Khaliq, Anis and Dabir” had raised in Lucknow and Delhi, and Zaidi Sahib founds an imambargah of his own for the muhājir Sayyids (217). The dispute is, once again, over a name: whose lineage owns the grief.

The story closes on the narrator, now freed by “the conceit of scientific thought” from the creeds of both worlds but not from the bonds of culture, predicting that a future generation of rationalists will find itself compelled to write the *tazkirah* “not of us, but of such madmen” (222). The shahr-āshob becomes a *tazkirah*, and the lament for a place without a name becomes a memorial for a man who knew exactly whose name he bore.

Stakes

Diyār-o Dasht deserves an English readership for more than its region. It shows that the *shahr-āshob*, usually filed away as a genre of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century verse about cities, remains a working form for twenty-first-century prose about places that were never cities. The classical poets mourned a city whose name outlived it; Naqvi mourns a district whose official names never took hold, and he finds its truth in the names the district gave itself: Gūngā, Bhatti Time, Chacha Ellis Kaduri, a sepoy with “(Retired)” after his rank. The book’s faults, the digressions it calls parentheses and the analyses it offers in place of story, are the faults of a writer still deciding how much of himself the genre can hold. Its achievement is to have found, in a village that is not even a town, a lament with a hole at its center, and to have understood that the hole is the point.

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