KHALID HASAN

Qurratulain Hyder: Literature's First Lady

"Let me explain time to you," Qurratulain Hyder once said to me. This was in the 1980s. How comfortable, she asked, was I with the 1960s? How distant did the 1960s seem in terms of years lapsing? "The 1960s feel like yesterday," I replied. "Well," she said, "that was a quarter century ago. So let's go back, taking the same unit of time you're comfortable with, another 25 years." To my surprise, if not horror, it struck me that we were in 1935. "And another leap into the past by the same measure," she said, "and we're in 1910, with the First World War still four years into the future. That's what time is. That's how time goes," she said.

She should have known, having written one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century in any language on the same theme: time. I refer of course to *Āg kā Daryā* (River of Fire). I've always found it ironic that while no week has passed since the late 1970s without some rubbishy and forgettable novel by an Indian author, writing in English, finding publication in Britain or the U.S., the work of a writer like Qurratulain Hyder, including her own superb translation of *Āg kā Daryā*, has never been able to make the list.

In June 1982 she wrote to me from Bombay, "Tell me, how does one get published in *Vilayat* [Britain; loosely, the West]? How did this boy get such a massive novel published from London/New York? [I forget what novel by a desi it was that I had sent her.] This is the sort of thing that has always baffled me about the Indo-Anglicans—do you call them Pak-Anglicans? This cousin of mine, Khalid Hussain Shah, and his American wife Linda wrote a huge novel [*Refugee*] about our family's migration to Pakistan. It was published from New York and got rave reviews in the U.S. press—'Mesmerizing,' etc." In another letter later that year, she wrote in that delightful Urdu that was hers alone to write, "Having watched books by "*unt-shunt*" (hocus-pocus) types finding publication in the West, I had handed over to you a collection of my stories (in her beautiful

English translation). Well, it's apparent that nothing came of it on your end. I'm two-thirds done with my translation of *Ākhir-e Shab kē Hamsafar* (Fellow-Travelers Toward the End of Night; published as *Fireflies in the Mist*). How can it get published in the West? [It wasn't]. You try."

The first time I saw Annie, which is what I always called her, was in 1960 or 1961 in Karachi, but I couldn't muster the courage to speak to her. There used to be a street that linked Victoria Road and Elphinstone Street. [I prefer to use the old names that nobody had any business changing.] On that road, there used to stand the Capital Cinema, which had a wonderful restaurant on its first floor called Flamingo. It was always dimly lit and had black steel furniture with colorful cushions. There, in that cool, calm place, I saw Qurratulain Hyder sipping tea with a woman friend. Annie was wearing a yellow sari and a spring-green blouse. That I have never forgotten. Another twenty-one years were to pass before I would meet her. Why? Because there is a preordained time and place for everything. The year was 1980. I was in Bombay and determined to meet not the movie stars of my dreams, but Qurratulain Hyder. And I did. From that day on our contact did not flag and we kept a correspondence going until May 1997. Thereafter, she did not write with her right hand because of a stroke, but she learned to write with her left. She sent me a copy of one of her books with an inscription written with her left hand that said "*Bā'eñ hāth kā khēl*." The literal translation may be "a trick with the left hand," but it means "executed with the least effort." Another book, her translations of some of her stories published in India, *Street Singers of Lucknow*, she inscribed to me in English with her left hand in childlike lettering. Can destiny come up with a greater irony than to divest a magical writer like her of the ability to write with her own hand.

People were always in awe of her because she refused to suffer fools and made it quite clear on the spot the reason why she did not. Some of my friends remain surprised to this day that I could even think of taking liberties with her. Everyone who was younger than her called her Annie Apa, but I called her Annie. And she let me call her Annie. When she asked me what I thought of her novel *Gardish-e Rañg-e Čaman* (Shifting Hues and Moods of the Garden), I told her I didn't like it and I told her why. I was forgiven, but I was also told that it wasn't necessary for me to be able to understand everything. She also told me about a certain kind of spoken Urdu in Uttar Pradesh that few Pakistanis would have an ear for now.

She bore with me to the point of indulgence. Over a period of years, in at least three instances, she let me go with life and limb—and friendship—intact. I know of people she sent to Coventry for lesser trespasses,

never to speak to them again. Now that I look back on it, I did not deserve such forbearance and I only attribute it to some stellar influence that placed me in a house that was exempt from Annie's ire and her celebrated temper when annoyed. Let me narrate the three incidents. In early 1981, she wrote to me (and I translate), "Famous poet F. R. [*darīda badan*] has arrived here, complete with husband and offspring. It is being said that she has no return plans and is looking for work. All kinds of stories are in the air. In order to earn local goodwill, she is making all kinds of rhymeless statements against 'that' country. For instance, that the reference to Dajjāl the One-Eyed has been censored out of the Qur'an. (A professor of Islāmiyāt in Delhi has said there is no mention of Dajjāl the One-Eyed in the Qur'an). One has also heard that the sister who has accompanied her is loud-mouthed and rude. Two years ago, when the lady poet came here and called on this humble being, her political passion was something to be seen, just like ours when we were in college. The inhabitants of the land of Confucius have been particularly welcoming to her."

Some days later, in a letter to my old friend and classmate, the late Kalim Akhtar (who must have written hundreds of thousands of words on Kashmir and why it must be free—without any effect on the governments of India and Pakistan, I should add), I made mention of what Annie had written to me about Fahmida Riaz. Kalim used to write regularly for *Navāʿ-e Vaqt* and, without naming me, he reproduced in the newspaper what Annie had written about Fahmida and her sister. This was exactly the sort of thing that *Navāʿ-e Vaqt* has always loved. For them, here was another example of the vile anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan Indo-Soviet lobby at work, etc., etc. I had no idea Kalim had put Annie's delightful and catty comments, which I had only conveyed to him for his own amusement, into print. Then I heard from Annie on 23 December 1981 from Aligarh. She wrote (in English this time), "Last month Fahmida R. came to see me in Allahabad. She was almost in tears as she told me that *Navāʿ-e Vaqt* had published a news item headlined '*Qurratulain Hyder kā ēk Khaṭ*' that said, '… who is here with one sister and to win local goodwill … is issuing statements (etc., etc.). This letter has been sent by Q.H. to a friend of hers who lives in the West and from whom this letter has been obtained.' Khalid, needless to say this is utterly disgusting. Can you throw some light on this shameful act? Kindly respond by return post [the last three sentences in Urdu]." And then this in English, "I don't feel like writing anything else."

My response was an abject apology rendered while prostrate on the ground at her feet. Sackcloth and ashes was my defense. I also sent her an

Yves Saint Laurent perfume called Opium as a "peace offering." She writes on 10 February (in Urdu), "These days a song from a new Amitabh Bachhan movie is very popular with the refrain: '*Kōʾī farq nahīñ albatta, kōʾī farq nahīñ*.' That incident is now stale, but a postmortem appears to be in order. What happens is that those who dwell in lands beyond the sea wait ardently for newsy letters from close relations and friends at home. That being so, man, who is a bundle of frailties, sometimes passes on to them the kind of gossip that I sent you. Now I remember that the lady told me in Allahabad that it was Kalim Akhtar who had put this letter in the newspaper. I think that was perhaps the name. I replied that I knew nobody by that name. So far I was being truthful. But when I said that the letter was an utter forgery (which she did not believe, as was evident from her expression, against my thief's demeanor, it caused me much anguish. I consider myself fairly honest, and that is more or less the opinion of others about me as well. As such, they do not expect me to be guilty of such misdemeanors. Unfortunately, the lady and I share the same circle of friends in Delhi and Bombay and everyone is now in the know about this story, which is a great shame. But since the newspaper referred to a "friend of mine resident in the West," I did not believe, at the time I was traveling from Allahabad to Aligarh, that you could have been responsible for this thoughtless and irresponsible act. It is possible that I may have written to Muhammad Umar Memon.[1] After writing to you in December, I inquired from him if I had written anything to him about the lady and if it was possible that my letter had been hijacked by someone and delivered to Lahore. I enclose Muhammad Umar Memon's reply. I am not one of the world's great letter writers. For years, I do not answer letters; feels like an ordeal. Except for extremely important correspondence, I only write to relatives and friends to whom I feel like writing. You are included in that second category." The last sentence was the forgiveness she had graciously conferred on me. The matter was never mentioned again.

Another of my trespasses that Annie forgave was related to an introduction I had written for a collection of Pakistani Urdu short stories that Faruq Hassan and I had put together (eventually published by Vikas (Delhi) as *Nothing but the Truth*). I had included in that collection my translation of Annie's story "Photographer." For the introduction, I had consulted Faiz Ahmed Faiz on certain points relating to the formation of

[1]Qurratulain Hyder did write to me asking whether she had said some such things about Fahmida Riaz when she was visiting Madison and stayed with us, which was, I believe, in November 1979). I wrote back to her that I didn't recall that she had spoken to me about Fahmida Riaz at all. And, I added, even if she had, I was not likely to repeat it people. —*Editor*

the Progressive Writers' Association. I sent the introduction to Annie for her approval. She took exception to two of its passages. They were: "Although Qurratulain Hyder left Pakistan in the sixties to settle down once again in India and thus, technically, may not be regarded as a Pakistani writer any longer, her stories are, in many cases, first published in Pakistan where she enjoys a wide, appreciative readership. In any case, most of her great work was produced while she was living in Pakistan and was its citizen." The second passage to which she took exception was: "Her story 'Photographer' is more universal. Tinged with nostalgia, it is in some ways perhaps autobiographical. Qurratulain Hyder returned to the India of her early youth only to find that time is remorseless and that people grow old and change. Even culture undergoes modifications along with the politics of a society. Nothing can be recaptured; only memories remain."

Annie took me to task for writing that "most of her great work was produced while she was living in Pakistan and was its citizen." She wrote (in Urdu), "Obviously, your patriotism is on the boil. While I won't say that I have ever or anywhere produced great work, have I merely 'dug up grass' [*gẖās kẖodī hai*] since I came here, or written nothing of note? I beg of you, kindly do not drag me into this Pakistani-Indian rigmarole. I shall be grateful. If you have included just Pakistani storywriters in this collection, and by including my stories some controversy might arise, then please do not include my stories. You have been living abroad for some time and you do not know the official Pakistani standpoint on Krishan Chandar and Premchand. All this is very unpleasant and (in Bombayese) I do not wish to be part of this '*laftray.*' Please spare me. Enough is enough. It has become quite sickening [this last line in English]. Some writers thrive on such controversies so they can get talked about more and more. I'm allergic to that sort of thing. Am terrified of it. Therefore, I request you to delete the stories along with the intro. If you write something other than what you wrote, I would like to take a look at it. You will be irritated and this will all become rather boring."

She also rapped me across the knuckles, but gently, for suggesting that "Photographer" might be autobiographical. She wrote, "By the way, the backdrop of 'Photographer' is Sri Lanka, not India. In a Kandy guesthouse, there lived an Indian dancer along with her musicians. That was the basis for this story. I think I should also write an article on the anatomy of each of my stories and novels." At the end of this long letter, in which she had some nice words to say about a Faiz memoir I had written (which she translated into Urdu, an honor that will outmatch what little I have accomplished or will ever accomplish), she wrote, "My dear, if any-

thing that I have said has caused offence in this epistle [her word], then forgive me, including the intro."

Whenever I went to Delhi, which sadly was only three or four times, I always spent an evening with her. She would insist that I eat and eat gluttonously. She had moved to N.O.I.D.A, which is a relatively new settlement across the Jamuna in Ghaziabad. She suffered one bout of ill health after another, but her sense of humor, her magnanimity, her lust for life never diminished. Her eyes gave her much trouble and in the end she used to read, what little she did, with a magnifying glass. One letter she wrote to me in May 1996 says, "My number is minus 18-19. All the best. The address on the letterhead [I had had some letterheads with her name and address printed and sent to her] is so fine that all I can read is my name. This letter I have written with the help of a magnifying glass." I was shattered when I read that.

The last time I spent an evening with her in Delhi she said to me, "I have to hear now with the help of an outlandish, outsize hearing aid, but for God's sake don't go advertising that with the slogan: *Annie behrī hō ga'ī*" (Annie has gone deaf). "You know me," I said. Among her good friends in Pakistan, I would count Raja Tajummul Hussain, Dr. Javid Iqbal, the late Ijaz Batalvi and Zia Mohyeddin. But she knew everyone and always followed what was going on in Pakistan—the literary scene, no less than the political front. She was very sad when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was executed. She told me that a poor woman had come up to her and said, "*Bībī, ye Pākistānī kaisē lōg haiñ? Apné Rājā kō mār diyā*" (Bibi, what kind of people are these Pakistanis! They killed their Raja). Annie was a great friend of Nargis. After her death, she wrote to me, "Yes, Nargis has left us all devastated. She was part of the times in which we were growing up—times now in the realm of mythology—(like Pankhaj Malik's songs). Now when we watch those old movies on TV, they look primitive, but how magical they were in those days! But she—Nargis—died with great dignity and very gracefully. When she died she was a grand public figure. She had become extremely dignified, but she never stopped swearing. This was a strange paradox of her personality. Once she told me that some exceedingly old people would come up to her and say, 'I have been watching your movies since childhood.' (In the same way that some white-bearded elders inform me they have been reading my stories since they were children.) But in her we had a fascinating lady."

In 1998, when I was living in Islamabad (where I had been lured by being offered the director-generalship of the Associated Press of Pakistan, which I was determined to transform into a proper news agency, but was told instead to become the head honcho of the Shalimar Television Com-

pany, which was a misnomer since it did not produce any television programs), Annie came there. She stayed with her cousin Humaira Syed, the late Jari Ahmed Syed's wife and Mushahid Hussain's mother-in-law. I was thrilled. I had known the Syeds since the early 1960s when, as a probationary officer in the income tax service, I used to live in the now-demolished Kashmir Hotel, next to which lived Jari Ahmed Syed, Controller of Military Accounts. Kishwar Naheed and I decided to do something grand for Annie. One evening at Kishwar's flat in Park Towers, Sector F-10 (it survived the October 2005 earthquake while the high-rise next to it collapsed) we gathered many of our friends and Annie's admirers. Muhammad Mansha Yad, Raja Anwar, Begum Sarfraz Iqbal, Aftab Iqbal Shamim, and so many others were part of that memorable evening. (I have pictures which I have not looked at since Annie died as they would make me very sad.) Everyone practically sat at her feet. She was happy and she listened to everyone, said nice things to many, praised some of their work and kept smiling. There she was: every inch the perfect lady and a writer without peer whom many have tried to imitate, but none has been able to match her élan, her brilliance, her wit and sense of humor, her compassion, her sense of history, her wide, wide sympathies and her modesty about her own formidable achievement and place in Urdu, indeed, in world literature. When she was leaving, I saw her to her car and said, "Annie, I love you."

She called Nargis a fascinating lady, but far more fascinating was Annie, whom the world will forever remember, in the words of my friend Sayyed Faizi of Vienna, as "Qurratulain Hyder the Hazir Imam of Urdu fiction."

Rest in peace dear lady, for your like we shall never see again. ❑

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