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Endearing Iconoclast

THE SCENE that greets me when I enter Aini Apa's room is truly amazing. She is sitting on a divan, in front of her is an open VIP suitcase crammed with sheets of paper, there is another pile by her side, and sorting out the sundry loose sheets is Rehana, her young assistant.

"*Aččhā*, now look for chapter eighteen," Aini Apa tells her. Rehana rifles through the suitcase and fishes out a chapter. Aini Apa peers at it, slaps it down next to her and says, "No, no, not this, this is the old one—give me the corrected one." "I've changed it, you see," she says to me in an aside. Rehana rummages some more before producing another, newer-looking version, and Aini Apa declares triumphantly, "*Hāñ!* This is it. Here—'Sir Cyril Ashley in Sydney Sussex College.' Now, this is final!"

"This" is none other than an English translation of *Āg kā Daryā* (River of Fire), Qurratulain Hyder's magnum opus in Urdu, her great novel on "Life, History, Civilization, India, Human Striving, Everything!" A great river of a novel, majestic in its sweep, grand in its vision, an acknowledged masterpiece, and first published in Urdu to widespread critical acclaim in 1959. In 1966, a version abridged by the author herself was translated into fourteen Indian languages by the National Book Trust, but it was not available in English, until 1998 that is.

Qurratulain Hyder was twenty-nine when she started writing *Āg kā Daryā* in 1956–57, and it took her a year to complete it. She began translating the novel in 1960, finished it within a year, and has been re-translating it ever since. "Don't call it a translation," she says. "I've changed quite a lot. A translator can't do that, naturally, but when I work in English, it's another language. I have to change. Nobody else can do that!"

"If it was translated as far back as 1960," I ask her, "why has it never been published?"

"I forgot about it!" she says ingenuously. Then, seeing a look of utter incredulosity on my face, adds hastily, "You can call it laziness—you know, I'm so disorganized! I lost many chapters, I had to do them again.

Every time I shifted I found something else was missing—anyway, now it's ready!"

And so, 40 years after it was written, and 38 years after it was first translated, *Āg kā Daryā* was published in English for the first time in 1998, 50 years since India had gained its independence. In some ways a most appropriate time for what many people regard as Qurratulain Hyder's "Partition" novel, although she herself says she has never stopped writing about Partition.

At the same time that we at Kali for Women were working on Aini Apa's translation of *Āg kā Daryā*, chapter by chapter, we were also discussing the publication of three novellas by her—*Sītā Haran* (Sītā Betrayed), *Housing Society* and *Patjhar kī Āvāz* (Sound of Falling Leaves)—under the rubric, *Season of Betrayals* in a translation by the Urdu scholar C. M. Naim. This would be, more or less, the first time that a fairly substantial offering of Aini Apa's writing not translated by herself was being published, for Qurratulain Hyder was well known for preferring her own translations (transcreations?) to anyone else's.

One of Aini Apa's most endearing (exasperating?) traits was the utter matter-of-factness with which she treated her writing, her almost breathtaking disregard for accepted convention and received wisdom. How else could she have been so casually confident about chopping and changing, adding and subtracting, revising—or rather, rewriting, for we cannot know whether, or if, she ever "revised"—her own published work, regarding it almost as a new work, to the despair—and I might add, strong disapproval—of her translators. She has been charged with mistranslation, misrepresentation, even, at worst, distortion and, at best, literary irresponsibility. When I was working with her on *Mērē Bhī Ṣanamkbānē* (My Temples, too—another manuscript she fished out of somewhere), I found, to my consternation, that the crucial last two pages were missing and could not be found anywhere. Aini Apa obviously could not undertake to translate them afresh because of failing eyesight and the aftereffects of her stroke—but she was undaunted.

She summoned me to her home, sat me down in front of her, and commanded the young student who was assisting her to read out the passages from the original Urdu. She then did a rough translation into English, which I transcribed and read back to her. "*Thik hai?*" she would ask, and depending on whether I agreed or not, she would either redo it or accept my suggestions to change a word or phrase here or there—and proceed to the next bit. And so we recreated the missing English text during the course of the day, no fuss and not too much bother.

It was with the same never-say-die spirit that she agreed with alacrity

to embark on the massive task of translating the family chronicle *Kār-e Jahān Darāz Hai* (The Work of the World Goes On), a task that remains unhappily incomplete. Here, too, she cheerfully declared that she could drop the first few hundred years of family history in order to reduce the necessary working time!

Aini Apa was most unusual for having translated the better part of her writing herself, almost simultaneously as she wrote it. From what she said, it appears that only a couple of years would elapse between the Urdu publication and her translation of a work into English—although several years might go by before the English was actually published. This, too, is curious, leading one to wonder what caused the delay. *Ākhir-e Shab kē Hamsafar* (Fellow-Travelers Towards the End of Night; published as *Fireflies in the Mist*), for instance, which was published in Urdu in 1979, did not appear in English until 1994, yet she probably translated it much earlier, as I suspect she did with *Mērē Bhī Ṣanamkhānē*. The latter was written when she was just nineteen (in 1946), but not published in English until 2004!

While editing *River of Fire* and, later, *My Temples, too*, I was struck by the cinematic quality of her writing, her technique of using very short chapters, almost like scenes, snapshots really, in place of long discursive exegesis. This was clearly not the case with her Urdu originals, and many scholars and commentators believe that indeed, the English translations are a travesty, abridging and abbreviating both character and dialogue. Yet this process was already apparent in the author-approved translation of *Āg kā Daryā* into Hindi in 1968. And, in fact, it continued, for in 1999, when Rajkamal Prakashan asked to reissue the Hindi translation, Aini Apa insisted that they now use the English text published by Kali for Women as her authorized version. So, too, with all its subsequent translations into European languages. Predictably, then, this prompts a further question: which text is the one to regard as the “original”—the Urdu or the one redone English?

This being the case, the *real* question, it seems to me, is why she chose to alter her text in English. It could be, as she said to me, that between 1959, when the original *Āg kā Daryā* was published, and 1998, when Kali published the English version, 40 years had elapsed and many of the elaborations in the Urdu version were now redundant. But it could also be, as she said in a not-quite-tongue-in-cheek aside, that in English the novel in its full form just might be “too long.” We may never know all her reasons or have satisfactory explanations for them, but since her abridgements were deliberate, one can only assume that she was actually attempting a distinct *style* in her English texts, more than a mere transla-

tion. She called this transcreation, but I think it was more than that. And, again, it was unique.

Consider the significance of what she did. In the 1950s and 1960s, when *Āg kā Daryā* appeared, no one was innovating with style in the bold and experimental way that Aini Apa was. What was being written in South Asia in English at the time, for example, was actually called Indo-Anglian. It was, frankly, derivative, with few exceptions, and remained so for many years. Consider, too, the fact that long before Salman Rushdie, Aini Apa had, as Aamer Hussein says, “an absolutely original brand of post modernism, which combined pastiche and brittle humour, rough juxtapositions, historical vignettes, fragmented chronologies and multiple voices” (2007, n.p.). Indeed, she herself has said (at a mehfil organized by Azra Raza in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1992) that innovative writing can encompass “fact, reportage, imagination, documentary presentation, the epistolary form,” and so on.

This literary iconoclasm was, I believe, completely consistent with her eclecticism, her cosmopolitanism and her political convictions. I might almost say, her lived politics, a politics of absolute integrity, of revulsion for sham, hypocrisy and pretentiousness, and of uncompromising secularism. (Perhaps I should say of an uncompromised secularism.) When she spoke of a composite culture, of the Gaṅgā-Jamnī streams that could not, must not, be separated, for her this culture was not only a way of life, it was also the quintessential spirit of the country.

Her novels are suffused with this spirit. Her characters—in *Āg kā Daryā*, *Ākhir-e-Shab kē Hamsafar*, *Mērē Bhī Ṣanamkhānē*, *Housing Society*, and so many others—embody it, and are ultimately unmoored because they are forced to jettison either one or the other aspect of their twinned selves, mirroring the tearing asunder, first of India, then of Pakistan. □

Works Cited

- Hussein, Aamer. 2007. “Tribute to Qurratulain Hyder.” *In Other Words: The Journal for Literary Translators* 30:88–93.