

QURRATULAIN Hyder, *eminence grise* of Urdu fiction in the twentieth century, began writing prose at a time when it was yet to establish itself as a serious genre in the poetry-oriented world of Urdu literature. Her illustrious predecessors—Saadat Hassan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander and Ismat Chughtai—lifted Urdu fiction out of its obsession with the world of fantasy and romance, lending it the convincing texture of realism, but it was left to Hyder to give it extraordinary range and depth and bring into its ambit newer terrains of sensibility.

Hyder's art and fiction have grown steadily in technical self-assurance as well as thematic range and complexity. She has combined her literary pursuit with freelance journalism, and has served as an editor and translator of Western and Indian classics. She received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967, the Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1969, and the Jnanpith Award in 1989. Besides Indian languages, her works have been translated into Russian and all the major European languages.

Hyder was born in 1927 in a distinguished family of writers from Bijnore. Her parents, Sajjad Hyder and Nazar Hyder were litterateurs of considerable merit. About her own entry into the world of letters Hyder writes: "If both your parents and one great aunt have been eminent writers of their time, you grow up in an interesting kind of household. If you also have a near-photographic memory and almost total recall, and a lot of imagination, you can't help but write, and go on writing for the rest of your life..." She grew up in a predominantly anglicized landowning Muslim aristocracy. The spirit and ethos were Victorian—landed and service gentry, hill stations, neo-Georgian houses and dak bungalows

The Exiles Return

Qurratulain Hyder's Art of Fiction

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Gardish-e-rangé chaman hai mah o sal-e-andalib
(The days and nights of the nightingale revolve around
the changing hues of the garden) — Ghalib

in remote places were all accoutrements such a lifestyle presumed. People talked about the evocative days of East India Company, the later Mughals and the last kings of Oudh.

Her first two novels—*Mere Bhi Sanamkhane* (I too Have Idols, 1949) and *Safinae Ghame Dil* (The Heart's Sorrows Afloat, 1952) were written against this background. They recreate the peak of sophistication and elegance attained by the people in Oudh, particularly Lucknow, a city which, as recorded by W.H. Russel, was "more extensive than Paris and

more brilliant." The epoch dealt with in the novels is the twilight of the Raj, and young men and women from the upper crust of Lucknow society—Rakhshinda, Pichu, Vimal, Kiran, Arvind—have been shown as cultivating the values of family honour, friendship, fellow-feeling, social reform and imbibing the best in India's composite culture. It is the Forsterian world of 'only connect' where individuals try to reach out to one another to build up meaningful personal and social relationships with the help of goodwill, culture and intelligence. Her novels project a unified vision in as much as they show people from different communities working together for a better world and dismantling the artificial distinctions of religion; caste and gender being insignificant. But as the narratives progress, the glory gradually departs from the world and the characters are caught in the vortex of communal violence let loose during the days of partition. They try to contain and combat it in their own ways. Rakhshinda and Kiran try to bring out the fiercely secular magazine, the *New Era* against insurmountable odds; Pichu gives his life trying to save the refugees from Pakistan. Arvind becomes the hero of the fall of Hyderabad, to the great dismay of his Muslim friends. A false role has been imposed on him and he



Qurratulain Hyder

feels internally diminished. The intermixing of the omniscient and first person modes of narration, punctuated with interior monologues, lay bare the external realities of characters and their chiaroscuro swings of mood. Rakhshinda combines in herself the poise and elegance of the earlier days with the liberal humanism that is inevitable for securing social justice. The portrayal of domestic helpers like the dapper Gul-e-Shabbu and Shulapuri is extremely lifelike. They possess a peculiar kind of feudal charm as much as they refute the allegation that Hyder cannot draw characters from the lower strata of society.

Hyder is fully aware of the fact that in India various epochs not only coexist simultaneously, but also intermingle freely on social and psychological planes. "You have to be a native, born and bred in this land to understand the synthesis and cultural richness as well as the contradictions and frictions inherent in this situation," she says. She does exactly that in her next novel, *Aag Ka Darya* (River of Fire, 1959). Commonly regarded as Hyder's *chef d'oeuvre*, it created quite a stir in the literary circles of the subcontinent. Its relentless quest for wholeness inevitably reminds us of Hugo's beautiful words: *Tout cherche tout, sans but, sans treve, sans repos* (Everything seeks everything, without end, without compromise, without rest). An epic in span and scope, the novel is essentially a study of the absorptive culture and civilization of India and the growth of Indian consciousness over the ages. The narrative may be divided into two parts. The first part effectively brings out the growth and development of Indian cultural ethos in the three pre-modern periods, namely, the early Buddhist period, the time of Kabir (*Bhakti Kal*) and the British Raj of the early nineteenth century, through

the experiences of characters like Gautam Nilamber, Hari Shankar, Abul Mansur Kamaluddin and Champa Ahmed. In the second part, a group of upper class intellectuals from Uttar Pradesh are introduced in the Lucknow of 1939, followed on their path to London and Cambridge through 1952 and then traced back again to post-partition India and Pakistan. In many ways they represent their prototypes in the first part. The reappearance of the four central characters in every epoch, the repetition of their predicaments and the replication of certain dominant symbols underscore the recurring pattern of human experiences which are universal and timeless, and contribute to the unity and centrality of the vision projected by the novel.

Hyder's contention is that the vitality of Indian culture emanates from its ability to accept and integrate different religions and beliefs, cultures and sects into a cohesive whole. Looking for his salvation amidst the many religious ways open for exploration in India, Kamal reaches the definitive conclusion that "although religion is considered important in life, love is higher than outward religiosity." Kamal finds in the *bhakti* movement the ideal of equality preached by Sufi Islam and also locates a means of ending the injustices inherent in Hindu caste barriers. This abiding belief in a common heritage is clouded during the days of partition as the characters

go through a searing sense of identity crisis. Champa resents the fact that many Hindus consider her an intruder, that she has no claim to her ancestral home in Banaras, and says: "This is the country I belong to ... Where can I find myself another?" Kamal, despite holding a number of impressive degrees from Cambridge, is shown the door because he is a Muslim. Frustrated and disillusioned, he eventually migrates to Pakistan. However, during his last visit to India and after his encounter with Champa at Banaras, he realizes that in spite of all that had happened, his heart really lies in India and its composite heritage. As the train crosses the border, he is overwhelmed by the sense that he is irrevocably leaving it all behind and utters the heart-rending words: "In myself, I am the corpse, the grave digger and the mourner."

Predictably, the book raised a storm of protest in Pakistan as it challenged the basic principles behind the creation of Pakistan and the *raison d'etre* of its ruling establishment which needed to justify itself day in and day out by crying hoarse over all the imagined but 'essential differences' between Hindu and Muslim cultures. The artist in Hyder seemed to have felt uncomfortable and restless in the claustrophobic atmosphere of Pakistan where she had been living since 1947, and eventually she decided to leave that country and come back to India in 1961. Hers is a classic case of double exile which afforded a unique vantage point.

Hyder's deep sense of history, and her Eliotian view of Time which assumes the dimension of an invisible *dramatis persona*, inform the narrative. She finds a common thread running through different phases of Indian history of which the Sultanate and Mughal era are only a part. She shows that the Muslim characters have their roots in India's ancient past. At Buddha's birthplace, Kapilavastu,

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Champa almost feels in her veins the past glory. While returning from there to Banaras during the time of Ramlila, she wistfully surveys the city and prays: "Eternal Kashi. Kashi, shelter me." At Sarnath, in a moment of epiphany, Kamal transcends his present by merging himself with India's past which is, in fact, an uninterrupted continuum: "Putting a hand on a nearby stone of the *stupa*, Kamal thought, 'through this touch I am present in this other time, a time which has passed but also still exists'." On his return voyage from England, Kamal shows the continuity of this historical sense when the beauty of the full moon on the sea reminds him of another night which has great significance for India: "On the self same full moon night, twenty five hundred years ago, Shakyamuni was born." The stream of the characters' thoughts move freely from one epoch to another and wonderfully luminous images and metaphors irradiate this process, as they do in Virginia Woolf and James Joyce who seem *de rigueur* in the criticism of Hyder's fiction.

Hyder is always reticent about herself but she enjoys talking about her ancestors and parents. That is exactly what she does in *Kar-e-Jahan Daraz Hai* (Life Tasks are Endless), a family saga which inevitably reminds us of Alex Haley's *Roots*. She calls it a "biographical non-fictional novel," of which two volumes came out in 1977 and 1979 respectively (Hyder is working on the third and final volume which is being serialized in *Aaj Kal*). The narrative opens in eighth century Damascus, recounting the life and times of the novelist's forbearers. It includes family papers, photographs and other memorabilia. The polyvalent narrative structure includes a *dastan go* or medieval storyteller, a *malfoozat* (annals) compiler, a Victorian Urdu novelist and a smart-alec modern Urdu writer.



Qurratulain Hyder with Dogri writer Padma Sachdev

A substantial portion of the novel concentrates on her parents. Both of them led very active public lives, touched by almost all the major events of their time just as they themselves touched the lives of so many people. In recounting the life of her parents, Hyder has brought to life the whole era in vivid detail. Sajjad Hyder, the central figure in the first volume, dies in 1943, and towards the end of the volume we are given an account of the trauma that the members of the family undergo during the harrowing days of partition. Most of the members, including the writer herself, migrate to Pakistan.

The second volume begins with the members of the Hyder family in Pakistan trying to get a foothold in the new land. Gradually they spread out to different parts of the globe. Hyder's immensely rich power of observation and eye for minute detail recreate all those places for us:

The sun sets very early and abruptly in December. The twilight had mingled with the darkness of the night. In the strong and chilly wind, the tall grasses in the half-lit Walton airfield of Lahore were undulating like the waves of a green river....

Hyder Often prefaces her observations of the human situation with such vignettes or descriptions of the natural environment around them. These word pictures, besides introducing us to the beauty of the local setting, serve to represent the moods of characters and the predicament in which they are trapped. Towards the end of the second volume, we have this vignette:

The sun was about to set... the pyramids basked in the warmth of its soft light. The citizens of Qahera came out in large numbers on their cycles, scooters and in cars to have a feel of the bracing air. The pyramids looked like toys against the background of the sky-kissing high rise buildings of the city.

The events and facts are interspersed with Hyder's metaphysical cogitations on history, culture, the state of affairs in the modern world, eternal issues like birth, death and so on. As the writer moves along, she makes evaluative judgements, in her characteristic tongue-in-cheek mode, on the growth and development of Urdu literature. Some of them are as follows:

After 1947, every writer in Urdu began to consider himself an

‘outsider’ as defined by Colin Wilson.

Most of the characters in Urdu fiction (in the first three decades of this century) were wishy-washy. The literature reflected the kind of ordinary, dull and limited life the writers of Asia lived. Everywhere there was dearth of originality, be it in fine arts, theatre or literature. The people of the East swore by Jean Paul Sartre, Picasso, Bergman, Becket, Camus, Arthur Miller, Francois Sagan and Colin Wilson.

Hyder’s interest in politics is minimal though she observes with comic delight how people delude themselves by embracing some particular political ideology and take it to be the panacea for all social ills. *Aakhri Shab ke Hamsafar* (Fellow-Traveller at the End of the Night, 1979) which has as its background the Bengali extremist movement of the 1930s for the liberation of the country is, *inter alia*, an oblique satire on the ‘progressives’ of the forties and the fifties. In their enthusiasm for social reform the ‘progressive’ writers made a mockery of what Sartre called *la littérature engagée* (“committed literature”) and missed no chance to attack Hyder for refusing to toe their line. The narrative covers the events up to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The central character here is Deepali Sircar, whose initiation into the extremist movement begins with a sacrifice of her expensive Baluchari sarees. The revolutionaries badly needed money and she could think of nothing else in the house but the sarees that were saved up for her own marriage. Raihan, the radical leader, is impressed by this show of commitment and entrusts her with serious responsibilities. Several years later he calls her to his hideout in the Sunderbans and they fall in love, though it is not expressed in so many words. From this point, the fate of the

extremist movement, the larger movement for a separate homeland for Muslims—all are mixed up with the fate of the characters in the novel. Deepali, along with her family, migrates to India and later to Trinidad. She sees the world of her ideology crumbling to pieces, and watches Raihan’s metamorphosis from a radical left-winger to a rabid right-winger, and lastly as an industrial tycoon who thrives by exploiting workers in his mills.

In describing the lives of Deepali, Raihan, Jahan Ara, Rosy and others, Hyder makes implicit comments on social mores and educational attainments of different communities at that point of time. While the girls in Hindu and Christian families have been shown as actively participating in different spheres of life, Muslim girls have been depicted as yet struggling between restrictive social norms and their half-articulated desire to achieve selfhood. The novelist builds up the ambience and the spirit of Bengal with consummate skill and artistry. The natural beauty of Bengal, its rivers, its rainy seasons, its vast and undulating jute fields come alive through her descriptions. The terrorist-revolutionary organization has a nebulous presence in the novel and serves mainly as a springboard for presenting the human drama associated with it. The formal structure of the novel is a triumph where the omniscient mode is interspersed with letters, quotations and diaries to such good effect that every single event or fact seems to converge on the central plot, something which cannot be said about her earlier novels.

Gardish-e-Rang-e-Chaman (The Changing Hues of the Garden, 1988) marks a significant maturity and mellow aspect in Hyder’s evolution as a novelist. The product of a resourceful imagination, the novel embodies her vision of life in an endless outpouring of stories about life’s cruel

changeability. However, Hyder’s narrative sophistication waxes and wanes as it does in some of her other novels as well. Naturally capable of clarity, grace and psychological depth, she is equally capable of facetious and sensational balderdash. Structural weaknesses sometimes cause her novels to sag, but imagination and intelligence are layered so thickly in her prose that one does not really care about architectural lapses.

Though Hyder calls it a ‘semi-documentary’ novel, it is comparatively free from the overarching presence of History. It would be appropriate to call it a sociological novel. In recounting the vicissitudes of their own lives (*à la* Umrao Jan Ada of Ruswa) the narrators—Andalib, Gulrukh and Ambar—provide insightful analysis of the clash of cultures and values with the change of epochs and the extremely uncertain nature of human relationships. The narrative also deals with the boredom and horror of modern life produced by an acquisitive and consumerist culture, a malady which is common in the West and which is gradually invading certain sections of the Indian society, and the novel obliquely hints towards a way out within a mystical framework.

One of the sub-plots in the novel is a brashly extravagant satire against Nigar Khanam, the prolific writer and plagiarist, and her sister, Shahwar Khanam. Through the two sisters who are stupidity incarnate, Hyder lambasts the colossal vulgarity of the *nouveau riche* for whom money is the magic which can buy everything—even culture, decency, and grace. In their interaction with other people, they always flaunt money, exult in their malfesance and unregenerate wilfulness. The other sub-plot is concerned with the ultra-modern Sufi saint, Mia, and how Dilshad Ali Khan, the international card sharper, is reformed un-

der his benign influence. Of course, the novelist's depiction of Khan as a likeable rogue is much more interesting than his later metamorphosis.

Hyder deals with the complexity of human relationships at different levels. Through the vicissitudes in the lives of Maheru and Dilnawaz, she depicts the gradual but inevitable demise of a culture that had lost its relevance in the new order. Philomina's dogged devotion to Gulrukh, Andalib and Ambar, and Mansoor's sharing of Ambar's suffering through thick and thin reinforce the Forsterian view that in a world where all the other props are fast disappearing, personal relationship is something which can bring individuals some solace. The liaison between the courtesans and their admirers have myriad nuances which have been treated with delicacy. The relationships between Gulrukh and Thakur Maheshwar Singh, Andalib and Amba Prasad have their charm as well as pathos: charm because such perfect communion exists between the lover and the beloved; pathos because such a relationship, unsanctified by marriage, always reaches a dead end. The novel becomes a metaphor of the fulfilled quest in the mind of courtesans to come back to what is perceived as a normal social and family life. Gulrukh and her daughter Andalib are like Umrao Jan Ada of Ruswa's novel of that name, for whom enlightenment comes, invariably, through suffering.

Chandi Begum (1990), Hyder's latest novel, explores new ground so far as her thematic and stylistic preoccupations are concerned. In broad terms, the narrative is concerned with challenges faced by two Muslim families of Lucknow from the days of partition to the present time. As social criticism it is tough and realistic. The narrative strands weave around members in the family of Sheikh Azhar Ali and those in the family of Raja Anwar Hussain. Qambar, Azhar Ali's son and self-styled 'progressive,'

represents the gullibility of the leftists in the thirties and the forties and the apparent contradiction between their proclaimed commitment and their privileged status in society. Though the abolition of zamindari system has considerably diluted their power and influence, the sons and daughters of Anwar Hussain find it difficult to shed their colonial trappings and display considerable acrimony in their relationship with one another. The novelist discusses with insight the love-hate relationship between the emigré Muslims of Pakistan and their relatives left behind in India, a theme which has remained unexplored in literature so far. The condescending attitude of Parveen (Anwar Hussain's daughter) towards her own kith and kin, and her son Dinky's uncharitable comments about the state of Indian Muslims, speak volumes about the underlying tensions that vitiate their relationship with India and Indians.

Chandni Begum has a special place in Hyder's *oeuvre* as it shows a new and emerging face of the Muslim woman who has certainly 'arrived' after long years of tension and struggle. Shahla and Laila herald the emergence of this new woman who is equally confident and as professionally successful as her male counterpart. Eminently capable of taking care of themselves, they provide their families with the much-needed anchor and support when the male progeny escape to comfortable pastures in the West.

The portrayal of Bela and her father I.B. Mogrey, the folk singers whose profession faces extinction, embodies Hyder's comic imagination as much as it depicts the comic angst of the father and daughter and their half-desperate delight in the illogical complications of life. I.B. Mogrey represents a group of characters in Hyder's fiction who are delightfully anachronistic, supremely unaware of the changes that have overtaken and

live in their quixotic and chivalrous past, like the Spanish Don, their fictional prototype. Grand but pointless gestures are their comic signature.

Hyder has produced four collections of short stories so far. Among them, *Pathjarh ki Awaz* won her the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967. However, her stories are not 'concentrated beams of light' possessing tautness and brevity which are thought to be the traditional hallmarks of a good story; more often they tend to be impressionistic pieces of expansive and dispersed reflection. Some of them, for example, *Malfoozat-e-Haji Gul baba Bektashi* and *Saint Flora of Georgia ke Eyterafat* defy categorization under any of the established literary genre. She is different from Ismat Chughtai in as much as while Chughtai achieves perfection only while working on a small canvas, Hyder's imagination is epic and really blossoms forth only on a large canvas. Hence her good short stories—for example, *Housing Society*, *Roishni ki Raftar*, *Yaad ki Ek Dhanuk Jale*, *Qalandar*, *Hasab Nasab*—inevitably tend towards short novels. With this reservation, the reader recognizes her merits: keen observation, a sharp ear for the natural poetry of dialect speech, and a deep affection for eccentricity and lively everyday anecdotes. Lucknow remains a metaphor for an arena of romance, a doomed and beautiful world driven by relentless historical forces, a land of fallen nobility futilely striving to retain some small segment of a lost Eden.

Notably however, there is nothing specifically feminine about Hyder's works; her preoccupations have always been common and universal, as she has remained committed to the craft of fiction and its moral centrality. □

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