

Farewell, Dear Friend

Shama Askari

The thing that constrains me from writing, and also compels me to write this obituary for Hasan Manzar Sahib is the fact that he opened for me, the doors of friendship and once I, or, for that matter, anyone, had become his friend, one ceased to fear being judged by him or failing to meet his approval, particularly in matters of literary creativity. This towering writer's personality was, in fact, like a safety net, ever ready to protect one from short falls in literary pursuit or achievement.

I was introduced to Manzar Sahib's writings by Dr Asif Farrukhi, during the Covid 19 pandemic. Reading *Waba* during that time had left a deep impression on me. I first met him in 2023 at the Readers and Writers Café



organized by Dr Tanveer Anjum. I clearly remember our first meeting and how I mustered up the courage to request permission to translate the novella. He took his time before replying in the affirmative.

I sent him a section of the first draft of my translation, and didn't hear from him for a couple of weeks. Naturally, I grew anxious, believing

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that perhaps my work hadn't met his approval. Almost as if he had read my fears, I soon received his email saying that his days were passing in silence because he had lost his wife to Covid. He was also housebound owing to restrictions imposed by the government; but he had decided not to *spend* his time in silence; therefore, I should complete the translation with his blessings, and give him a call, if I ever felt stuck or needed to discuss something.

This was followed by a WhatsApp message saying that he was more comfortable working with people he 'knew' better. He asked me to tell him more about myself, about my family and my pets and that is when I moved on from being a translator to becoming a friend. Often, he would sign off his emails as "Your friend, Old Man Manzar," much to my delight.

On 22 September 2026, I received an email from Dr Fatima, confirming that *Urdu Studies* would be including my English translation of *Waba* or "Epidemic" in this year's issue. I was overjoyed, because Manzar Sahib was very keen to see it in print in English translation. I messaged him that "Epidemic" had found a platform that would take it to a wider readership. When I got no reply, I worried, because it was unlike him to overlook prompt responses to messages. I felt uneasy, and I messaged Fatima to let her know he probably wasn't well. We bolstered each other's morale, and she kindly said that I could read it to him in the coming days when he was better.

But that was not meant to be.

True to his quiet lifestyle, Manzar Sahib left silently, without a fuss – There were no loud public announcements of his passing, just a palpable quietness which held love, respect, kindness and spirituality.

Dr Asif Farrukhi had written an article on Manzar Sahib titled "The Man Behind The Fiction," which was published in *Dawn* in 2011. He wrote, "richly detailed and meticulously crafted stories engross you to the degree that it is only much later that you realise, where did the author go?"

Manzar Sahib admired the writings of Axel Munthe, a Swedish doctor who wrote *The Story of Saint Michele*. And he left behind, for us, characters – myriad voices – a smorgasbord of people and places, each to be savored and celebrated. His writing was pithy – at times detached and sparse, never sentimental – which in turn made his work all the more poignant and powerful. I received the news of his passing – and I know I am privileged to have known him at all.

Attending the du'a at his home, I sat near the corner where he would sit and sip his coffee, his walking frame by his side, the tray attached to it laden with books, papers, and his phone. He never forgot to keep on it, the books he intended to pass on to you to for further reading. His home was calm and peaceful as though the radiance of angels was filling it up. I saw people reading the *siparabs* with reverence. Sitting in that room, memories came flooding in.

Rabies has taken an ugly turn in the country. He was adamant that with his vast experience as a doctor and psychiatrist, he must write and inform the public about it, because he feared it would turn into an outbreak. He sent me numerous articles about dog bites, adding "one more heart wrenching news," as cases of dog bites increased. One day, he messaged, asking me to co-write an article he had conceived – "Rabies: Preventable not Curable" – his '*jihad*' against rabies. He told me candidly that he was finding it difficult to put sentences together and added that he would provide me the information and I should write it with/for him. Writing this grim, raw article wasn't without its lighter moments. Once the article was complete, he said: "Now publish it under your name." I told him I couldn't because I wasn't an infectious diseases expert. He went on to advise that I should inform the publisher that I got the information from a 'doctor friend.' I replied that the publisher would prefer my doctor friend's name over mine! Then, he conceded on the condition that I put his name down as Dr Manzar Hasan, not the other way round, because he preferred to remain incognito. I recall his telling me once, that the writer residing inside the doctor was considerably older – by at least two or three decades.

To say that Manzar Sahib was deeply affected by other people's pain is possibly an understatement; he lived their agony. The genocide in Gaza gave him sleepless nights. Once, in complete agitation, he said the 'zombie' cartoons children watched were neither fictitious nor cartoons. Because 'zombies' were raised in 'kibbutzim' ensuring they would be incapable of rational thought. From birth, these people were brain washed to kill on command without hesitation or question, even if it meant killing babies. I recalled that he sent money from his book sales to a fund supporting Palestinian children. I later found out he supported a local children's cancer hospital through his book sales as well.

We last met on the 19 of July. He often said life that was meant to be lived robustly, with *joie de vivre*. He told me that the novel he had been working on for the last two decades had been handed over to a trusted colleague, adding that he couldn't sort out the chapters or edit it

any longer. But he knew that he had to surrender it sooner rather than later to someone to finalize it for him. There was a quiet acceptance that life was finite. I looked up a line he had written to console me when a dear friend and mentor passed away last year: “I believe in the continuation of life after death.”

Shama Askari is a translator and performing artist. She has been associated with the performing arts for the last twenty years. She started her acting career in theatre in 1999, with *Tehrik-e-Niswan*, and then moved on to television, film, and dramatized readings, performing all over Pakistan as well as India. In 2021, Shama was selected to be a part of the Transforming Narratives – Cultural Leadership Programme supported by the British Council, which provided a platform for collaboration between creatives from UK, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. She completed a project ‘Producers of the Future: From Keighley to Karachi’, led by the Bradford Literature Festival 2021. She worked with the Adab Festival Pakistan and was the Project Director of the festival in 2022. She has worked with Dr Asif Farrukhi compiling and collecting Ibn-e-Sa’id’s work, which was published by Oxford University Press in 2017. She was the runner-up to the Jawad Memorial Prize in 2022. She has translated the following texts: *Hiroshima and Other Stories* by Ibn-e-Sa’id (Lightstone Publishers; 2022); “Begum” by Ibn-e-Sa’id; published in *Urdu Studies* (<https://urdustudies.in/>; 2023); *Queen Zarga: A Transgender’s Odyssey* (the Pashto Nainzak; Lightstone Publishers; 2024); “The Story of a Drop Caught in a Moustache” by Jeem Abbasi (excerpted from *مونیچہ میں اگلے ایک قطرے کی کہانی*; Pakistan Academy of Letters; October 2026).