

CHRISTINA OESTERHELD

In Pursuit of Qurratulain Hyder— (Partly) a Detective Story

IN JANUARY 1983 I arrived in Delhi to collect material and information for my doctoral thesis on Qurratulain Hyder's novels *Mērē Bhī Ṣanamkhānē* (My Temples, too), *Āg kā Daryā* (River of Fire) and *Ākhir-e Shab kē Hamsafar* (Fellow-Travelers Toward the End of Night; published in English under the title *Fireflies in the Mist*). Before setting out for India, I had learned that she was teaching as a visiting professor at the Jamia Millia Islamia, but when I got there I found that she had already left for another teaching assignment in Aligarh. However, when I attended a seminar on Mir Taqī Mir at the Jamia Millia on 21 March of that year, a participant from the Aligarh Muslim University told me that she was not in Aligarh at the moment. I was scheduled to leave India on 18 April so, in a last attempt to find her, I went to Aligarh on 5 April. From the railway station I went straight to Aligarh Muslim University where I met the head of the Urdu Department, Dr. Suraiya Husain, and two of her colleagues. None of them knew anything about Qurratulain Hyder's whereabouts, but all were expecting her to return to Aligarh any day. Thus they arranged for my stay in the girls' hostel where I shared a room with another Urdu student who was writing a dissertation about Ms. Hyder's novellas. I spent the afternoon and the next morning in the library searching for material and talking to different people. In the afternoon Dr. Suraiya Husain invited me for tea and told me that she had heard from one of the guests at a social gathering the night before that somebody had seen Ms. Hyder in Rampur. She urged me to go to Rampur immediately and wrote a letter to Shahida, a research student from Rampur, asking her to accompany me. Shahida agreed on the condition that I would pay for her bus ticket, which I readily accepted.

At 7:30 the next morning we met at the bus stop. The bus was supposed to arrive at 8:00, but it did not turn up until 9:45. It was so crammed that I more or less had to stand on one leg most of the time. We

stopped at a wayside *dhāba* and had a nice, simple meal. We had to change to another bus at Muradabad. Here my companion went to the ladies' room and emerged clad in a burqa. She explained to me that in Aligarh she was free to roam about in shalwar kamiz, but when she entered the vicinity of her hometown Rampur she had to be wearing a burqa because here she might be spotted by some neighbor, relative or acquaintance of her family.

Rampur was a revelation. About ninety-five percent of the women I saw on the streets were veiled, either by a burqa or by drawing the end of their saris over their heads and faces. Shahida's family welcomed me very kindly and I spent the rest of the day with them watching television, gossiping, and washing my soiled clothes.

On the morning of the following day (8 April) Shahida's mother took us to see the librarian of the Raza Library to enquire about Ms. Hyder. He did not know her whereabouts and told us that he had last seen her early in March. My heart sank. I saw all my hopes dashed. But then he remembered that he knew of a family which was somehow related to her and gave us the address. We got into the rickshaw again and went to the place he had indicated. Luckily we met a young man there who told us that she was definitely in Rampur, likely staying with Fārūq Ḥaidar in the neighborhood of the Kačči Masjid. He was kind enough to take us there immediately. A few minutes after we reached Fārūq Ḥaidar's house, Ms. Hyder appeared before us, beaming with joy.

Having read almost everything Qurratulain Hyder had thus far written, I was deeply impressed by the sheer abundance of her knowledge, her wide-ranging interests and the diversity of her literary styles. These things in themselves would have been enough to make me feel very humble and unimportant in her presence. How could such a creative giant be confronted by my completely uncreative self? Moreover, I had heard a number of stories and read accounts of her quick temper, alleged snobbery and contempt for minor writers. Hence I was feeling quite nervous and did not know what to expect from our meeting. I was very lucky that several factors combined to make this first encounter very relaxed and amiable. Ms. Hyder obviously was in a good mood, happily proceeding with the work on her next novel, *Gardish-e Rañg-e Čaman* (Shifting Hues and Moods of the Garden), which was eventually published in 1987. She might also have felt flattered by the fact that someone had come from so far away to meet her. But the decisive factor, no doubt, was the delight she took in the story of my serpentine search for her. She was greatly amused by this adventure and started to laugh again and again when she remembered the twists and turns of my pursuit. Thus, the

first thing I observed in her was her keen sense of humor and her delight in an interesting story.

During our first meeting, she told me about the novel she was about to finish and about planning for a book on her mother, the writer Nazar Sajjād Ḥaidar. I am not sure whether this book finally took the shape of an edition of her diary with the title *Guzishta Barsōn kī Barf, Nazar Sajjād Ḥaidar kā Roznāmĉa "Ayyām-e Guzishta"* (The Snows of Yesteryears: Nazar Sajjād Ḥaidar's Datebook "Days Gone By"), which is currently in press (Ahktar 2007, 20). We had tea together and she invited me to meet her the next day.

The next day we had lunch at Fārūq Ḥaidar's home and then spent the whole afternoon talking about her writings and many other topics. She showed me the files of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century journals that she had borrowed from the Raza Library for her research on the famous courtesans of that period. Thus I got a firsthand impression of how meticulously she studied the relevant sources before sitting down to write. Beyond that, I could also feel how thrilled she was by her material. One gets a clear reflection of this fascination while reading the respective passages of *Gardish-e Raṅg-e Čaman*. After Rusvā's *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* (1899) this was probably the first Urdu novel to deal extensively with the role of the courtesans in the cultural life of North India, especially in dance, singing and poetry. Ms. Hyder virtually celebrates the artistic accomplishments, the financial power and the independence of the courtesans. Much more has been written on the subject since her novel was published, and a lot of information on famous singers and dancers, who were the backbone of the modern entertainment industry when it started in the twentieth century, is now easily available on the Internet. It goes to Hyder's credit, however, that she also presented the dark side of the story, namely the social stigma these professionals had to face, in a very convincing and touching manner in her novel. Sa'ādat Ḥasan Maṅṭō's destitute prostitutes were among the lowest strata of society, mostly uneducated and without any artistic skills. In contrast to that, in Ms. Hyder's novel we read about the tragedy of a highly-educated, modern lady doctor who is unable to get married simply because her mother was a dancer with a somewhat shady background. While the mother becomes a drunkard, the daughter suffers a mental breakdown. Although this is only one of the story lines of this complex novel, it is the one which impressed me the most.

But let us get back to Rampur! In the evening we all went to see the film *Dūlbā Biktā hai* (Bridegroom Being Sold) in a local cinema hall. While sitting in the rickshaw, Qurratulain Hyder carefully covered her

head with the end of her sari and told me that she had never in her whole life worn a burqa or a chador, but the atmosphere in Rampur was such that even she felt compelled to cover her head. I was wearing western-style trousers and a blouse and did not have anything to save myself from the stares of men apart from a thick, woolen shawl, but I felt so uneasy without a cover that I hid myself in the shawl despite the warm weather, sweating profusely but feeling less exposed.

When we later discussed the film, Ms. Hyder was full of praise for the anti-dowry message it contained. I, however, was a bit critical of the, in my mind, completely unrealistic happy ending, but she insisted that this mixture of a sense of social mission with light entertainment, catering to the spectators' expectations, was the best way to convey the message. Her reaction to the film came as quite a surprise for me because I knew of her otherwise high aesthetic standards and her anger when anyone dared to name her in the same breath with lesser writers. On the other hand, her attitude toward popular culture, especially folk culture, was very accommodating and she integrated many folk songs, reports of popular rites and ceremonies, etc. into her work. While such borrowings document her tremendous interest in these facets of Indian culture, they simultaneously highlight her belief in the composite or synthetic nature of Indo-Muslim culture, which she never tired of invoking in her writing.

Another factor which certainly contributed to Ms. Hyder's enjoyment of the film was her enduring engagement with the situation of women. The fate of girls and women in society was one of her central concerns, and thus the anti-dowry message of the film was something closer to her heart.

We did not talk so much about her previous work as about her forthcoming books, but I very vividly remember Ms. Hyder's complaint about her readers' and critics' obsession with her 1959 novel *Āg kā Daryā*. She was rightfully annoyed about the comparative lack of attention to her later works. To a great degree, this imbalance has persisted to this day. Some reviews and articles on her later writings have been published in Urdu as well as in English, although much less in English, but many readers still refer only to *Āg kā Daryā* when they mention her name. There is no justification whatsoever for this attitude.

Far from being a one-novel author, Qurratulain Hyder vastly extended her canvas and techniques after *Āg kā Daryā*. She dealt with a wide range of new subjects, social milieus and historical as well as geographical settings, and perhaps no other Urdu writer experimented so successfully with different literary modes. Should we not discuss the excursions into the realms of science fiction and fantasy in her short

stories, all in an effort to talk about the imbalances in gender relations? Should we not look more closely at such delightfully ironical stories as “*Faqīrōñ kī Pahāri*” (Poor People’s Hill) so they might be appreciated as much as they deserve to be?

Qurratulain Hyder’s tour de force *Āg kā Daryā* was an outstanding, innovative, and in many ways exceptional novel, but it has become dated to some extent now. She soon outlived the idealism and the sense of political activism that pervaded its novelistic space. *Ākhir-e Shab kē Ham-safar* (1979), structurally her best novel, is ample proof of her changed attitude, although even here we find the longing, albeit unfulfilled, for ideals and some kind of utopia. The novel presents a grim picture of betrayal and compromise, personal and collective failures, and bloody political nightmares. If nothing else, at least the sunrise at the end of the novel provides a glimpse of hope—which is not without its own irony. In *Gardish-e Rañg-e Čaman*, this singular ray of hope is presented in the shape of the card sharper Dilshād Alī Khān who is changed from a care-free, ruthless cynic into a believer thanks to the influence of a modern pir. Otherwise, here too we have only stories of loss, failure, greed, deception and unpleasant revelations. The only redeeming figure seems to be that of the mysterious pir. This novel brings out Hyder’s strengths and weaknesses in full. To quote M. Asaduddin: “... 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” (2000, 31). Strangely enough, this highly-educated author who, due to *Āg kā Daryā*, is regarded as difficult and too intellectual by many, quite often resorted to means and devices that are more akin to popular genres. Scenes full of slapstick and melodrama abound in her later novels *Gardish-e Rañg-e Čaman* and *Čāndnī Begam* (Madame Čāndnī, 1990). This back-and-forth movement between highbrow intellectualism and the basest kind of comedy and sensationalism may very well reflect different aspects of the author’s temperament. As mentioned above, despite her sometimes snobbish demeanor, Qurratulain Hyder was well-acquainted with various forms of popular culture and thoroughly enjoyed them.

There is yet another conflict that is sometimes detected in her attitudes, viz., an acute consciousness of social injustice and a critique of the upper classes on the one hand, combined, or rather alternating, with a sometimes equally acute contempt for the middle class and a very obvious fascination with everything aristocratic. This does not imply denunciation of Hyder as a reactionary bourgeois, as some “Progressives” once called her. Her contempt for vulgar consumerism and greed is well

founded, and she is also aware of the new prospects that are opened up, especially for Muslim girls, because of the social changes that set in after 1947. Thus her nostalgia for the old order and its genteel representatives is somewhat balanced by her acknowledgment of the social progress from which lower- and middle-class Indian Muslims may profit. We may stumble over some of her extravagance, but then again she carries us along with her tremendous gift as a storyteller and her boundless imagination. We may get a bit irritated at her pomposity, but in the next moment we will be rewarded by her delightful self-irony. On the whole, do the ambiguities in her writings not correspond to the ambiguities of human nature?

There can be no doubt that Qurratulain Hyder was one of the greatest Indian writers of the twentieth century. To do her justice, however, we need not put her on a pedestal and worship her from afar. We will serve her much better by encouraging younger generations to read her books, by producing more translations of her works into Indian and other languages, and by producing well-founded, critical research on the whole corpus of her writing. □

Works Cited

- Akhtar, Jamīl. 2007. "Qurratu'l-'Ain Ḥaidar—Savāneh-e Kavā'if." *Urdū Dunyā* 9 (10) (October):18–21.
- Asaduddin, M. 2000. "The Exiles Return: Ms. Hyder's Art of Fiction." *Manusbi* 119 (July-August):28–32.