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Dislocations: A Look at Some of Qurratulain Hyder's Novellas*

THE SENSE OF THEATRICALITY keeps shifting from place to place in Qurratulain Hyder's (Qurratu'l-Ain Haidar) fiction, like a landscape through which mist disappears and reappears, revealing to us places and people, in crisp glimpses. We sense that there is a stage, a play being enacted and we see it in snatches. It is powerful enough to keep us glued to our vantage point but is never coherent enough to make clear its thrust or meaning. In a way, this ambiguity itself conveys a strong sense of life's verisimilitude because, in a wider inference, we cannot fathom the mystery of being, neither of our own nor of others. We confront each other with increasing annoyance or confusion. The more we draw closer to one another the less we understand. In the middle and muddle of a confrontational world we feel lost, displaced, dislocated, either going away to flounder in new miseries or coming back to older and familiar ones.

One of the characters in "*Čā'e kē Bāgh*" (The Tea Gardens) says: "There is no one reason why a story should begin and neither is there any for its ending." And a little later, as if at the end of her tether, she says:

"A question has been bothering me for a long time."
"Go on, please."
"Why did God create this world?"
"Eh?"
"Yes, why? After all, why? Give me one good reason."

(240)

And the novelette ends with this sentence: "I could never make any sense of the world" (241).

*Qurratu'l-Ain Haidar, *Čār Nāveleṭ* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mil, 1994). The text is marred by typographical errors but it was the only text I had access to. All translations are mine.

The four novelettes are a curious welter of illusion, disillusion, disguised identities, realism, irony, and at least one of them, "*Čā'e kē Bāgh*," a distinct sense of place. Over all this we feel the directorial presence of the author. It is surely some sort of pointer that theater and films and artists, whether good or mediocre, invariably have a part to play. A possible exception is Sītā in "*Sītā Haran*" (Sītā's Abduction). While her close associates remain keenly involved in theatrical activities, she merely drifts from one man to another, from one city to another, never in control of herself or her emotional imperatives. She is outside the narrow stage of the theatrical world, on a bigger plane, in search of a role for herself, repeatedly possessed and dispossessed and finally out on a limb. She seeks out men, as someone short on confidence, and is deceived or discarded each time by her husband and lovers. In "*Sītā Haran*," the longest novelette in the collection, men obviously are the villains, or so it seems. A careful reading reveals that Sītā is equally to blame. She is too impulsive and perhaps sexually dissatisfied. As sexuality is nearly censored out of Hyder's fiction, it is impossible to define Sītā's sexual proclivities or discontent. It would be absurd to label her as a nymphomaniac. Yet it is in her nature to be attracted towards men of her liking far too easily. She does not quite realize that she is being exploited. Perhaps she does not care. An alcoholic, her inclination for dependency is evident but also leads her to turn her life into a series of fragmented affinities. 'Irfān, who is to become one of her lovers and who, in the end, abandons her for a nineteen-year old Normandy beauty queen, is more worldly and tells her, as she narrates it, how her marriage failed:

"Look here, Sītā," 'Irfān said calmly, "you say that everything should be different and original and wondrous and profound. Sītā! Life, the whole of it, is a fiction repeated millions and millions of times over. It has always been and will always be like this. People will fall in love likewise, will find each other disappointing. There will be heartbreaks the same way, leading to similar suffering. You or Jamīl or Qamar are not remarkable, unrivaled people ... Such things shouldn't happen to people like you. You and Jamīl and Qamar possess uncommon intelligence and sensitivity, but life's mill grinds down everyone. It makes no distinction between an intellectual and a non-intellectual."

(III-12)

Commonsensical thinking, on the face of it, but in fiction, as in life, those who adhere to commonsense often turn life into an unexciting affair. Sītā is chasing a mirage. Like all fallen women, she longs to be a decent housewife and look after her husband and children. In her heart of hearts she knows that, if left to fend for herself, her old age will be a

heartrending combination of impoverishment and drudgery. It is not only the safety of a house of her own that Sītā seeks. She also wants to put an end to her exile. ‘Irfān is a Pakistani and by marrying him she can go back to her beloved Sindh which she was forced to leave with her parents when India was partitioned in 1947. Her hopes are dashed when she goes back to Paris, ready to marry ‘Irfān. Unluckily, commonsense prevails again and makes a mess of someone’s life. Ostensibly, in “*Sītā Haran*” men appear to be cast in a sadistic mold, always ready to take advantage of a woman, unsure of her instincts. But what about Sītā who lets her guard fall again and again rather casually. Hyder’s ambivalence is discreet, although it falters tactlessly at the end when lines from Iqbal’s famous poem “The Mosque of Cordova” intrude into the narrative. These lines could not have occurred to Sītā. Poetry is not something which comes to mind when total disaster stares one in the face. Perhaps an inappropriate authorial interference.

It appears peculiar or maybe strange that Hyder never directed or was asked to direct feature films. So much of her fiction has a canny, modulated staginess about it. To act is to play a part, to pretend to be someone else for a while. The illusory character of the stage spills over into real life. In Hyder’s fiction many persons, mostly female, cultivate assumed identities. It is as often as not a question of survival. In a society dominated by men, women, in order to track down loopholes in an enforced subservience, resort to deception. It is hard to break out of a straitlaced, fossilized segment of society. The middle class has its notions of decorum to which it clings as if they were matters of life and death.

In the past, a Muslim woman, belonging to the middle class, knew the risk she took when she ran away from home. To come back, chastened, to her family was an impossibility. If her luck held she could become a courtesan. On the other hand, if her luck ran out she could only turn into a prostitute, moving down the road toward unbearable poverty. By the time Hyder turned to interpret the world around her through her fiction, the institution of courtesans was already on the way out. However, theater, films and broadcasting stations were coming to the fore as new avenues to explore and where some women could find means to secure a marginal but unconventional freedom. As a writer, Hyder’s sympathies, understandably, lie with the women; although she is perceptive enough to see that, in a wider sense, gender is immaterial. All her characters, male or female, are flawed. Many women in her fiction try to escape from a tedious domesticity to stand or fall on their own. These attempts may be construed as existential choices. The world, unfortunately, is a construct of force, not of fair play.

The eponymous “Dilrubā” and “*Aglē Janam Mōbhē Bīṭyā na Kījō*” (Don’t Let Me be a Daughter in My Next Reincarnation)¹ are studies in contrast. In “Dilrubā,” Hyder’s sense of the comic is on display. No pity though is shown for the snobbish, holier-than-thou attitude of the gentry. Four young boys belonging to the aristocracy and upper-middle class, fascinated by plays and actors and actresses, become quite dotty about a theatrical company. Soon enough their elders, who regard actors and actresses as a depraved lot, try to knock some sense into the youngsters. By taking strict, prohibitive measures, the elders think that they have saved their younger generation from some very questionable behavior. However, as the years go by, and the rich family is reduced to genteel poverty, the protagonist’s granddaughter runs away to Bombay to become a film star. The world changes and the tottery standards of respectability of a down-at-heel class count for nothing. As an aside, one can not help applauding Hyder’s astute comment that the Indian film industry is an anachronistic continuation of the defunct Urdu theater which was financed by the Parsis.

“*Aglē Janam Mōbhē Bīṭyā na Kījō*” is arguably the best-crafted novelle in the collection. The story of two sisters, one of them a cripple, who belong to a commonplace indigent ensemble and enjoy, through chance patronage, a brief respite from stress, it moves smoothly and inevitably to a bitter denouement.

Rashk-e Qamar, the elder sister, as sound as a bell, is good-looking with a captivating voice. Helped by a couple of relatively sympathetic male acquaintances, rather exceptional in Hyder’s fictional world, she earns some respite as a poet with a nice voice. Of course, she is not a poet. Someone else writes the ghazals which she recites as her own in the mushairas. A rich, handsome Iranian makes her his mistress. She gives birth to a daughter. He promises to marry her and then simply walks out of her life, never to return. From India, Rashk-e Qamar goes to Karachi in Pakistan, mistakenly assuming that she would find her Iranian lover there. What actually happens is that her handsome daughter leaves her to become a high-class prostitute, frequents ritzy hotels, associates with rich underworld characters and is finally found murdered on a beach in Karachi. Rashk-e Qamar makes her way back to Lucknow, her hometown, and discovers that in the meantime her crippled sister has died. She looks up her former contacts who promise to take her to a mushaira but neglect to

¹Hyder’s own translation published under the title “The Street Singers of Lucknow” in *The Street Singers of Lucknow and Other Stories* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1996).

pick her up. She realizes that in order to earn a pittance she will have to do what her crippled sister used to do, needlework and embossed embroidery. The wheel comes full circle. Perhaps a novel whittled down, for some reason, to a novella. As it is, in the last half of the novella things move too fast, events are telescoped and there is a sense of unseemly haste to set up the last scene—the return, not of the prodigal, but of a woman, utterly bereft.

The air in “*Ā'e kē Bāgh*” is thick with illusion, deception and dislocations. The mood of uncertainty extends even to the nature of the genre. Is it fiction or dressed-up reportage? The novella is written in the first-person singular, a fact which lends strength to its equivocacy.

A woman film director from West Pakistan comes to the Sylhet tea estates in East Pakistan to shoot a documentary. Here it is relevant to point out that while Hyder was in Pakistan she did make some official documentary films.

Anyway, she disembarks at a remote railway station and is given a lift to the rest house by a bearded official. As she discloses her identity the official says: “I am no longer interested in Urdu literature, which is becoming increasingly un-Islamic day by day, but my wife reads your short stories with keen interest” (190).

The question must be raised: why this admission by the narrator that she writes fiction? Disclosure of her identity is inconsequential to the plot and could have been simply deleted. Does the narrative hinge partially on things actually seen or heard by the author? Perhaps the happenings, or some of them at least, are real, but the names of the characters have been altered? There is no way we can be sure about it.

In the tea gardens, no one apparently belongs to the place. All the higher positions are held by persons who have come from elsewhere, from England or Scotland or other provinces of India or Pakistan. Even the tea garden workers were brought there forcibly from eastern Uttar Pradesh. The region is a limbo of dislocated people. Those who rule the roost lead lives of smug satiety. However, they only serve as a background to a bizarre story of three extraordinarily handsome and unscrupulous sisters, told by the narrator’s cousin who was once a gynecologist but now leads a life of benumbing respectability with her husband who manages one of the tea gardens. The cousin acts like the chorus in ancient Greek tragedies. Numerous incidents take place offstage and are narrated in flashbacks. The sisters are amoral and break up other women’s marriages without a touch of remorse. They cast aside their lovers at the drop of a hat and, what is worse, are out-and-out imposters. Nevertheless there is an aura of glamour about them because both the

narrator and her cousin believe that they are the daughters of a nomadic tribe's chief and belong to Quetta. In fact, that's what the sisters claim. And nomadism evokes images of atavistic wildness, vagabondage, earthiness and a rapport with nature.

Appearances can be deceptive and pretensions hollow, as the narrator incidentally finds out. The shooting of the documentary is finally abandoned because all the workers at the tea gardens where the narrator is staying are Hindu. There is no way the documentary can be given an Islamic touch. But before she was told by the concerned authorities to give up the project, she had already done some fieldwork. And, as she potters about the hilly countryside in search of suitable locations, she stumbles across a letter which shows that the sisters have nothing to do with Quetta or nomadic life but are the daughters of a hard-up maulvi who lives in a small town in Madhya Pradesh in India. Their cover is blown and the narrator is saddened and shaken by what she has discovered. She tends to withhold her sympathy and says in yet another inappropriate authorial aside: "What did you get out of this continual self-deception and unending escapism?" The question makes sense only if we consider the behavior of the sisters in the light of middle-class morality. Seen in a worldly context, their immoral lives are perfect examples of gainful survival in dangerous environments.

All told, "*Čā'e kē Bāgh*" does possess a melancholy ennui, as if the world makes no sense at all and it is impossible to fathom the drives and motives of human beings. Yet these are the drives, impenetrable and inaccessible though they might be, which render us human, which make us believable and likeable.

The resilience of Hyder's characters is a matter to ponder. Not a single character in these novellas, no matter what his or her plight, ever contemplates committing suicide. In a way, for all its ambiguity and despondency, Qurratulain Hyder's fiction seems to indicate: fearful or not, life is a gift and we must see it through. □