



Sahitya Akademi

12 November 2010

meet the author

Syed Muhammad Ashraf





His writings are born of a deep crisis. He has fathomed the human suffering from very close quarters. Ours is the age of a callous, insensitive, ignorant and crime-ridden society while man is being transformed. Whenever an anthology of the stories of our age will be compiled, some of Ashraf's stories are bound to find a place in it.

Qurratulain Hyder

Born on 8 July 1957 at Sitapur, a town in the Awadh region in UP, Syed Muhammad Ashraf belongs to a family of devout scholars and Sufi saints of Marehra Shareef, district Etah, UP. His father and ancestors headed the renowned Barkaatiah khhanqah that has catered down the ages for the spiritual alleviation of people, irrespective of their caste, colour or creed. The philanthropic, spiritual ambience of his home instilled into the young Ashraf the life-ennobling value system of Sufism, catholicity of mind and love and concern especially for the poor, needy and those in distress. This early sensitization appears to have lent Ashraf's creative mind with poignancy,

pathos and deep sensitivity. Another formative influence on the young Ashraf's mind was his easy, enviable access to the rich library of Barkaatiah khhanqah, housing a treasure of Urdu, Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit literary masterpieces. His grand father, a prose stylist, playwright and broadcaster, who was better known by his pen-name, 'Awara', too, exercised great influence on his supple mind, as he narrated to the young Ashraf marvelous stories, interspersed with all the ingredients of a good drama. Poetry and story recitation sessions were part of his daily life at home. All this drew him closer and deeper into the literary realm at a very young age.

Ashraf's literary predilection



With Saiyid Hamid, who is releasing the first collection of short stories *Daar Se Bichhre* (1995)



Reading his short story. On dias: Qamar Rais, Joginder Paul, Qazi Abdus Sattar and Gopi Chand Narang

was developed and refined further, as he joined the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) for doing BA in Urdu literature. The AMU, acclaimed for its literary and elocutionary contests provided the perfect platform for the blossoming of Ashraf's creative genius. That he took a very prominent part in the co-curricular activities, particularly literary ones, is evident from the several coveted posts he held at the AMU, ranging from Secretary, University Literary Club, Secretary AMU Great Books Club to Editor, *Aftab* Magazine. Also, he was the winner of various prestigious Debating trophies. More importantly, notwithstanding his

preoccupation with literary activities and writing stories which gained wide acclaim on the University campus, he kept earning the highest academic distinctions by standing first in his BA (Hons.) and MA examinations and was awarded Gold Medals for his academic excellence. To crown it all, soon after obtaining his Masters degree he appeared at the highly competitive Civil Service Examinations and set a new record in the history of UPSC as he opted for Urdu as the medium of examination and qualified Civil Service. In 1981 he joined Indian Revenue Service and rose to be the first Income Tax Commissioner at Aligarh in



With Sajid Rasheed, Intizar Hussain, and Salam Bin Razzak

2001, after having served at important positions in the Income Tax Department at Nagpur, Agra, Kanpur and Mumbai. Presently he is posted as Commissioner of Income Tax in New Delhi.

Apart from discharging his professional duty, Ashraf holds the cause of education very dear to his heart. Little wonder then that he has been instrumental in establishing educational institutions for the underprivileged in Kanpur, Marehra and Unnao and founding the sprawling, top quality educational complex, Al-Barkaat Educational Institutions at Aligarh that imparts the education of CBSE 10+2/MBA/B.Ed and other professional courses. Besides, he has delivered lectures on social, educational and cultural issues at the leading Indian universities and also at the Urdu Festival under the aegis of the University of Virginia, USA. He has been closely associated with several prestigious bodies such as Bhasha Samiti for Saraswati Samman, National Council for the Promotion of Urdu Language, HRD Ministry, Indian International Centre and Sahitya Akademi.

While he was only in his teens and a student at the AMU, Ashraf published his first major



Receiving Sahitya Akademi Award from President, Prof. Gopi Chand Narang, 2004

story "Dar Se Bichhre" (Separated from the Flock) which appears in its English translation in *Stories about the Partition of India*, Edited by Alok Bhalla, Delhi, Indus/Harper Collins, 1994, Volume-I. This won acclaim for its narrative, its stylistic features and its diction. Though written in 1970s this story brilliantly recreates the trauma of Partition and the concomitant human tragedy. In the words of Alok Bhalla: "Here suffering is not forgotten, for it can never be, but what is aroused is a new awareness of the gratuitous inflection of pain on the unsuspecting creatures of the earth..." Ashraf draws on the imagery of migratory birds and dexterously applies it for



In Karachi with Ahmed Faraz and Mushtaq Ahmed Yusufi



Participating in South Asian Literary Conference
organized by Sahitya Akademi

grappling with the human condition, especially by way of presenting a parallelism between the helpless women characters and migratory birds as victims and prey. Since the beginning of his career Ashraf did not commit himself to any particular ideology. For, in the words of Barry Lopez, he subscribes to the view: "A story is a piece of disciplined magic. It is the most powerful educational tool we possess. It is also a privileged carrier of truth, a way of allowing for multiplicity and complexity at the same time guaranteeing memorability. Story creates an atmosphere in which truth becomes discernible as a pattern." For him, a story creates its own universe, its unique thematic overtones and undertones, and its symphony, of which the readers are the best judge and critic.

As Urdu-speaking-reading public is addicted to the entrancing charms of the rhyme and rhythm and figurative language of ghazal, Ashraf has painstakingly and successfully retained some of its features in his fiction through his carefully selected imagery, his apt use of the nuances of diction and his special proclivity for capturing the essence and ambience of the natural world, to which he had

easy access as he grew up as a young man in the natural, rural setting of the Gangetic plain with its varied landscape of jungles, animals, ravines and rivers. Nonetheless, his fiction is permeated with the unmissable note of protest against and agony over all forms of oppression, exploitation, fanaticism and the unholy nexus between the organized crime and politics. The strain of social criticism is to the fore in both his novel *Number Dar Ka Neela* (1997) and his other collection of stories *Baad-e Saba Ka Intizar* (2000) which earned for him Sahitya Akademi Award in 2004.

Ashraf is widely recognized today as a first-rate Urdu fiction writer, as is borne out by the wide appreciation his work has received from the leading critics and fellow creative writers. Qurratulain Hyder, Jnanpith Award winner, is on record having paid a glowing tribute to Ashraf's art and craft. Several literary journals in India and Pakistan have brought out special issues devoted to in-depth critical assessment of his writings. His contribution to Urdu fiction has also been studied in some doctoral dissertations.

Ashraf's fiction has added a new dimension to the annals of Urdu literature – of a captivating

narrative, of articulating the universal human tragedy, of scintillating presentation skills, of impeccable diction of evoking

and reinforcing boundless concern and love for fellow human beings, especially those existing on the margins.

A Select Bibliography

Collections of Short Stories

- ◆ 1994 *Daar Se Bichhre*
- ◆ 2000 *Baad-e Saba Ka Intizar*

Novel

- ◆ 1997 *Number Dar ka Neela*

Others

- ◆ Several stories translated into Indian regional languages and English
- ◆ Sahitya Akademi Award winning collection of short stories *Baad-e Saba ka Intizar* translated into English
- ◆ English translation of many stories included in the world class anthologies of modern

Urdu literature, brought out by Penguin, Katha, Sahitya Akademi and Oxford University Press.

- ◆ Authored several books on Sufism and devotional literature
- ◆ A host of leading Indo-Pak Urdu literary journals have brought out special issues, focusing on Ashraf's creative and literary accomplishments.
- ◆ Ashraf's art and craft as a writer have been explored in several Ph.D. and M.Phil dissertations of Urdu. His stories are included in the Urdu syllabus of some institutions.

Chronology

- 1957 Born at Sitapur, UP. He belongs to Marehra, Etah, UP
- 1979 Stood First in BA (Hons.), Aligarh Muslim University.
- 1981 Secured First class in MA (Urdu), Aligarh Muslim University
- 1981 Started career as Civil Servant, being the first successful candidate in the history of UPSC to have qualified Civil Service Examination while opting Urdu as the medium of writing examination.
- 1990 Joint Commissioner, Income Tax, Kanpur
- 1992 Established Sir Syed Public

- Schools in Kanpur and Unnao
- 1995 Katha Award for the Best Short Story in Urdu
- 1995 Founder Vice President, Al-Barkaat Educational Institutions (10+2/MBA/B.Ed./ Girls 10+2 School)
- 2001 First Commissioner, Income Tax, Aligarh
- 2004 Received Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection of short stories *Baad-e Saba ka Intizar*
- 2008 Member Bhasha Samiti for Saraswati Samman
- 2008 Member National Council for Promotion of Urdu Language
- 2008 Delivered lectures at the University of Virginia, USA