

Obituary

Dr Syed Munir Wasti dies silently - the way he was living

*Jawed Ahmed Khursheed**

A renowned scholar and former head of English department, University of Karachi Dr Syed Munir Wasti died silently from Covid-19 on 25 November 2020. May he rest in peace and may his family be given the courage to bear the loss.

Dr Wasti authored and compiled many books. His research articles were also published in many national and international peer-reviewed research journals. He was awarded PhD degree by the University of Karachi in 2009 on The Writing of James Elroy Flecker with Special Reference to his Treatment of the East. The title of his MPhil degree was Perso-Arab Elements in English Literature 1850-1900.

Dr Munir Wasti hailed from a family of scholars. His father, Professor Syed Jamil Wasti (1905-1981), grandfather Professor Abdul Ghani Wasti (1886-1950) and great-grandfather Ghulam Qadir Wasti Mubarak (1850-1906) were writers and teachers of English literature. Professor Jamil Wasti was a teacher of the well-known poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. His elder brother Syed Tanvir Wasti is also a learned man who is a Professor Emeritus at Middle East Technical University, Ankara. He has authored books and numerous articles on Turkish literary traditions and their impact on South Asia, on British Colonial history and on Civil Engineering.

Munir Wasti was a reserved man who only spoke a little. Sunday sittings at the residence of Professor Dr Moinuddin Aqeel provided an opportunity to many to see him and have a word with him. He didn't come there to take part in the informal discussion held weekly on research trends, writers, books, rare-books, libraries and personal collections. He came there almost every Sunday either to borrow or return books to Professor

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Aqeel as he (Dr Aqeel) has a well-stocked personal collection. There was another reason for him to visit there, which was to take Professor Aqeel to the Karachi Sunday bazaar for old books and then to the Karachi Frere Hall, where book stalls were set up to attract book lovers. Prof Aqeel would not always accompany him. On occasion, he softly declined, as some of his Sunday guests were there to attend and seek guidance from him. Many of the Sunday visitors are his students including foreign visitors mostly from Japan, admirers and old friends like the noted writer Muhammad Hamza Farooqui. Dr Khalid Amin and I had the privilege to spend time with these two scholars while visiting the two bazaars of books. I found Dr Aqeel always saying thanks to Dr Wasti for offering the opportunity to roam around the city with relatively unblocked roads of Karachi. Dr Aqeel recalled his cherished memories about the book shops Karachi used to have, which Dr Wasti seconded. During the short journey of the City, Dr Wasti asked Dr Aqeel to sit behind the driver's seat so that he could talk to him during the journey while being seated in the front seat of his car.

Dr Wasti would visit these book bazaars every Sunday. Even when his car driver was not available, he would go to the bazaars on his bicycle. He had a bag to carry his purchases in it and had number of bags for others like Professor Aqeel, Dr Khalid Amin and me. He purchased rare books, reference materials and English fiction for his family, particularly for his daughter and returned them to the seller on the next visit at discounted rates. Professor Aqeel and we were a little astonished to see him buying books which he never discussed. I asked him about this one day. He replied that he had purchased the books for his family and after having been read, these would be returned to the sellers at lower prices. These bazaars offer the opportunity to the book lovers to return back to what they had previously purchased.

Dr Wasti had multiple tasks when visiting such areas of Karachi where the two bazaars are situated. He used to buy bakery items and items being sold at several little bazaars of old city areas. Those who visit nowadays and used to visit these areas even two to three decades back would tell you how congested these areas of the city are. Aside from Sundays, he would visit these areas twice a week. Visiting such crowded places is possibly one of the reasons he was hit by Coronavirus.

I was one of those fortunate people to whom Dr Wasti provided books of my interest either from his library or the Sunday bazaars. Professor Aqeel was also provided with many books. Dr Khalid Amin, Niaz Swati and Professor Dr Nigar Sajjad Zaheer are also among those scholars who got books from him. Dr Zaheer runs a publishing organization called Qirtas, Karachi which has published over 150 literary, scholarly, religious and historical texts. It has also published many titles of Wasti sahib.

It is really interesting to share that once Dr Wasti on Sunday left some books at Dr Aqeel's residence for me to collect which Dr Wasti had bought the previous Sunday from the old book bazaars. Dr Aqeel informed me through email that Dr Wasti left some books for me, which were either gifted to me by Dr Wasti or Dr Aqeel from their personal collections. I was astonished to know how it happened that the books from my little personal collection went to the Sunday bazaar of old books. I asked my wife who told me that she had given the books to a scrap purchaser, as she had never seen me consult them for months on end.

Dr Wasti had some reservations about the people visiting for Sunday sittings at Dr Aqeel's residence, due to their monologues planned in advance, as some were there to speak up and did not want to listen to anyone. One or two occasions I initiated a discussion, to benefit from the kind presence of Dr Wasti, about those foreigners who converted to Islam and whose mausoleum-like graves are found in Karachi's unplanned and overcrowded graveyards. Before Dr Wasti could add something meaningful to it, many Urduwalas sitting there self-appointedly took up the subject and kept on responding. The discussion lasted over an hour. Dr Wasti had no opportunity to add his contribution. Later, Dr Wasti said that I had wasted their time by engaging in a discussion that had no importance at that moment.

Dr Wasti was a mystery for his students of English literature. I know one Husain who was his student, was taken aback to know when Dr Khalid Amin told him the way Dr Wasti candidly dealt with us. Husain shared one of Dr Wasti's peculiarities about checking a student's answer script. He did not mark the answer script the way many teachers of University do. He only wrote down the marks obtained. It was really amazing for me to know as I have never seen such an attitude of a teacher. One day I asked him about it. He replied yes. The reason was that he did not want to waste

his time by underlining each and every mistake. He went through the answer script from start to end and wrote down marks obtained on the basis of the student's skills of clarity in language, knowledge about the contents and understanding of the question. In case, if a student wished to question his assessment, then he briefed him/her on each and every detail where the student had lapsed.

I had the privilege of seeing his very well-organized library in his house in Karachi's Gulistan-e Johar which he sold to fund his daughter's education abroad, and he chose to live his life subsequently in a rented house. He shifted from one rented house to another and had to bear in mind the spaciousness of the rented house to house his books for which he had to buy cartons for safe transportation. He had over 15000 books on a range of themes on which he loved to write. He carefully shelved books in a neat and clean manner. On my visit to his personal collection, I found that he had two exclusive shelves in his personal collection. One was for books to be discarded, and the other for books to be gifted. I capitalized on the opportunity and got two books from those to be gifted.

Dr Wasti was really a soft-spoken person, who spoke in almost a whisper. But I found him speaking aloud on one occasion. The occasion was when he was taking an MA exam at the English department, University of Karachi. I was also there to assist him as an invigilator during the three-hour session of the exam. He responded at times in a louder voice to answer. This effective strategy is used to quiet those hurling unnecessary queries to distract the class. At the beginning of the exam, some students wanted to know how long the exam would last. Dr Wasti responded tersely if they had been given twenty hours to answer this paper, they would not have the capacity to do so due to their irregular attendance in class and their lack of a reading habit.

He was laid to rest in the Karachi University's graveyard.