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Qurratulain Hyder: An Author Par Excellence

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If anyone can be called a phenomenon in modern Urdu fiction, it is Qurratulain Hyder, the author of the famous Urdu novel *Aag Ka Darya* which, in the late 1950s, rocked the literary circles in Pakistan, and consequent upon the publication of which the author had to migrate back to India. Later, this novel was selected by the National Book Trust for their prestigious Aadaan Pradaan series for translation into various Indian languages. Though the novel went through many printings in India, but since it was published outside India (1956), it could not be considered for the Sahitya Akademi's award. It was her collection of short stories, *Patjhar Ki Awaaz* (The Voice of Autumn), first published from New Delhi in 1965, which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967. Following this, her novel *Aakhir-e-Shab Ke Humsafar* (1973), won for her the Jnanpith Award.

Qurratulain Hyder was born in 1927 in Aligarh, into an enlightened family of writers. Her father Sajjad Hyder Yaldram was a highly respected original writer in Urdu, as was her mother Nazr-e-Sajjad Hyder. Qurratulain

passed her high school at the age of thirteen, and her M.A. in English from Lucknow University at the age of nineteen in 1946. She migrated to Pakistan in 1947 with her parents but returned to India after the publication of her magnum opus, *Aag Ka Darya*, as mentioned before, and was given Indian nationality again. For some time she worked for the *Daily Telegraph*, London, and also for the BBC, London. She had attended art schools in Lucknow and London and learned a good deal about music and painting, and had a sound knowledge of English literature besides being well versed in Urdu and Persian literary traditions. While in Bombay, she worked as the editor of *Imprint*, and also served on the editorial staff of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* for many years. She was a member of the Film Censor Board of India, and a distinguished Visiting Professor at the Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, and the Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh.

A number of novels, novelettes, and short story collections make up Qurratulain Hyder's oeuvre. *Aag Ka Darya* (The River of Fire); *Mere Bhi Sanamkhane* (My Temples Too); *Safina-e-Gham-e-Dil* (The Boat of the Heart's Grief); *Roshni ka Safar* (The Journey of Light); *Kaar-e-Jahan Daraaz Hai* (The Task of the World is Endless) Vol. I, 1977, and Vol. II, 1979, a biographical novel; *Aakhir-e-Shab Ke Humsafar* (The Travellers unto the Night's End) 1978; *Roshni ki Raftar* (The Speed of Light) 1982; *Gardish-e-Rang-e-Chaman*; and *Chandani Begum* are novels. *Sita Haran* (The Abduction of Sita), *Dilruba* (Beloved), *Chae ke Bagh* (Tea Gardens), and *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Naa Kijo* (Don't Make Me a Girl in My Next Birth) are novelettes. *Sitaron Se Aage* (Beyond the Stars), *Sheeshay ke Ghar* (Glass Houses), and *Patjhar Ki Awaaz* (The Voice of Autumn) are collections of short stories. She had written several articles in various journals in India and Pakistan. She had been writing fairly extensively in English on literary topics and arts, and had translated some books from Russian into Urdu. She had

also translated *Portrait of a Lady* (a novel by Henry James) and *Murder in the Cathedral* (a play by T.S. Eliot) into Urdu. With Sardar Jafri, she had edited *Ghalib: Poetry and Letters*, and with Khushwant Singh, *Stories From India*.

Almost all of Qurratulain Hyder's fiction reflects her preoccupation with India's cultural past, the pastness of the past, as well as its relation with the present. There is a sense of urgency about her work in that what the Indian people have now become is closely linked with what they have been, and a reflection upon their present identity has to take into account the formative processes that have shaped this cultural identity. Qurratulain Hyder is Indian and her ethos oriental but the human nature she probes is to be found anywhere, and the suffering she depicts is universal. Her work is marked by a quality of vastness and magnitude both in time and space, and undoubtedly she has produced some of the unique fiction of our times. Let me briefly dwell on her important books that have placed her firmly in the world of Urdu fiction.

Aag Ka Darya (The River of Fire), a novel spanning Indian history from the 1950s back to the hoary past of Indian civilization, definitely to the times of the Buddha, is a witness to Qurratulain's uncanny vision that gives a unique depth and meaning to the concepts of Time and Space. In this novel, her perspective is universal and her concern, humanity at large.

The story is spellbinding and fast-paced; the short, episodic narrative mode, keeps the attention of the reader always on a high. Gautam, the protagonist, a student in ancient times begins his peregrinations in the forest and eventually reaches the horrid times of Partition. Many of the scenes she portrays remain vivid in the reader's memory long after first reading it.

Qurratulain pulls off a double effect through writing in Urdu: the implications of the theme, which appeals to all humanity and expresses the anguish of any sensitive mind,

found avid readers wherever the language was read and spoken, and yet it remained a thoroughly Indian book. It also explores with the colonial past, especially looking at the advent of the English with the kind of critical sternness, seeking to give a balanced assessment of the Indian ethos down the millennia.

Patjhar Ki Awaaz (The Voice of Autumn) is an outstanding collection of short and long stories and a novelette, 'Housing Society'. Handling with remarkable skill a wide range of subjects and themes, and recreating history, Qurratulain Hyder is at her best in this collection. Her sensitivity to mood and situation and her considerable powers of characterization have no parallel in contemporary Urdu fiction. Most of the writings included in this volume are marked by the basic question of the predicament of human beings, the complexity of relations, and the unavailability of time with a backdrop of the cultural cohesion and the cultural personality of the Indo-Gangetic people.

In '*Jila-Watan*' (The Exiles), one of her best long stories, while underlining the humanistic aspects of the integrated Hindu-Muslim culture, or composite culture of the great cities of Northern India, she reflects on human suffering through the portrayal of vital experiences of the generation of those times in India and Pakistan, a generation which had passed through a profound historical change, and turmoil, caused by Partition, Independence and exile. In another story, '*Dalan Wala*' (That Winter) typical of her impressionistic style, she effectively employs past recollections and experiences capturing the dark and bright areas of human nature, and the underlying cultural unity of the Indian people.

'*Patjhar Ki Awaaz*,' the title story, perhaps the only story of its kind by Qurratulain Hyder, depicts the predicament of a nymphomaniac, who, thirsting for love, in spite of the purity of her soul, passes from one man to another, and

yet another by the sheer force of circumstances over which she has no control, and eventually in her grey days, feels like a fallen leaf drifted listlessly by the autumn winds.

Kaar-e-Jahan Daraaz Hai, the title of the next book, is taken from a verse by Iqbal which means 'The task of the world is endless'. The author calls it a biographical novel. It is a breathtaking book because of its scope, diversity of narrative voices, and layers of references. From the first page it snares the reader in its web of history and memory, fact and fiction, and does not let one go till the end. It is the history of a family of Nahtor, Bijnaur, which begins in the twelfth century and continues to the present. In the flowering of that particular family, however, there is also revealed to our riveted gaze the formation of that more general cultural identity—the Indian Muslim and his composite patterns of sociological behaviour.

Akhir-e-Shab Ke Humsafar (Travellers unto the Night's End), is another remarkable novel published from Bombay in 1978. It deals with one of the most fateful periods of the history of the subcontinent, i.e. from the pre-Second World War terrorist activity in Bengal and the Quit India Movement to the Partition of the country, and then to the events of 1970 and the eventual emergence of Bangladesh. The author's main concerns are psychological and existential in that the once revolutionary characters who, inspired by high ideals, give up everything for their ideology but with the change of time, and driven by primitive impulses and desires, stoop to the level of ordinary beings given to greed and lust; and disillusioned, they seek careers of ordinary comforts and base pleasures. Qurratulain Hyder raises some basic questions about the nature of existence and human freedom, how people rise to heights pressed by challenges, but in fact, the dark areas always persist and the scope of choices is rather limited. It is a vibrant story of different families—Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and English—interwoven with each other during these three

decades of revolutionary fervour. The changes wrought by the impact of these eventual years on the mentalities, aims, moral values, ideals, and outlook of the characters are depicted with profound psychological insight, and the characters of the hero Raihan, the heroine Deepali, and the younger female protagonist Yasmeen are hauntingly drawn. The atmosphere of East Bengal (now Bangladesh), its cities, rivers, and jungles are also portrayed very vividly.

Qurratulain Hyder has an intense feeling for the immensity of pain, and for that cruel force called Time which overshadows all activity on earth. Time, in her fiction, is that faceless force that transforms all faces, which is linear as well as spiral, which one can ignore only at one's own peril, and which is so easily accessible, and is still as boundless as the universe itself. She urges us to recognize that the inevitability of change is the only reality, and that fact has one face of hope as well as another of sorrow. A linearly progressing Time brings changes, and change can be a harbinger of grief or joy. Should one then take sides? That would be too easy, she confides to us, too simplistic, for these issues cannot be settled by referring to the material world alone. What counts for Qurratulain Hyder is the human spirit and the relationships through which it blossoms forth. And that is where the linearity of Time turns into a spiral, bringing recognizable moments back to us if we have the necessary sensibility.