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Post-colonialism and Marginality in the Fiction of Ismat Chughtai, Khadija Mastur, and Qurratulain Hyder

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Urdu fiction, dating back to approximately a little over a century, is relatively young compared with its English counterpart from whom it has been largely derived.¹ Yet, having a readymade model to draw from, it evolved quickly, thereby compelling its readers to alter their tastes and accept changes and shifts in subject, tone, and technique, much sooner than the foster parent had done. Faizi's fantastic, romantic, fairy tale, *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*² gave way to the sociological and didactic fiction of Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar, Abdul Haleem Sharar, and Maulvi Nazir Ahmed, whose novels were soon succeeded by the realistic fiction of the Marxist, Progressive writers. The dramatic element of the Persian *dastan* or *quissa*³ was replaced by the indigenous 'modern' novel of the nineteenth century (Osterheld 2001: 27), which eventually paved the way for the realistic and the experimental novel of the twentieth century. The political, socio-economic, cultural, and military upheavals of the twentieth century wrought a rapid alteration in the depiction of life in the

novel. The cataclysm of partition followed by independence was inadvertently represented in the fiction of these years.

The widely attended first Soviet Writers' Congress (1934) was a watershed that marked the role of responsible writers and intellectuals in a rapidly changing world. The proponents including Andrey Zhdanov and Maxim Gorky popularized social realism. (Ahmed, Talat 2009: 43) The writer's purpose was to serve as an instrument of change, arousing readers to react to their surroundings. In India, the *Anjuman Tarraqi Pasand Musanifeen-e-Hind* (All India Progressive Writers' Association, AIPWA), was formally inaugurated in 1936, at a widely attended conference in Lucknow; Premchand was its first president. This has been one of the most significant literary organizations of the twentieth century, created for the propagation of Communist principles. The initiators of the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM) including Munshi Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Ali Sardar Jafri, had strong Marxist socialist leanings and sought to promote social awareness and propagate modernity. The Progressive Writers' Movement was also the watershed that marked the beginning of contemporary Urdu fiction written by women, undermining most kinds of gender distinctions (Pietrangelo 1983: 164). Though the movement gradually became increasingly politicized (Coppola 1994: 50), the art of Urdu fiction came to embody all the connotations that the word 'progressive' might carry with it. Sajjad Zaheer's manifesto of the Progressive writers (drafted in London, 1935) claimed that they would aim at an authentic and realistic portrayal of the 'turmoil and conflict of a new society' as against the spiritualism, idealism, emotional exhibitionism and the lack of rationality in the literature of the previous two centuries (Russell 1992: 204). Urdu fiction, including that by the Progressive writers, during the crucial pre-Independence years was not concerned

with India's struggle for independence: it projected realistic, societal situations through linear, chronological narratives. Nevertheless, the stories were set against the backdrop of the struggle for independence which was indeed so large that it could not be ignored (Ahmed 1992: 118). The concept of nationalism was intermingled with a sense of mourning for the barbarism and willingness of a people to give up their civilizational unity in the wake of Partition (Ahmed 1992: 119). 'Urdu fiction in the decade after Partition was inordinately concerned with the horror stories of the rioting and the heartbreaking miseries of displacement' (Farooqi 2008: xxx). 'Realism' as a fictional device was rather popular, but the Progressive writers were more concerned with narratives of individual loss and pain of displacement and the atrocities that attended it (Farooqi 2008: xxx). Progressive women writers propagated modernity among the Muslim masses and pioneered an educational renaissance, especially for women. Their stories were largely concerned with the struggle of women to find an identity in a time of flux when they felt disadvantaged through various kinds of marginalization—primarily through being born as the second sex and furthermore, through economic deprivation, social and class restrictions, and dogma that alienated professional groups.

Ismat Chughtai, Khadija Mastur and Qurratulain Hyder are dominant writers of modern Urdu fiction, largely responsible for its unmistakable realism. Chughtai and Mastur's concerns are in keeping with the particular creed they profess as writers of the Movement. Hyder remains politically unaligned. She stands apart from her Progressive contemporaries, both ideologically as well as through depiction of social class and milieu, emerging as an ambassador of *l'art pour l'art* dictum of Gautier, giving priority to aesthetics and the imaginative spirit. Time and again, she has been the subject of derision of Progressive

writers like Chughtai for creating upper crust protagonists who appear ensconced in their own, small, sophisticated world, rapidly being devoured by that of the teeming masses (Kumar and Sadique 2000: 123).⁴ Nevertheless, though she may not be considered Progressive in the sense of the Marxist socialist manifesto, her works are tinged with eclecticism, humanism, and modernity and reveal a deep-rooted philosophical perception of the meanderings of the river of life.

Hyder's novels are largely a bourgeois representation of economically fortunate women, who interact with the deprived. However, the larger class struggles, the transformations at the national level and personal experiences of her protagonists, in a hostile environment, lend an element of fatalism to her works. Thus, Deepali Sen's evolution is marked with determinants that help her evolve into a person who learns to accept the inevitability of change. Shamman and Aaliya, iconoclastic Progressive heroines, represent the altering visage of the new woman, who emerges more confident and adaptable in a rapidly altering social scenario. Yasmin Majid, Sita, Rashke Qamar, Motibai, and Jamilun, among others, reveal the eternally struggling face of the marginalized woman. This paper attempts to analyse the foregrounded habitations of marginalized womanhood within the changing face of the emergent spirit of nationalism in select texts by Chughtai and Mastur, while drawing comparisons between these and representative texts by Hyder. The larger struggle for independence has Chughtai and Mastur emphasize the role played by the woman as a harbinger of change but Hyder emphasizes the plight of the de-centred centre. Economic and land dispossession under the *Zamindari Abolition Act* led to the creation, overnight, of a new marginalized group that hopelessly struggled against the unexpected.

Ismat Chughtai (1915–91), Urdu's pioneering feminist writer, professed allegiance with the ideals propagated by the All India Progressive Writers' Movement early in her student days (McLain 2001: 144). Chughtai was an ardent admirer of Dr Rashid Jahan, a gynaecologist by profession and the only woman contributor to the *Angare* collection,⁵ the publication of which catalyzed the formation of the All India Progressive Writers' Association (Russell 1992: 205). Like Rashid Jahan, Chughtai stresses the biological human self and as Priyamvada Gopal asserts, she goes a step further and claims that the woman can actually take pleasure in physical contact (Gopal 2005: 69). Chughtai remarks that the thinking of the Progressive writers 'projected the truth of the down-to-earth realities of life' (Kumar and Sadique 2000: 131). The works of Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, Khadija Mastur, and Razia Sajjad Zaheer, among others, are largely concerned with what it is to be modern, not merely as women but as 'professionals, as middle class, as Muslims, as Indians, and particularly as intellectuals with an investment in social change' (Gopal 2005: 68). Her investment in social change is combined with a keen-eyed observation of the minutiae of daily domestic lives of women. Chughtai's oeuvre stands testimony to her unbridled spirit as it simultaneously reveals her forward thinking, modern outlook: above all, her works are fraught with the truth and virtuosity of experience and 'faith in (her) own convictions' (Kumar and Sadique 2000: 131). Chughtai's realism revolves round the domestic lives of the ordinary people of Uttar Pradesh and Northern India. She writes with the intent of throwing light on the day-to-day lives of marginalized ordinary masses, especially women, encouraging the need for a paradigm shift in perspective and the adoption of a modern, socialist approach. Chughtai promotes freedom of cognitive, emotional, and linguistic expression. While she is decidedly against the portrayal of the imperialists'

lives, she is also unable to empathize with the sufferings of the peasant class and is better able to 'feel the pain of the middle and the lower middleclass' (Kumar and Sadique 2000: 131). Her liberalism, her preoccupation with Freudian psychoanalysis and human sexuality, and freedom of expression led to a fallout with the Progressives who gradually narrowed down the scope of their writings to that similar to realist, Soviet, socialist literature and the portrayal of the plight of the peasant class; reconciliation came about only after several years had lapsed (McLain 2001: 145).

Varis Alvi, commenting on her art, remarks that Chughtai 'come(s) across as an insider—the young girls, women, maidservants, and men she wrote about were very much a part of our households. All that she lay before us was so familiar that, like an old picture hanging on the wall at home, we hardly noticed it' (Kumar and Sadique 2000: 209). Shamman, in *Terhi Lakeer* (1947) or *The Crooked Line* (2003), whose life loosely symbolizes Chughtai's own, is the product of an altering ambience in an archetypal Indian Muslim middleclass household. Her infancy and upbringing are dotted with such emotional experiences of neglect as render a psychological imbalance in what is considered acceptable behaviour in a child. As an adolescent, she is exposed to a larger secular culture at school and college: finally, as a young woman, Shamman has learnt, like her creator, to be guided by her own sovereign spirit. Chughtai focuses on the female biological self while portraying the inner reality of various phases of psychosomatic, emotional, and intellectual growth of her protagonist, from whose point of view the story has been narrated. Shamman's forced tearing apart from her wet-nurse whose love affair is discovered creates in her a longing for the warmth of the female body which in turn perpetrates an attraction for her throw-ball instructor, Miss Charan at the English Mission School. Shamman is

'rescued' from Miss Charan by the school principal, after perceptible indiscretions in their relationship are discovered. It is not till she is consciously advised by a friend that it is fashionable to indulge in heterosexual relations at the co-education college she attends, that Shamman learns of the attractions of the opposite sex. Ironically, she finds her interactions with men closer to her age nauseating and seeks solace in the companionship with the ageing Rai sahib, her friend's father. Shamman feels devastated by his death and finally marries an Irishman, Ronnie Taylor, a captain in the British army. Differences erupt between them because of their different cultures, following which the marriage breaks up. Shamman perceives the significance of her own Indianness and realizes that a permanent marital partnership is not possible with the colonizer. In her narrative, Chughtai highlights the growing awareness of the need for Western education among Muslim masses, the sense of national pride which was fast taking root in the psyche of the people through the emergence of a hybrid national culture (a confluence of the Hindu and the Muslim cultures), and the changed society that had emerged as a product of the stratification of Western and Marxist political ideologies. A democratic and free India generated a need for freedom of personal and social spaces and freedom to make one's own choice in matters of personal requirements. Shamman's breaking away from accepted social codes of conduct is an affirmation of the free spiritedness that evolves from individual experience.

Speaking about her intent, Chughtai remarked: 'I projected a female character in my stories who refused to live by old values, that is, the false ideas of shame and honour, one who was not prepared to sacrifice her life for the sake of a mere show of so-called respectability of her family or "*khandan*"' (Kumar and Sadique 2000: 129-130). Shamman emerges as the progressive 'new woman' who assimilates the old value system of her family with the

modern ideals of a new order and is guided by her own spirit. In the introduction to the novel, Tahira Naqvi compares *Terhi Lakeer* with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), averring that there are certain portions in Chughtai's novel that seem to be 'fictionalized prefigurations of Beauvoir's description and analysis of childhood playacting and fantasy...' (Naqvi 1995: viii). The involved narrative 'reveals the fault lines in psychoanalysis, and shares contiguities with the kinds of rewritings of psychoanalysis done by feminist psychoanalysts' (Patel 2001: 351, 352).

Khadija Mastur (1927–83), one of the youngest members of the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM), is well known for her depiction of the economic and domestic trials of the lower middleclass and the modernity she propagates as a follower of the Progressive creed. '... she is among the last of the class of writers who gave to Urdu fiction a sense of clarity of purpose and design, and in particular brought into focus the issues surrounding women's roles in the Muslim society of pre-Partition India and, later, Pakistan' (Naqvi 1998: xi). Her most popular novel *Aangan* (1956) or *Inner Courtyard* (2001) foregrounds the psychological and emotional development of the protagonist Aaliya, and the family's stoic resistance to the rigours of poverty, against the backdrop of India's struggle for independence. Religionization of pre-Independence Indian politics and alignments of characters with different political parties become reasons for serious conflict within the family and outside. The novel also throws light on the predicament of the women of the neighbourhood in the shape of the taunts and jibes aimed at their acts of rebellion. Amma's callous remarks regarding the widowed Kusum Didi's elopement and return to her father's home are a warning to Tehmina Apa, her friendship with Kusum Didi and her clandestine romance with Safdar Bhai. 'Unbelievable shamelessness! First she runs away then she comes back

to torment her parents and burn coals of fire on their breast. I ask you, could she find no other place to stay? I'll break her legs and throw them away if she so much as casts her eyes towards this house!' (Mastur 2001: 44). Haji saheb's daughter-in-law, who has eloped only three years after the death of her husband, becomes a subject of ire. 'The vengeance of God upon us, the wanton! She should be buried alive if she's ever found,' says Amma, and Kariman Bua responds: 'Indeed we live in the fourteenth century. There was a time when widows of thirteen or fourteen would live out their lives with nothing in view except the grave, never casting so much as a glance at any living creature. But all that is over now. Our elders spoke truly when they said that in the fourteenth century the cow would eat dung and the virgin would demand a bridegroom.' (Mastur 2001: 191)

Remarks such as these, point to the narrowness of moral codes binding on women. However, the discussion soon takes on communal overtones, since an impious reference to the cow could lead to a riot in the current time of disharmony. Najma Phuphi's and Chammi's marriages evoke the frustration encountered by women through mismatches. However, unlike Tehmina Apa who suffers in silence till her suicide, both women seek divorce or separation as an assertion of their individualities in their attempt to alleviate their respective predicaments. Aaliya emerges as Mastur's new woman, confident in her capacity to support her mother financially as a son would. Later, in Pakistan, her refusal to marry Safdar, who vows to give up his socialism in lieu of his export business, once he receives his license, can be viewed as a triumph of the 'progressive' woman who is able to cast aside her personal need for love and comfort and opt instead for the larger social cause of the ordinary, deprived citizens in the shape of refugees from across the border. Aaliya's emancipation from the manacles of individual needs parallels India's freedom

from the imperialists and the creation of Pakistan. It can also be viewed as a vindication of the disappointments of the other women in the novel. Severed from the traditional home through migrational displacement, Aaliya is faced with the dilemma of reconstructing herself socially, economically and culturally, in an alien land in the cold discomfort of the large house procured for them by her maternal uncle.

Qurratulain Hyder's *Akhir-e-Shab Ke Humsafar* (1979) or *Fireflies in the Mist* (1994) traces the growth and evolution of the protagonist Deepali Sarkar, foregrounding the troubled political scenario of twice-partitioned Bengal. The adolescent Deepali strikes the reader as an alter ego of both Shamman and Aaliya, but although she has strong Communist leanings and actively participates in the so-called 'terrorist' or 'revolutionary' activities of the earlier Communist leaders in the overthrow of the British, she learns, in time, that the comrades of Bengal along with her own endeavours would be crushed by both, the British as well as the Congress, which was emerging as the voice of the Indian citizen. Deepali's fiery adolescence gives way to a sober youth, also through disappointment in her brief romance with Comrade Rehan Ahmed, the dashing and enigmatic guerilla Communist leader. She finally migrates to Trinidad and marries the wealthy, uninteresting expatriate, Dr Sen, through the efforts of her uncle.

Terhi Lakeer and *Aangan* are *bildungsromans* that encourage modernity. Chughtai and Mastur have ensured situations that focus on the social and emotional evolution of their female protagonists promulgating Marxist tendencies. It is symptomatic that both women evolve into individuals who, empowered by education, are capable of supporting themselves and their families, independent of male support. Their breaking free from long-standing, accepted codes of conduct at a time when India won

freedom marks the triumph of the woman in a traditionally insular society.

The writers have left their individual imprints upon their novels. Shamman's is a story narrated through a series of tactile images that stress the biological facet in the process of growing up, in addition to the psychosomatic. 'The word 'wife' made Shamman shudder. It seemed to her that there were dozens of babies and thousands of worries sucking on Noori's body like leeches' (Chughtai 1995: 171). On the other hand, Aaliya's story highlights the psychological-emotional aspects of her temperament in the growing up process, while accenting sensuality. 'His face was flushed and his eyes fixed on her with a painful intensity. She bowed her head at that moment, she felt that if she failed to find shelter from his gaze something unspeakable would happen' (Mastur 2001: 115). Mastur also recreates the minutiae of environmental sights and sounds. The political goings-on form the background of both the stories but while in Mastur's *Aangan* they take the form of reported incidents, Chughtai's Shamman grows up in the midst of the reforms that are either the by-products of a larger, escalating political order or may have led to it.

Hyder's novel, distanced from the struggle for independence through the passage of time, plunges into the real politick of the struggle for independence, the people's uprisings against the British and against the zamindars and the capitalists. Rosie Bannerjee's active involvement in the bombing of the British police station, her consequent hospitalization and imprisonment and the encouragement she receives from fellow women nationalist supporters, the active involvement of comrade Rehan Ahmed earlier in the surreptitious Communist Party activities and later in the discussions with the Muslim League and the Congress, are grim reminders of the tumult of the age. Deepali Sarkar's lineage makes her an obvious choice for the comrades who

are in search of daring, unsuspecting, willing candidates who will work as spies or radical activists. Deepali's reference to Ranadive and his declaration that the struggle was the people's war, to the activities abroad, of the Communist International, and to Nehru and the divide between the Communist Party and the Congress, indicate her complicity and involvement in political affairs (Hyder 2004: 169).

Hyder's *bildungsroman* records the various experiences that shape the life of her protagonist without ensuring that the experience that the protagonist gains is measured in terms of positives. Deepali learns to cope with her particular predicament through a stoic stance inculcated by a deprived childhood. Her Bengali *zamindar* family that has lost its fortunes through the common tendency to live beyond its means, and her uncle, Dinesh Sarkar has been hanged by the British for involvement in a terrorist case. Aaliya is born into the family of an erstwhile *jagirdar* from the United Province. Both have heard of the legendary wealth of their families and strive to accept the meagre remains. Nevertheless, both derive their fortitude and stoicism from their fathers' sense of dignity and self-respect. Chughtai popularized the *begumati zaban* (i.e. the language commonly used by the women of the household) and retained her sense of humour in spite of never losing sight of her socialist intent. Mastur highlights the multiple points of view of women in her novels; her texts, like Hyder's, are enriched with inter-textual references to ghazals, folksongs and popular folklore.

Akhir-e-Shab Ke Humsafar also represents the sufferings of several women who inhabit the margins of the class-ridden, Indian social scenario: like the many characters of a *dastan*, Hyder's protagonists play their different parts, evoking relevant questions as regards the larger change taking place at the national level. One of the sub-plots of the novel deals with the talented and ambitious dancer

Yasmin Majid, the daughter of a poor maulvi, Maulana Majidullah. Yasmin's ambition transports her to London where she is preyed upon by a fashion designer, Gerald Belmont, who marries and then abandons her, in favour of a male partner, leaving her to fend for herself and their daughter. Yasmin's destitution leads her to relinquish custodianship of her only child who grows up with her grandmother in the Catholic faith, disliking her mother. Yasmin's abortive remarriage and her many emotional traumas and embarrassments lead her to commit suicide. The novel concludes with a concert commemorating Yasmin's skills, as part of the efforts of a young nation acknowledging its great artists. Deepali, who has travelled back to Bangladesh to be a part of the concert, reads the 'glossy brochure' circulated by the Yasmin Majid Memorial Committee which describes Yasmin as 'another celebrated daughter of Bangladesh, the splendorous dancer and poetess, the late Madame Yasmin Majid Belmont' (Hyder 1994: 307). Deepali visualizes the futility of the grand concert, for Yasmin's diary is ample proof of the neglect incurred by the talented dancer from erstwhile East Bengal who was disowned by her family, disregarded by her country and looked down upon by the Westerner. Yasmin becomes a prototype for independent women who follow their heart's desire and meet with disappointment. Her actions are redeemed by Nasira Najmus Saher who observes: 'The maulvis did not forgive Yasmin for her waywardness. But thousands of Muslim girls were raped here during the War of Liberation. Countless had to become street-walkers. Not a single maulvi of the Islamic world protested against the horrible situation' (Hyder 1994: 329). Deepali terms her a 'real rebel of Nazrul Islam'⁶ (Hyder 1994: 329).

Giribala's predicament bespeaks the quandary of the impoverished, young, attractive girl who is rescued from the lasciviousness of Nawab Qamrul Zaman Chowdhry of

Arjumand Manzil, where she serves as a maid in his mother's establishment. Later, she is rehabilitated and converted to Christianity as Esther Giribala by the active missionaries in the land of the infidels. Her marriage to the Reverend Paul Banerjee, provides respectability to her existence but she remains always a passive recipient of the tricks of fate, unwavering in her selfless service to her husband and humanity and her stoicism against her daughter Rosie's acts of rebellion. Rosie's belligerent nationalism and her conversion to the old faith of Hinduism after her marriage with the business magnate Basant Sanyal in an attempt to shed her poverty raises pertinent questions on the viability of the many conversions: the imperiousness of the Biswases reveals the pompousness caused by the stratification of the Hindu caste system with a religion free of such hierarchical order.

Strife-ridden Bengal, the land of the Sundarbans of the Nawab Nazims, the Bengali babus and the Christian converts, figures as the political nexus of British India, the state that initiated politically motivated Communist activities against the British and later, witnessed bloodbaths in the name of liberation. Deepali feels nauseated by the devastation the war of independence has wrought; she is filled with a sense of shame at the ease with which Rehan Ahmed has slid into his new role of master of Arjumand Manzil. She pleads with him: 'Ever since I have seen you in your new role... I have been hoping earnestly that this is also part of your play-acting. Please tell me, please, that you are still in disguise. That you have really not turned into all that you had once rebelled against' (Hyder 1994: 321). Later, Rehan remarks: 'Look, for long years I went from pillar to post in united Bengal. Served terms in jail. Remained underground.... I grew tired. Then I got a chance to have some rest and comfort... It's as simple as that' (Hyder 1994: 331). Perhaps, the only act that associates Rehan Ahmed with his Communist past is his

marriage to the poverty-stricken Zohra, who is perhaps more of an embarrassment to him than a companion. Deepali's purchase of the exclusive woven Bootedar Balucher saris with a sense of satisfaction at their affordability stands in ironic contrast with her initial act of selling similar heirlooms from the old, prized collection that once belonged to her mother, for the cause of the comrades.

Hyder's Progressive contemporaries emphasize the positives of modernity and socialism, but she concentrates on the realistic patterns of existence, emphasizing the dichotomies and ironies that provide the various hues to humanity. She balances the plight of the capitalists and the *zamindars* with that of the masses, in the ensuing carnage; the message rings clear that the Nawab Nazims did not deserve their deaths any more than the others who lost their lives. The animal-like, in-cognitive cries of Mala, Jahan Ara's personal maid, bear testimony to their attachment and point at the brutal killings in the household. Rehan's rags-to-riches story leaves the reader unsympathetic towards his past affliction; perhaps only his orphaned, disinherited mother is pitiable for the quality of her life and her untimely death.

Aaliya, Deepali, and Yasmin suffer alienation through their transportation from the motherland—Aaliya, through her migration to the newly established nation state of Pakistan and Deepali, through her migration to the West Indies: theirs as well as Yasmin's wilful migration are the outcome of their economic need for survival in a time of flux. While the twice uprooted Aaliya yearns for the familiar discomfort of her old home where she will perhaps never return, she tries to cope with her new identity as a *mohajir* by submitting herself to the emancipation of thousands of others like her herself. Aaliya forfeits personal happiness, propagating the idea that society comprises the family. Deepali's obligatory migration on the other

hand, leads her to live a life of comparative comfort as Mrs Sen—she is also able to provide for her father and aunt. Back in the newly-established Bangladesh and face to face with a new generation, she also realizes that some things will never change: Deepali feels alienated among the familiar sights and sounds of the land that she once toiled to free from the yoke of imperialism and longs to return to the comfort of her new home. Like Shamman, Yasmin realizes in the foreign land that the Eastern and the Western cultures can never be integrated, but while Shamman retains the hope and will to fight on, Yasmin sacrifices herself at the altar of her abortive attempts at liberation.

Hyder took up the subject of the dispossessed Nawabs and princely states in independent Northern India, in her earliest novel, *Mere Bhi Sanamkhane* (1947) or *My Temples Too* (2004). The Kunwar Sahib of Karwaha Raj is sceptical of Dr Salim, due to his being a self-made man. His dissipation, his self-imposed seclusion, and lack of direct involvement in the goings-on around him, owing to his fear of the rapidness of change on the eve of partition and independence, bring death in the form of a reprieve. He is saved the trauma of witnessing dispossession of his ancestral land though he is aware that the new government is planning to set up a 'major refugee resettlement centre' (where) 'displaced peasants from Punjab and the NWFP were to be rehabilitated on his fertile agricultural land' (Hyder 2004: 134). Perhaps the finest indication of shifting loyalties is contained in the attitude of Lala Iqbal Narain's nephews who are impassioned workers of the Hindu Mahasabha. They advise him against giving up service at Karwaha Raj: 'Don't leave the Raj now, Uncle, this is the time to stick around. How long will these wretched Polus and Kachalus, or whatever their names are, last? The government will confiscate their land and redistribute it among us. We'll look after Karwaha Raj, good and proper!'

(Hyder 2004: 137). The futility of Peechu's murder and mutilation by an irate, communally-charged mob is rendered the more poignant since it comes at a time when he was in the act of saving the honour of migrant women, in the capacity of a police officer. Peechu and her father's sudden bereavements engender a mental imbalance in Rakshanda which is only augmented by her impoverishment, since, her father having left no will, according to the Talukdari law, she has no share in the estate. Roshi Bibi's philanthropic humanism is reduced to a cipher and she becomes an object of abject pity as she wanders semi-consciously in the dark, towards the mansion that was once her home. She strikes the reader as the suffering heroine of an inevitable tragedy. The mild, indolent Polu tries to come to terms with the rapid transformation; he visualizes a quiet life after marriage with a cousin. The conversion of Ghufra Manzil into an employment bureau (watched over by the refugee Ram Singh) for displaced men stands in stark contrast to the romance of the opulent lifestyle of the earlier Karwaha Raj residents. Trucks parked under the *moolsari* trees in the garden now are austere configurations of the changed times.

Hyder categorically caricatures Zeenat Riaz for being several steps ahead of the other women of her age: 'Zeenat Riaz belonged to that select group of highly educated females who thought they had raised the banner of rebellion against the laws of society and the accepted standards and traditions of orthodox families. During her college days she had cooked up schemes of tremendous moral and spiritual daredevilry, but had actually ended up as a principal of a private college at a mere Rs 500 a month. She sent for more money from her well-to-do-home, lived in the YWCA, and was an ardent believer in the intellectual, economic, and social freedom of women' (Hyder 2004: 63).

Quoting Mohommad Sadiq's observation that 'in her stories it is women who are in the centre of the picture and

men are there to enable her to dramatize their misfortunes' (1983: 320), Pietrangelo observes that although Hyder frequently wrote about women, female issues were not her primary concern (Pietrangelo 2004: 169). Hyder's collection of four novellas entitled *Char Novelette* (1998)⁷ has her consciously take up issues of besieged womanhood. This paper focuses on two novellas from the collection—*Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Naa Kijo* (1976) or *The Street Singers of Lucknow* (2004)⁸ and *Sita Haran* (1960) or *Sita Betrayed* (1999), since they reflect Hyder's concern with conflicts of women from diverse societal groups and communities. *Agle Janam* is about the 'the marginal, the transgressive, and the victimized woman' (Intro. Hussein: 2004) on the one hand and on the other, *Sita Haran* is about immigrant Sita's intrepid courage and effort to come to terms with destiny. Hyder's female protagonists are differentiated from her male ones by an overwhelming desire to overcome the marginality conferred on them by their social status or their camaraderie. The novellas cross-examine the hypocritical social and moral ethics that govern contemporary as well as ancient society. Sita and Qamar's stories suggest that a woman's naïve optimism and trust in love essentially become the prime reason for her undoing.

Agle Janam catapults the reader into a world replete with the low-born and the high-born, a world of god men and mafia dons, of the rich and the poor, of poets and singers, of artistically inclined people on the one hand and brazenly callous ones on the other. The story of Rashke Qamar, her polio-inflicted sister, Jamilun, and their friend, Motibai, a singer from Faizabad, spans practically a lifetime and raises pertinent questions on conventionality and modernity. These women are subject to multiple marginalizations of fate, poverty as well as their profession as street singers. In addition to foregrounding the abuse of her protagonists, Hyder draws comparisons between the situation of Mahapara, Qamar's daughter, who leads a jet-

set life among the smugglers of Pakistan and thousands of young girls of the Ginza locality in Tokyo. These girls have replaced the dignified geishas of the earlier generations who were professionally qualified artists and entertainers, often supported by patrons like Farhad with whom they were emotionally, sexually, and economically involved, like Rashke Qamar. The Ginza girls are looked down upon more for their grossness of behaviour than for their profession.

Qamar writes that her embarrassment with Mahapara stems from a 'bamboo-screen of false dignity' (Hyder 2004: 38) that she has erected before herself, like the geishas of old Japan '—although the curtains behind which (they) lived were made of sack cloth and the dignity was self deceptive and illusory' (Hyder 2004: 38). The indignity of Mahapara's operations prevents Qamar from either living with her or accepting money from her, in spite of rationalizing that Mahapara is in fact doing what she and her mother have done. 'Didn't my mother, my aunt and myself do exactly what my daughter is doing now, albeit in much better style?' (Hyder 2004: 38) she writes to Jamilun.

The novella evokes India's colonial past in more ways than one: Mr Verma's companionship of Motibai is reminiscent of the sexual colonization of Indian women by the British. The analogy is drawn between the Jat lass Sarwan, from Haryana, and Motibai who are both educated in the art of etiquette and culture: the former by William Fraser⁹, and the latter by Mr Verma. Farhad's folk song about General Fraser and his mistress draws parallels between colonial and post-colonial situations.

Choweke mien baithna chod meri Sarwan, churi kaante se khaana seekh.

Lehenga pehenana chod meri Sarwan, saya pehenana seekh—
(Hyder 1998: 349)

Leave your rustic kitchen, my Sarwan, take up the forks and knives.

Shed your peasant skirt, my Sarwan, put on English gowns.

(Hyder 2004: 14)

Partition and Independence have been referred to only obliquely, with Pakistan continuing to gleam as the sought after land of opportunity for the poor Indian Muslim citizen who migrated with a view to bring about an economic uplift. In Karachi, Qamar feels alienated from the motherland while she feels exiled in the country of asylum. Estrangement from Jamilun adds to her misery and isolation.

Sita Haran is a narrative about Sita Mirchandani, a quintessential, displaced, Sindhi Partition refugee from Karachi, Pakistan. Faced with the inevitability of reconstructing herself and her home after displacement from her homeland, Sita makes a valiant effort to resettle under altered geo-political and socio-economic conditions, with her family. The central trope in this novella is rootlessness. Once uprooted from her motherland, Sindh Desh, Sita is unable to lead a settled life anywhere. Her forced diasporic relocation leaves her pining for the geographical boundaries of the land of belonging. Sindh becomes for her as Avtar Brah describes the birthplace, a mythic place of desire, a place to which she cannot return though she may visit the geographical territory of this place of 'origin'. (Banerjee 2007: 169) Sita's visit to Pakistan as Jamil's estranged wife, for his cousin Qamar's wedding, reveals her extensive knowledge about the land, its historical background with its many saints, its rich cultural fabric and her family's profound associations with it. During the visit, Sita undertakes a reconnaissance trip through Sindh to Lahore, but avoids visiting their old, palatial home. Wistfully she remarks to Irfan: 'Now we are a people with no land of our own. The Punjabis at least got the eastern part of Punjab.' (Hyder 1999: 65) Her

globetrotting exercises make her travel full circle, leaving her confounded and heartbroken. Partition, that brought in its wake mass displacement and resettlement exercises, also becomes a psychological-emotional bane for both Sita and Aaliya who struggle to recreate identities in the countries of new domicile.

Both Sita and Qamar struggle against forces beyond their influence in order to combat annihilation. Their existentialism is largely governed by facets that dominate the female psyche—both believe in the synergetic authority of love and continue to become emotionally involved with men who, being insensitive, persist in tormenting them. Sita's inability to find a soul mate parallels Qamar's destiny. Their search for security remains an elusive dream as the several respectable men in their lives come and go. C.M. Naim comments in his introduction to *A Season of Betrayals*—'Sita Mirchandani in *Sita Betrayed*, despite betrayals by a series of men, must remain alive to her own essentially felt need: it is as if for her, ceasing to search for a shared and lasting experience of love would mean self-annihilation' (Naim 1999: xi). The same is true of Qamar.

Sita Mirchandani, is educated and outgoing, with a modern perspective of life, unlike her namesake from Hindu mythology. Hyder draws analogies between Hindu mythical precedents and the modern scenario emphasizing that society has not undergone radical changes over the years. Women continue to be ostracized, tormented, and treated as outcasts on the basis of social class and profession, in spite of being reservoirs of love, strength, and fortitude. The treatment of the woman as a victim is not a new theme in sociological literature; Hyder's ingenuous handling of the subject, in relation with a particular culture while she makes references to others, infuses it with specificity and greater variety at one and the same time.

Hyder's worldview that consists of both positives and negatives is evident in the patterns observed in the lives of her protagonists and the balanced sweep of her narratives. Nemesis is the watchword of existence, time brings with itself retribution, it is a healer and a trickster and financial comforts are in fact the bottomline of human subsistence. Life's little ironies are continually revealed through the frustrations of man's motives. Her novels are an artiste's impression of woman in relation to the environment in which she thrives or wilts as the wheel of fortune turns. Hyder's conscious non-alignment with any political creed or her mistrust of any particular doctrine of life indicates her affirmation of the patterned imperfections of humankind's subsistence.¹⁰ Her stories materialize as descendants of the Persian *dastan*, conjuring tricks of fate: as the scenes shift and the cameos unfold, Hyder captures the nuances and the spirit of the Ganga-Jamuni culture of the Indian subcontinent, thereby emphasizing the confluence of ethnicity. Like a true aesthete and a pluralist, her concern is with the creation of artifacts that are living monuments of the mythological, the literary, and the cultural tradition of a land whose historical and political magnitude is largely a consequence of a convergence of cultures. Hyder's pluralism enables her to stand apart from other contemporary Urdu women writers whose texts give the impression of didactic, period doctrinaires, written with a view to engender optimistic change.

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Notes

1. It is often supposed that the Urdu novel and the short story made their appearance in the subcontinent owing to Western or British education and administration. (Osterheld, 2001: 27). This observation is debatable.

2. *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza* is a romantic fairy tale involving magic, charms, fairies, and devils. Originally written in Persian during the Tughlaq dynasty by Amir Khusrau, it was written in its present form by Faizi in order to entertain Emperor Akbar. (Sharar 1994: 262) Several stories were written in great detail on lines of quest and adventure, similar to that of *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*, till it began to be felt in the nineteenth century that the content of the tale should be realistic or even educational rather than magical.
3. To quote M. Asaduddin, 'In Persian 'qissa' or 'dastan' simply means a tale or a story. However, in its specific literary usage, it denotes the lengthy cycles of medieval romances which consist of heroic and adventurous tales of great courage and valour that include the deployment of supernatural machinery, magic and enchantment (*tilism*) and adhere to the medieval code of chivalry (Asaduddin 2001: 78). He also avers that if the Urdu novel has indeed evolved from the tradition of the English novel, then 'it is equally true that a readership nurtured on the earlier forms of storytelling took to it quite naturally, without any sense of shock or novelty (Asaduddin 2001: 78).
4. For more views of Chughtai on Hyder, see article entitled 'Pompom Darling' in Kumar, Sukrita Paul, Sadique, eds. *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*. Alt Series. *Approaches to Literatures in Translation*. Delhi: Katha. 2000.
5. *Angare* (1932) is a collection of ten short stories and a drama in Urdu, co-authored by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Dr Rashid Jahan and Mahmuduzzafar. Sajjad Zaheer's works include 'Neend Nahin Aati', 'Jannat ki Bashaarat', 'Garmiyon ki ek Raat', 'Dulaari', and 'Phir yeh Hangaamah'; Ahmed Ali's include 'Baadal Nahin Aate' and 'Mahaavaton ki ek Raat'. Mahmooduzzafar contributed 'Jawaanmardi'—it is unlikely that he wrote his story in Urdu since his knowledge of the language was not sound enough. Mahmuduzzafar's story was written in English and translated into Urdu by Sajjad Zaheer who was also the editor of *Angare* (Gopal 2005: 156 and Coppola). Rashid Jahan contributed a play entitled 'Parde ke Peeche' and a story, 'Dilli ki Sair'. All the stories in the *Angare* collection have been translated into English. The *Angare* collection initiated a tendency that aimed at an authentic, realistic representation of social and cultural life in Urdu fiction, which had hitherto remained distanced from it. The writers had strong Marxist-socialist leanings and aimed at propagating modernity.
6. Kazi Nazrul Islam (25 May 1899–29 August 1976) was a Bengali poet, musician, revolutionary, and philosopher who pioneered poetic works espousing intense spiritual rebellion against orthodoxy and oppression. His poetry and nationalist activism

earned him the popular title of *Bidrohi Kobi* (Rebel Poet). Accomplishing a large body of acclaimed works through his life, Nazrul is officially recognized as the national poet of Bangladesh and commemorated in India. His poems have been quoted throughout the novel.

7. The other two novellas are *Chai ke Bagh* and *Dilruba*. A few of the novellas contained in this collection had been published in journals or collections of short stories before they were collectively brought out.
8. Also translated as *A Woman's Life*. New Delhi: Chetna Publications, 1979.
9. William Fraser was the assistant of the English Resident at Delhi, Sir David Ochterlony, years before the Mutiny of 1857. Both Ochterlony and Fraser were largely influenced by the Indian way of life and consciously adopted Indian customs and forms of dress, and learnt Urdu and Persian from the ulemas or teachers. Fraser, a Scotch Highlander, had six or seven legitimate Indian wives in his opulent harem and fathered many children (Dalrymple 2006: 64–65). Ochterlony was assassinated in 1825 and Fraser met with the same fate in 1835 while he was Resident of Delhi. He controlled the region of Haryana for several years and perhaps his liaison with Sarwan can be attributed to this time. Jacquemont records that he had many children who were Hindus and Muslims, according to their mothers and were peasants, shepherds or mountaineers, according to their professions (Dalrymple 1993: 109). Not much is known of what became of Fraser's wives after him.
10. On several occasions, Hyder has negated being swayed by social or political creeds. For instance, in *Shahrah-e-Hareer* she insinuates her non-alignment in the essay '*Khadija Mastur ke Maraasle*', by quoting Iqbal—'*Khuda wanda yeh tere sadah dil bande kidhar jaaen*' (O God, your innocent servants are equally disillusioned by monks as well as monarchs. So whom to follow?). With regard to Leftist ideology, she remarks, '*Khwab tha jo kuch deka / Jo suna afsana tha*' (All seen was not more than a mere dream / All heard was merely a story) (Hyder 2003: 318).