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#### Book Review

*Ek Waraq by*  
**Justice Shamim Saifi**  
*Translated as*  
***A Leaf Unturned*<sup>1</sup> by Syed Sarwar**  
**Hussain**

*Reviewed by*  
**Syed Imtiaz Hasnain**

What one encounters in *A Leaf Unturned*, a carefully curated translation by Syed Sarwar Hussain, is not merely a collection of short stories but an entire moral and metaphysical landscape—at once intimate and unsettling, lyrical yet unrelenting. The anthology, drawn from Shamim Saifi’s original Urdu collection *Ek Waraq*, bears the unmistakable imprint of a writer who was as much a philosopher of the human condition as he was a storyteller. Hussain’s translation, meanwhile, undertakes the formidable task of carrying across not only Saifi’s narratives but also the tonal subtleties, cultural textures, and layered ironies that define his prose. The result is a volume that is at once intellectually provocative and emotionally resonant, even if at times it reveals the inherent tensions of translation itself.

From the outset, the Introduction situates Saifi as a writer deeply invested in the exploration of interiority—of fractured identities, moral ambiguities, and the existential weight borne by individuals caught between desire and constraint. This framing is not merely descriptive but programmatic: it prepares the reader for a body of work that consistently resists narrative comfort. Saifi’s stories do not resolve; they linger. They do not reassure; they unsettle. And above all, they demand that the reader participate in the act of meaning-making.

<sup>1</sup> Published in 2025 by Naamak Publications, New Delhi.

At the thematic core of the anthology lies a persistent engagement with the idea of incompleteness—of lives half-lived, desires half-articulated, and identities perpetually in flux. In the title story, “A Leaf Unturned,” this sense of incompleteness is rendered through the haunting figure of Neelum, a courtesan whose life unfolds within the claustrophobic confines of Nath Road. Her yearning to “turn over a new leaf” is not merely a personal aspiration but a metaphor for the human desire for moral renewal in a world that offers little possibility of redemption. The imagery of “stale sweets” and “fallen fruits” that pervades the setting is emblematic of Saifi’s symbolic method: the external world mirrors the inner decay of his characters, creating a seamless interplay between environment and psyche.

What is particularly striking in this story—and indeed throughout the collection—is Saifi’s refusal to sentimentalise suffering. Neelum’s predicament is rendered with empathy but without indulgence. Her hunger, both literal and metaphorical, becomes a driving force that ultimately exposes the fragility of her moral resolve. The closing moment, in which she resists the call of yet another client, is not a triumphant assertion of agency but a precarious, almost desperate act of self-preservation. The “untuned leaf” remains as much a possibility as an illusion.

If “A Leaf Untuned” explores the commodification of the body, “The Lost Paradises” turns inward to examine the commodification of the mind. Here, the protagonist’s struggle to prepare for examinations becomes a metaphor for the broader tension between institutionalised knowledge and lived experience. The narrative oscillates between the mundane reality of academic pressure and the dreamlike recollections of past relationships and youthful aspirations. This oscillation is not merely stylistic but thematic: it underscores the fragmentation of consciousness in a modern world that demands both productivity and emotional suppression. Saifi’s use of literary allusion—particularly to Milton and the idea of paradise—adds a further layer of complexity. The “lost paradises” of the title are not simply nostalgic memories but epistemological constructs: they represent alternative modes of being that are rendered inaccessible by the demands of modern life. The protagonist’s eventual return to his books is thus deeply ironic. Knowledge, which promises enlightenment, becomes instead a form of entrapment.

Perhaps the most overtly philosophical story in the collection, “A Socrates Reborn,” extends this exploration of existential disquiet into the

realm of absurdism. The protagonist's request for "poison," revealed to be coffee, is both a parody of classical philosophy and a commentary on contemporary alienation. The dialogues with inanimate objects—a cup, an ashtray—are reminiscent of surrealist techniques, yet they serve a distinctly existential purpose. By externalising the protagonist's inner turmoil, Saifi exposes the inadequacy of conventional language to articulate modern suffering. What emerges from this story is a profound sense of dislocation. The protagonist is surrounded by people, yet remains fundamentally alone; he is materially secure, yet spiritually impoverished. His inability to identify the source of his sorrow becomes, paradoxically, the very essence of his suffering. This is a recurring motif in Saifi's work: the idea that the modern individual is not only alienated from others but also from himself.

In "On the Edge of a Spear," Saifi's philosophical concerns take on a more overtly allegorical form. The descending sun, poised ominously close to the earth, functions as a symbol of impending catastrophe—whether personal, societal, or cosmic remains deliberately unclear. The narrative's fragmented structure, with its abrupt shifts in perspective and tone, mirrors the instability of the world it depicts. Conversations about surgery, domestic quarrels, and metaphysical speculation coexist in a manner that is both disorienting and revealing. What distinguishes this story is its capacity to juxtapose the trivial and the profound. The mundane details of everyday life—arguments over food, delays in returning home—are set against the backdrop of existential inquiry. This juxtaposition serves to highlight the absurdity of human existence: even as the "sun" descends, individuals remain preoccupied with their immediate concerns. The "edge of a spear" thus becomes a potent metaphor for the precariousness of life itself.

A similar tension between the spiritual and the corporeal animates "The Fragrance of Her Crimson Lips." Here, Saifi delves into the complexities of religious identity and erotic desire, crafting a narrative that is as sensuous as it is introspective. The protagonist's oscillation between different religious spaces—temple, mosque, church—reflects his futile attempt to escape the pull of memory and desire. The "fragrance" of the titular lips becomes an almost tactile presence, haunting him across these spaces. What is particularly noteworthy is Saifi's refusal to privilege one form of experience over another. Spiritual devotion and carnal longing are presented not as opposites but as intertwined aspects of the human condition. The protagonist's failure to reconcile these impulses is not portrayed as a moral failing but as an existential inevitability.

“The Angel” expands the scope of the collection by introducing a more explicitly socio-political dimension. Through the figure of Iblis and his journey with the angels, Saifi offers a scathing critique of human violence and moral hypocrisy. The inclusion of historical references—Hiroshima, Gandhi—anchors the narrative in a recognisable reality, lending it a sense of urgency and relevance. Yet even here, Saifi resists didacticism. The story’s conclusion, which gestures towards the possibility of redemption through individual acts of compassion, is deliberately understated. Hope, in Saifi’s universe, is never absolute; it is always contingent, fragile, and often fleeting.

Stories such as “The Throne of Smoke,” “Crying for the Spring,” and “The City of Mirrors”—continue to explore variations on these central themes. Whether it is the tension between personal fulfilment and societal expectation, the fragility of human relationships, or the multiplicity of identity, Saifi’s narratives consistently return to the question of what it means to be human in a world that resists coherence.

If Saifi’s thematic concerns are undeniably compelling, the success of the anthology ultimately depends on the quality of its translation. In this regard, Syed Sarwar Hussain’s work is both admirable and instructive. His translation is marked by a clear commitment to fidelity—not merely to the literal meaning of the text but to its emotional and cultural resonance. The cadence of the prose, the richness of the imagery, and the subtle shifts in tone are, for the most part, effectively conveyed. Particularly commendable is Hussain’s handling of metaphor. Urdu prose, with its deeply ingrained poetic sensibility, often relies on metaphor as a primary mode of expression. Translating such metaphors into English without flattening their nuance is no small feat. In many instances, Hussain succeeds in preserving the evocative power of Saifi’s imagery, allowing the English reader to experience something of the original’s lyrical intensity.

However, the translation is not without its limitations. At times, the prose tends towards a certain stiffness, as though constrained by an over-adherence to the source text’s syntactic structure. This occasionally results in sentences that feel slightly laboured or unnatural in English. Similarly, certain cultural references, while retained, are not always sufficiently contextualised, potentially leaving the uninitiated reader at a distance. Yet these are, in many ways, the inevitable challenges of translating a writer like Saifi. His prose is not merely linguistic but cultural, embedded in a specific socio-historical context that resists easy transposition. That Hussain manages to navigate these challenges with as much sensitivity as he does is a testament to his skill and dedication

as a translator.

Indeed, what ultimately distinguishes this translation is its refusal to domesticate the text. Rather than smoothing over the rough edges of Saifi's prose, Hussain allows its complexities to remain visible. This is, perhaps, the most honest approach to translation: one that acknowledges the impossibility of complete equivalence while striving for meaningful approximation.

In conclusion, *A Leaf Unturned* is a deeply affecting and intellectually stimulating anthology that offers a rare glimpse into the philosophical and emotional landscape of a significant Urdu writer. Through its exploration of themes such as desire, identity, alienation, and the search for meaning, it speaks to concerns that are both culturally specific and universally resonant. Hussain's translation, while not without its imperfections, succeeds in bringing these stories to an English-speaking audience with a commendable degree of nuance and integrity. What lingers, long after the final page has been turned, is not a sense of closure but of continuity. Saifi's stories do not end; they echo. They inhabit the reader's consciousness, inviting reflection, provoking discomfort, and, above all, reminding us of the unresolved nature of our own inner lives. In that sense, the anthology does not merely present a series of narratives—it offers an experience, one that is as unsettling as it is illuminating.

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