of India, the right of Urdu-speakers to receive education in their mother tongue has to be recognized as a fundamental right. Therefore, to promote the teaching and learning of Urdu at the primary and secondary levels of education is the responsibility of the State. I feel that all Urdu lovers must compel the State to act with a sense of urgency and make this fundamental right a reality.

I wonder when it will dawn on our nation that Urdu is the language of India. I wonder what it will take for those who oppose Urdu to see that this fight to preserve Urdu is a fight for India! ❑

—Mahesh Bhatt

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The Uncelebrated Master—Muhammad Khalid Akhtar

For a period of thirteen months between December 2009 and December 2010 I was the Urdu publisher at Oxford University Press, Pakistan. Of the books selected for publication during this time, some works held, beyond their literary importance, a personal significance for me and I considered it a private honor to be involved in their publication. The collected works of modern Urdu literature's great master Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar (1920–2002) was one such project.

Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar was a novelist, short-story writer, essayist, critic, letter writer and author of travelogues. He was also one of Urdu's most sophisticated humorists and a masterful translator whose renderings of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* are important additions to Urdu literature. Greats such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Ibn-e Inshā held his work in high regard: Faiz famously called his *Čakīvaṛa mein Viṣāl* the best novel written in Urdu. During his lifetime, Khālid Ṣāḥib did not receive the recognition that was his due—a collective misfortune for many readers of Urdu literature who could have been introduced to his work sooner. But this work is now available in a standard text for which the OUP Series Editor Ajmal Kamal's work deserves credit, and readers can now engage with this diverse and rich body of work.

I wrote the following piece in 2002 when I learned of Khālid Ṣāḥib's passing. In his last days I was not in Pakistan and had lost contact with him. This essay was never published. Now that his works have been launched, I would like to share it as a small personal introduction to Khālid Ṣāḥib, my friend.

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Essay: Khalid Sahib Has Run Away! Again

Around the same time that I was blacklisted by the British Council Library for deviant behavior in returning books, Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar yet again made an unsuccessful attempt at running away from home. I was 24 then. He was 72. My behavior stemmed from a native apathy to orderliness. He had run away just from sheer ennui or, perhaps, to keep in practice. In his younger days he would run farther away—the disparate geography of undivided India offering an interesting choice of vistas for such escapades. But this time he had made it only to a dingy hotel near the Cantonment railway station—a few blocks from his home in Karachi. Perhaps he had run out of steam, or maybe, he wanted to be found. When we first met, he was still writing, but persisted in the claim that he was "more of a reader." I had yet to write a thing but always introduced myself as a writer. He had retired after a long, uneventful career with the government as an electrical engineer. I had taken a preemptive retirement from such an eventuality by dropping out from the local university's electrical engineering program. But I think that more than anything it was our love of fruitcake that cemented our friendship. Miss Jean Brodie, too, played a part.

When I was introduced to Khālid Akhtar, I had not read any of his books. In fact, I had not even heard his name. I recall that I read his collection of short stories *Kẖōyā huā Ufaq* before I read his novel *Čakīvaṛa mēñ Viṣāl*—the books that would make me his fan forever. Shortly afterwards, one day while we were sipping coffee in a restaurant and I was wondering if it would be all right to finish off the last slice of cake, I asked him what he was writing those days. After repeating his familiar refrain that he was more into reading, he looked away for a moment, and then said, "My writing days are long past! Now young people like you should be doing all the writing!" It greatly flattered my ego to be spoken of as someone on whom the country's literary activity now depended, but I suddenly remembered something I had recently read. And finally picking up the cake slice in a feigned act of abstraction, I said, "Don't say that your writing days are over. According to a certain Miss Jean Brodie, the prime of one's life could start at any age!"

"So, you are reading Muriel Spark!" he said, and his eyes immediately lit up. "Isn't she a wonderful writer!"

"Yes, I have read all her books!" I lied brazenly to make an impression.

The fact was that I had picked up the book from an old books sale in Sadar some time before, thinking, very naturally, that it would be all about the saucy adventures of some lustful wench called Jean Brodie. Although

these expectations met disappointment, I found the book a good read and remembered the one message that had most appealed to me. I thought then that the saying would make a good wall hanging when I reached my dotage if I was still a virgin or an unpublished writer. What had made Khālid Ṣāḥib happy was not so much my veiled suggestion that he should produce another novel, but the discovery that I was reading the books he loved. Sensing his drift, I dropped the names of all the writers I remembered, only some of whom I had actually read, and with this mixture of charlatanism and half-truth, convinced him of my erudition.

One day upon my asking how he started writing, he told me that in the beginning he had mainly written parodies. At that point, dreams of writing aside, I did not know if I would ever write a thing, or what manner of animal it would turn out to be.

Nor was I conscious that I would finally choose to write in English. Set upon proving to him that I was also a word master in the making, I decided to write a parody in Urdu. In the end the piece turned out to be something unquotably scandalous and never saw the light of day. But it won his approval. I remember the big foolish grin that was plastered all over my face that day as I returned home after hearing words that had, in effect, endorsed my existence. From that day, Khālid Ṣāḥib started lending me an assortment of books from his own collection: the yellowing editions of *Tarka the Otter*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*, *Life of Johnson*, *Under the Volcano*, *Watership Down*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and old, old issues of *Punch,* which his friend Shafīqu'r-Raḥmān, another of my favorite Urdu writers, used to send him.

Khālid Ṣāḥib never asked for them back. But while he encouraged me to write, he also felt responsible for me in a paternal way. He would say that he envied my daring to run away from my boring engineering studies (something he confessed to thinking about many times in his student days but never actually carrying out for fear of upsetting his family) while wondering loudly what kind of an end I might meet as a writer. Going by the wayward, ad hoc nature of my existence, things did not look too promising. But in his heart the scales were weighed too heavily in my favor for him to ever bring himself to reprimand me. And knowing a misfit's destiny first hand, he left me alone, except for the few times when he suggested half-heartedly that perhaps it would be best to complete my engineering degree to ensure a secure future. But he always said it without conviction, almost guiltily, like one truant to another. I remember he was very happy when I finally found a job at a newspaper. He thought that apart from providing me with a livelihood, it would also give me a good grounding as a writer.

By then I had started writing in English and had written a few poems

and a couple of children's stories. My friends and I naturally finding our writings most excellent, decided to publish them in our very own small literary magazine. It was then that I found out that many years ago, Khālid Ṣāḥib had written his earliest parodies and stories in English. When I went to see him to ask his opinion of our magazine, he mentioned to me that some well-meaning people who had read my Urdu prose, and knowing of his influence with me, had suggested to him that he should persuade me to write in Urdu. I told him that I had decided to write in English because most of the fiction I read was either originally written in English, or was translated into it, and when I thought of writing something it became difficult not to think in the language I read all the time.

He knew the problem and told me that his first writings were in English too, but persuaded by friends to write in Urdu, he gave up writing in English. He said that he sometimes regretted his decision and would advise me to stick with the language I felt most comfortable writing in.

Years later, when I phoned to give him the news that my novel had been accepted for publication he was overjoyed. He said to me, "Musharraf, my son, it is my triumph!" Knowing myself that my novel was no such remarkable thing that was worthy of making him proud, I think I know why he said those words. He felt that his confidence in my ability to write and the encouragement he had given me had finally been vindicated, and I had lived up to his expectations. However, my first novel owed to him much more than that.

Everyone has heard of the ideal reader for whom every novel is supposedly written. But behind every piece of writing there is also one or more ideal writing(s) from which it derives its legitimacy. In my case, that ideal reader was Khālid Ṣāḥib, and the ideal novel I drew on was *Čakīvaṛa mēñ Viṣāl*. The world of Purana Shehr in my novel was loosely structured around the city of Hyderabad, Pakistan, where I was born. The picaresque world in *Čakīvaṛa mēñ Viṣāl* was drawn from Khālid Ṣāḥib's sojourn in that neighborhood in his younger days. There was a world of difference in time and geography between the two locales, but when I sat down to create the world of my childhood, I fell back on the model of the world created by the master. And I always had it at the back of my mind that if the world in my novel conformed somewhat to the world in his novel, it would validate it in my own eyes. I could never have equaled the master's feat, but my novel got written in the first place because of *Čakīvaṛa mēñ Viṣāl*.

As a writer, Khālid Ṣāḥib forever remained in his "prime of life." His last piece—passages of a travel diary to Iran, Turkey and Greece—was published in the literary magazine *Teḥrīr* not too long ago. But despite

having people like Kanahiyā Lāl Kapūr and Faiz Ahmed Faiz as his declared admirers, to the end of his days this wonderful writer remained unknown outside a small group of readers, and not many in my generation have even heard his name. It was mainly due to the fact that while he desired to be acknowledged and read, he never had the stomach for the usual antics needed to promote oneself in the seedy world of letters, and he kept his renegade's outlook to the last. He did not give up running away either. I heard that the last time he absconded by way of a minibus to pick up some more books from the old books sale in Sadar. And I am sure the expedition was punctuated with breaks for fruitcake and tea. ❑

—Musharraf Ali Farooqi

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