AZRA RAZA

Qurratulain Hyder (Aini Apa)
1926–2007

Sarōd-e rafta bāz āyad ke nāyad
Nasīm az ḥijāz āyad ke nāyad
Sar-āmad rōzgār-e īn faqīrī
Digar dānā-e rāz āyad ke nāyad

The song has gone, will its echo ever come or not
The breeze of Hijaz, will it ever blow or not
The time has come for this fakir to depart
Will another savant of mysteries ever come or not
—IQBAL

It was a lovely winter evening in 1983 when I first met Aini Apa (ʿAinī Āpā) at the home of my beloved Misdaq Khala Jaan (Saleha Abid Hussain, the prolific Urdu writer) in Okhla (New Delhi). She looked even grander in person than I had imagined and by the end of that evening, I was completely ravished forever by her palpable charisma, her sharp intellect and her great good humor. She, on the other hand, thought I was a snob and said so to my dearest friend Sughra Mehdi (a famous writer in her own right and the adopted daughter of Misdaq Khala Jaan and Janab Abid Hussain Sahib). The reason she thought I was a snob is quintessential Aini Apa. My visit to Delhi, along with my mother, had been hastily arranged from Karachi while I was home from the United States for two short weeks, and our stay in India was going to be quite rushed. The dinner had been arranged by Misdaq Khala Jaan so Ammi and I could meet our friends and relatives in one evening. Aini Apa was living in Zakir Bagh at the time, being the first occupant of the Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan Chair at Jamia Millia, and was a frequent presence at my aunt's home. She considered Sughra Mehdi her friend and confidant (Aini Apa bestowed the title of "Musheer Fatima" on Sughra as Sughra is forever being solicited for practical advice by the young and old alike).

Like every other reader of Urdu literature, I worshipped Aini Apa and was dying to meet her, but I had been duly forewarned by Sughra not to show my adoration as Aini Apa was known to be irritated by all manner of people claiming to be her fans. As a result, I spent the entire evening regaling her with juicy gossip about our common acquaintances (she loved to gossip), jokes (she had a fantastic sense of humor and she roared with complete abandon if she liked a joke), poetry (I lay claim to knowing hundreds of Urdu verses, including some wicked and funny ones) and conspicuously avoiding any acknowledgment of her as the greatest living writer of her time. The fact that Aini Apa minded my deliberate avoidance of the subject is why I say it was quintessential Aini Apa. She was full of surprises and contradictions. For example, she once asked a famous critic repeatedly to tell her what he thought of her latest book, while he tried helplessly to excuse himself modestly from doing so because he felt he was not good enough to critique her work. At her insistence, he finally caved in and feebly critiqued a few very minor points in the novel. Aini Apa's subsequent unbridled wrath, which immediately and ferociously descended upon the miserable fellow and lasted late into the night, lived up to its legendary reputation. Paradoxically, when the famed Urdu writer and trilingual poet, and my flamboyantly gay best friend (we were known as the Hag-Fag couple in Chicago and he insisted that he was the hag), Ifti Nasim was invited by Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi to give a series of lectures, one of his major attractions was to be able to meet Aini Apa. He asked me for an introduction to her and I called Aini Apa to request some time for him. She was completely smitten by him forever as, on their first meeting, he promptly produced a lipstick from his pocket and said, "You will love this Aini Apa because I use the same shade."

It took two more meetings with her before we really became friends, and we have stayed in touch ever since. I invited her to Cincinnati as a guest of my literary club Urdu Mehfil in the summer of 1992. During the few weeks that she stayed with me, we traveled (Buffalo, Niagara Falls), laughed hysterically, had serious bitching sessions, ate out at fancy restaurants, and talked endlessly about subjects ranging from *Maśnavī-e Zehr-e ʿIshq* (The Maśnavī Zehr-e ʿIshq), *Dillī kē Karkhandār* (The Karkhandars of Delhi), Mīr Anīs, and Bollywood to how sweet she thought E. M. Forester, Arnold Toynbee and John Dos Passos were in person, and how arrogant John Steinbeck. I taped many hours of serious conversations with her. She agreed to be interviewed only if I would write out my questions in advance so she could decide whether they were worth answering or not. She had very definite likes and dislikes, and two things she hated

with a passion were any mention of her writing and all desserts. The latter prompted my darling Zakia to compose the following parody of Ghālib's ghazal on the spot while we were all together in Cincinnati:

Zindagī yūñ bẖī guzar hī jātī
Kyūñ javānī kā figure yād āyā

We would have lived our days—somehow
Why did we recall our youthful figure

Muñh mēñ rasgullā na āyā tẖā hanūz
ʿAinī Āpā kā qahar yād āyā

No sooner had the sweet reached our mouth
Did we recall Aini Apa's wrath

Some years ago in Chicago, I was complaining about the malice and political acrobatics of a peer to my dear friends Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge when Arjun cut me short and made the following profound statement: "Azra yaar, there are very few people who are truly A-team (Beethoven, Einstein, Freud, Michelangelo … you get the picture). The rest of us are all just B-team. What difference does it make to complain or feel competitive within the B-team?" I can safely say that of the five A-team people I have met in my life, Aini Apa heads the list.

She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth and grew up among the exclusive élite circle of her famous parents, Sajjad Hyder Yildirim and Nazr Sajjad Hyder. At nineteen, she astounded the world of Urdu with her first novel, *Mērē Bẖī Ṣanamkhānē* (My Temples, too), which dealt with the theme that occurs repeatedly in her subsequent works: the tragedies and social betrayals resulting from the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Where history is concerned, the devil definitely lies in the detail. With profound insight, exquisite sensitivity and heartbreaking prose, she chronicled the stories of families and individual lives as they were rent asunder in parallel with the fissuring of the country. This is what C. M. Naim, retired Professor of Urdu Literature and Languages at the University of Chicago, says in his introduction to *A Season of Betrayals* (which contains the English translations of her short story "Patjẖaṛ kī Āvāz" (Sounds of Falling Leaves) and of two novellas, *Sītā Haran* (Sita Betrayed) and *Housing Society*:

> The days and months that preceded and followed August 1947—when the Indian subcontinent became free of colonial bonds—were filled with most horrific acts of physical violence. […] It was also a time of other, equally rampant violations that were not any the less scarring for not being

> patently physical. These were violations of trust; they wounded and maimed the psyches of their victims, leaving the bodies intact. And their time—that season of betrayals—lasted longer than just several months. […]
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> At the time, most major Urdu writers—they were almost all men—wrote about the horrors and brutalities that some human beings could deliberately inflict upon others in the name of religion. […] Only later did some of them—Rajinder Singh Bedi, for one—turn their attention to the other, less overtly bloody tragedies: what had happened and continued to happen to individuals and families at those human sites where there had been no "riot" and yet there were any number of victims. […] Prominent among the latter was Qurratulain Hyder, who may also have been unique among all writers, women and men, for having experienced and written about such tectonic upheavals on all the emergent borders—in India and in both West and East Pakistan. Interestingly, she first responded in the form of novels, as if the magnitude of the events demanded a larger canvas, and only later turned to shorter genres. In some sense however, she never stopped examining the consequences of those events, as is evident even in her most recent works.
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> (1999, vii–ix)

The second to last paragraph sums it up beautifully:

> In almost all her writings Hyder has been concerned with Time, that faceless presence which transforms all appearances and which we ignore only at our own peril. Though this inevitability of change is our only permanent reality, Hyder persistently urges us to recognise both its faces, one of gain and the other of loss. A linearly progressing time brings about changes. Should we then take sides? Should we say that change is progress? Or should we say it is decline? Either, according to Hyder, would be simplistic and perilous, for such issues are not settled by a reference to the material world alone. What counts for her, is the human spirit and relationships it generates and nurtures. That is where the linearity of time seems to curve into a spiral, urging us to recognize a past that never quite disappears.
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> (*ibid.*, xix–xx)

I may be stretching the point but it seems to me that what Hyder tacitly offers us is nothing but that wise Candidean response: even in the best of all possible worlds, it is best not to neglect tending to our garden. Certainly, through the several thousand pages of her writings, she has shown herself to be an eloquent witness to that truth.

At the age of twenty-eight, she published her magnum opus, the landmark *Āg kā Daryā* (River of Fire), which is arguably the best book in fiction, occupying that coveted place in Urdu which Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* occupies in Hispanic literature. The world

of Urdu changed forever after this book was published since every subsequent writer has been influenced by Aini Apa (yes, including Salman Rushdie):

> It was the season of beerbahutis and rainclouds, some time in the 4th century B.C. In a cool grotto Gautam Nilamber, a final year student at the Forest University of Shravasti chances upon Hari Shankar, a princeling yearning to be a Buddhist monk. He falls in love with the beautiful, sharp-witted Champak. And thus begins a magnificent tale that flows through Time, through Maghadhan Pataliputra, the Kingdom of Oudh, the British Raj and into a Time of Independence. This fiery river of Time flows along the banks of their lives as they are reborn and recreated, weaving through the twists and turns, the flows and eddies, keeping them together, keeping them apart. The story comes full circle in post-Partition India when Hari Shankar and his friend Gautam Nilamber Dutt meet in a grotto in the forest of Shravasti, and mourn the passing of their lives into meaninglessness, their friends who have left for Pakistan, and what remains of their country of which they were once so passionately proud.
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> What happens between then and now is history, full of the clangour of conflict, the deviousness of colonisers, the apathy of maharajahs, and the irrelevance of religion in defining Indianness.
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> (*River of Fire* 1998 Kali for Women edition, back cover)

I read this mesmerizing book once every two or three years, and to me, in addition to its captivating prose and the stories themselves, it also represents one of Aini Apa's central and profound tenets: current events, history, and most importantly, the past, have a nasty habit of intruding into our lives no matter how private a citizen we wish to be. Should we then abandon society and lead the life of an ascetic Jain? Well, as she deftly shows in the interconnected stories, even that does not protect us. In fact, one of the major messages of the book is exactly the message which Ghālib sends in the following brilliant couplet.

> *Dair nahīñ, ḥaram nahīñ, dar nahīñ āstāñ nahīñ*
> *Baiṯẖē haiñ rahguzar pe ham, kō'ī hamēñ uṯẖā'ē kyuñ*
>
> It's neither a temple, nor a mosque, someone's door or entryway
> We sit along the road, why must anyone evict us?

Aini Apa's memory was extraordinary and flawless, her intelligence was dazzling, her knowledge of Urdu, Hindi, and English literature, archeology, dance, classical music, (her last book was a biography of Ustād Baṛē Ghulām ʿAlī Khān), painting, etymology and history was astonishing. I never heard her utter a platitude in all the times I have spent

with her, and she was equally brilliant in both Urdu and English. Aini Apa was a fantastic mimic and could adopt a series of perfectly authentic regional accents. She thoroughly enjoyed a good joke, especially if it involved her. She loved the *hajv* (satire) written by her cousin which begins with the following lines:

Qurratuʾl-ʿAin haiñ adab mēñ dakhīl
Jaisē mulk-e ʿArab mēñ Isrāʾīl

Qurratulain's entry into literature
Is like Israel's into Arab lands.

She was a stunningly good-looking young woman and cut a striking, imposing and graceful figure when older, and when she was not writing, her pet hobby was painting. I have never met anyone who valued her family more than she did. There was unconditional love in her heart for each and every member of the extended Hyder clan and for that of her mother's side as well. Her glorious personality sparkled and lit up every room she was in. When I was in Delhi in 1992, Shabana Azmi came to see me at my lovely friends Zakia and Akku Zaheer's home in Ashadeep. Aini Apa was also there for dinner that night. It was a magical evening with Sughra, Saiyeda (Hamid), Zakia, Aini Apa, Shabana, my friend Mehro and her husband Samar. Sparks of wit, hypnotizing Urdu couplets, and funny lines ranging from Ajit epigrams to Blonde jokes were flying all over. I saw Shabana, no less magnificent a person herself and an icon of Bollywood cinema with hundreds of millions of devoted followers, being completely blown away by Aini Apa. Such was her charisma, such was her charm.

Aisā kahāñ sē lāʾē ke tujh sā kahēñ jisē?

Where do we find someone who we can equate with you?

I never met anyone whose set of values was as decent, who combined her celebrated wisdom with mind-boggling innocence and vulnerability, who was easily the kindest, gentlest, most sensitive person around and yet who did not suffer fools lightly. Javed Akhtar once said to me that the names of people Aini Apa really likes can be written on a grain of rice (secretly, both he and I were unabashedly confident that we were among them) and yet her circle of friends and acquaintances was exceedingly wide. She was compassionate to a fault and could feel the pain of the haves and have-nots with equal sensitivity.

As a friend, she was breathtakingly generous and thoughtful. During one of my visits to Delhi, she arranged an amazing evening for me. My

favorite Urdu poet (who I think is as great as Ghālib) is Mīr Anīs, the acknowledged king of elegiac poetry (*marsiyas*), and whose unique style of reciting *marsiyas* was legendry in Lucknow. Aini Apa invited the grandson of Sir Sultan Ahmed for a majlis at her place because he had learned to imitate Mīr Anīs precisely, from gestures and voice intonations to the angarkha and *dupallī* topi he wore. I was more deeply touched by her thoughtful gesture of holding a majlis for me because she was not a practicing Shīʿa (although her mother was), but did it because she knew of my absolute devotion to Anīs. She was also a great admirer of Anīs and her story, "Qaidkhānē mēñ Talāṭum hai ke Hind Ātī Hai" (A Tumult Rises in the Prison as Hind Makes Her Appearance) is a lovely reminder of that.

Aini Apa could do no wrong as far I and her other diehard admirers were concerned for one simple reason:

Vo tō jis fan kā khudā hai yārō
Us kō har bāt ravā hai yārō

She is the Goddess of her field
Everything is permissible for her

Last year, we were chatting on the phone when something I said reminded her of a wonderful anecdote about the great Ismat Chughtai. Ismat Apa was trying to give some extra money to her washerman—an extremely poor, illiterate man from some hinterland in Uttar Pradesh. He asked her what he was supposed to do with the money and Ismat Apa said, "What do you mean, what are you supposed to do with the money? Buy toys for your children." His response was a drawled out "*Phaiiiiinh*???" (the Purbi version of *p̲hir* which means *and then?*). And Ismat Apa said, "Well, buy some new clothes for your wife," and he said, "*Phaiiiiinh*???" And on and on. "So Azra Begum," she said to me, "this is what life is all about … a never ending series of '*Phaiiiiinhs*???' I got the Sahitya Academy Fellowship … '*Phaiiiiinh*???' I got the Bharatiya Gnanpith [India's highest literary award] '*Phaiiiiinh*???' I get the Nobel Prize tomorrow … '*Phaiiiiinh*???'"

During my last trip to India in 2004, I drove from Janpath to Noida every single day to see her. Her breathing problems, caused by severe and progressive pulmonary fibrosis, were getting visibly worse. One afternoon following lunch, I cornered Aini Apa and suggested immediate reevaluation of her condition by a fresh team of specialists. She was adamant in the beginning, insisting that she had the best physicians taking care of her already, but over the next few days was finally convinced to follow my advice and subsequently did better for a long while.

The first evening I went to see Aini Apa in 2004, I had taken my nine-year-old daughter Sheherzad with me. Aini Apa was exceedingly attentive to her, had her recite lots of poetry by Ghālib and Iqbāl, which I have made the innocent one memorize since she was three years old, and encouraged her during and after each poem by applauding loudly. When she found out that Sheherzad had been taking kathak dance lessons, Aini Apa was visibly delighted and insisted that she do a few steps for the guests which included the Vice-Chancellor of Jamia Millia. Such was Aini Apa's aura that, without a peep, my daughter got up and performed an entire song for her.

On my last day in Delhi, Aini Apa insisted on coming to see me herself for lunch at Abid Villa in Okhla. Walking into the house from the car, which had been pulled up in the driveway almost to the front door, Aini Apa was completely out of breath and had turned blue. It took many puffs from her various inhalers and the connection of her portable oxygen tank before she could catch her breath sufficiently to be able to talk. Then she was unstoppable. During this memorable afternoon, as we sat on Sughra's verandah enjoying what Josh Sahib has named the *gulābī dẖūp* of a January afternoon, the front door bell rang. Sughra's young niece Zehra answered the door and then, to our great delight, yelled out in all earnestness, "Sughra Apa, the beggar is here. What do you want to give him today, lunch or a lecture?" In the end, the time came for us to part. We walked Aini Apa to the car, those few short yards bringing on another severe attack of breathlessness. After she was safely seated in the car and had caught her breath somewhat, she asked the driver to open the trunk. "I have been thinking about what to give you" she said, "and decided upon a very special gift." Out of the trunk came a huge, beautiful, bright yellow satin quilt with silver stripes on the top and a brown lining on the bottom. "I got this made in Radoli because I always felt cold in America, so I know this is one present you will definitely use." Needless to say, I had to borrow an extra large suitcase from Sughra to put this *liḥāf* in for the trip back to Chicago, but it remains one of my prized possessions. She gave me a big kiss and we stood on the road waving to her until her car turned the corner and went out of sight. This was the last time I would see Aini Apa.

In March of this year, as my other A-team member friend Sara Suleri-Goodyear and I were working on our book *Ghalib: Epistemologies of Elegance*, we agreed that the best person to write a foreword for our book would be Aini Apa. Given the highest esteem in which we both hold Aini Apa, we felt it called for a trip to India in order to make the request in person. Sara, by the way, who has never met Aini Apa, but is nonetheless

an admirer of hers, reminds me uncannily of Aini Apa: the same regal personality, equally intelligent, classy, wise, witty, sensitive, generous, and above all, the same wonderful sense of humor. Had they so chosen, either might have become a great actress. It was one of my wishes to see them together in the same room. We called Aini Apa and asked her if she could spare a week for us, to which she readily agreed and insisted that we stay with her. As our bags were packed and all preparations were complete, including a menu for our various meals at Aini Apa's prepared by her devoted housekeeper Rehana, at the last minute Sara was denied a visa by the Indian consulate in New York. We later learned that this was a tit-for-tat game being played between Pakistan and India. Pakistan had denied a visa right around the same time to Javed Akhter, so India was going to do the same for a prominent Pakistani. We were heartbroken. When I called to tell Aini Apa about the visa situation, she was incensed and threatened to call the Prime Minister and protest. Unfortunately, it was too late as Sara's spring break at Yale was going to be over soon and she had to start teaching again. We decided to go during her winter break. Alas, Aini Apa did not wait for us.

My last phone conversation with Aini Apa was some six weeks before the end came. She was her usual sparkling self and we gossiped and chatted for a long time. In early August I had some kind of a premonition and called her only to be told that she had been admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) that very day with a severe pneumonia. I called regularly and received increasingly ominous reports from Sughra, Bacchan (Aini Apa's grandniece Huma Hyder who was adored by Aini Apa like a daughter and who did more for Aini Apa than any other soul) and Rehana. I talked to Dr. Shukla, her personal physician, and learned that even though she was improving in some ways and had been transferred from the ICU to the step-down unit, her lungs were not cooperating since almost no functioning pulmonary tissue was left. At 11:00 p.m. on August 21, Sughra called with the news that Aini Apa was no more.

Kahīñ andẖērē sē mānūs hō na jā'ē adab
Čirāgh tēz havā nē bujẖā'ē haiñ kya kya

Literature might become used to darkness
What fabulous lights has the brisk wind extinguished!

Kaifi Azmi

Aini Apa no more? That can never be. Even if it sounds clichéd, as long as Urdu is alive, she truly will always reign supreme as one of its most dominant writers, and she will live through the several generations of writers she has already and indelibly influenced, with many more to

come. So instead of saying *Innā li'l-Lāh*, I am going to say: Aini Apa Zindabad! ❑

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