

Fiction at Play: The Truth about Haji Gul Baba Bektashi

AT the beginning of the twenty-first century, Qurratulain Hyder (b. 1927) remains the preeminent woman among modern Urdu writers. In the course of the past six decades she has produced fifteen novels, novellas, and collections of short stories, of which *Mērē Bhī Ṣanam-Khānē* (1949) and *Āg kā Daryā* (1958) have become early post-Partition classics. Her writing also ranges more widely over several intersecting modes and genres: social and psychological realism (including stream-of-consciousness fiction), allegorical and fabulist narrative, ironic autobiography, magical tales, “docudrams,” travelogues, translations, and journalistic commentaries. In the 1970s she invented what she calls the “nonfictional novel” in Urdu, and has subsequently published a trilogy in this form. Moreover, she has been fluently bilingual since the 1950s, producing translations and original prose in English, for print and for broadcast journalism, on a significant scale.

Within this oeuvre, Hyder’s third short-story collection, *Patjhar kī Āvāz*, occupies a chronological as well as structural midpoint, bringing together her early and late literary preoccupations in a highly condensed form. The original edition of the book, published in 1967, included eight short stories and a novella written during the previous fifteen years, and won the annual award of the Sahitya Akademi, India’s national academy of letters, for the best new book in Urdu. In 1994¹ she published an

¹See Qurratulain Hyder, *The Sound of Falling Leaves* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994), which is her own translation of the augmented *Patjhar kī Āvāz*. “The Sermons of Haji Gul Baba Bektashi” appears on pp. 239–49; I also refer to Hyder’s preface to the volume, which appears on pp. v–xv. All citations refer to this edition, and are included in parentheses in the text.

augmented version of this, collection, adding three later stories; one of these, entitled “The Sermons of Haji Gul Baba Bektashi” and placed at the end of the volume, was conceived and written in the early 1970s.

Overshadowed by Hyder’s major works and practically unknown outside Urdu circles, “The Sermons of Haji Gul Baba Bektashi” is an astonishing piece of fiction. It opens with a first-person female narrator waiting in a small town in the Lower Caucasus region, between the Caspian and Black seas, where the borders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, and Iran meet, about two hundred miles south of contemporary Grozny. She is expecting a magical raven or rook to transport her back to Shahjahanabad, the imperial nucleus of Delhi in the middle of the seventeenth century. Instead of the rook, however, a dove arrives, carrying a hysterical letter from a woman whose husband, a painter, is missing inexplicably. The letter urges the narrator to seek out a *pīr* or Sufi master who may be able to use his mystical powers to determine the whereabouts of the missing man. So the narrator begins to walk toward Mount Ararat which, geographically, stands in the northeastern corner of Turkey, and is the most sacred site in that part of the world. Ararat, of course, appears in the Hebrew Bible as the mountain on top of which Noah’s ark finally came to rest before the deluge receded; but it is also sacred to Armenians, who believe that they are the first race of human beings born after the flood, and to Iranians, some of whose folk-legends identify it as the birthplace of humankind itself.

In an unnamed “twilight spring” in a valley in the vicinity of Mount Ararat and Lake Van (which lies to the southwest of the mountain), the female narrator meets a dervish, a blue-eyed fakir or *qalandar* wearing a white felt cap, a striped smock, and full leather boots in the style of the “Don Cossacks,” the Kazakhs of the region of the River Don near Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) that lies in southern Russia today. The dervish, a Bektashi Sufi named Haji Salim, begins talking to her suddenly, as if “an invisible tape recorder” had been switched on (p. 240). Even though the narrator gently persists in attempting to find out what he might mystically or magically know about her correspondent’s missing husband, their conversation rapidly turns into a series of enchanting, lyrical riddles in “esoteric Bektashi terminology” (p. xv), moving from riddles about the human world, God, the nature of Sufism, and the death of the great Sufi orders, to riddles about the races and nations of human beings, human history, modernity, and the multiple levels of existence. In style, symbolism, and substance, these riddles belong distinctively to West Asian and South Asian Sufism; but in their tenor and generic properties

they also resemble the riddles in the *sanddha-bhasha* tradition of Tantric Buddhism, the liminal paradoxes in the *ulata-bamsi* tradition of postclassical Indo-Aryan languages, and even the Greek *adynata* of the late classical period and the aphoristic injunctions of Zen Buddhism produced during the past millennium. At the end of his melancholy and mystifying exchanges with the narrator, the dervish retreats into his *takiya*, a small wooden hut with windows, where he sits in a trance with an identical double or alter-ego, his spiritual Doppelganger, and both turn into bits of paper blown away by a gust of wind coming from Mount Ararat.

The rook then arrives and transports the narrator back to Tughlaqabad, the fourteenth-century city about twenty miles south of the seventeenth-century city of Shahjahanabad, both of which stand among the seven (or more) historical cities that comprise the older sectors of Delhi at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The woman alights and enters an urban area that turns out to be the contemporary capital of India, some time after the 1971 war that led to the carving of the new nation of Bangladesh out of what used to be East Pakistan. On the crowded pavements of contemporary Old Delhi, the woman-narrator meets a young man from Bangladesh, that “river country,” who is in India on a government fellowship to learn the art of acting, at which Indians are said to excel. It is evening, and he is in search of a restaurant with river-fish on its menu; the narrator helps him find one, and sits talking to him while he eats. Their conversation picks up the style of the Bektashi riddles from the first half of the story, and the young man (who even speaks in the voice of Haji Salim) reveals that his father, a painter of wild ducks, was recently “taken out of [their Dhaka] house at five o’clock in the morning and shot dead” (p. 248); and that his mother, who refuses to believe that the execution took place, has been writing hysterical letters to every woman in the world, seeking information about her husband’s whereabouts. The narrator realizes that the young man has just solved the puzzle of the letter she received by way of the dove while she was in the Lower Caucasus region at the start of this chain of events. He then leaves, and she walks out into the rain, into “the evening crowds of Shahjahanabad,” feeling as if she were merely “a puppet or a character in a Noh play that nobody understood” (pp. 248, 249). This brings the main story to a close, but the last two paragraphs go on to say:

Beloved Friends. This is a riddle set before his disciples by Haji Gul Baba Naqshbandi. He taught through parables ancient and modern, when he lived in his famous hospice by the Danube, six centuries ago.

“And at this stage my melody is over. O worlds, take your leave and go back ...,” said Maulana Jelaluddin Rumi and put down his flute. (p. 249)

So the text as a whole turns out to be a framed story, set inside three successive narrative boxes. We have been listening all along to one of Jalālu 'd-Dīn ar-Rūmī's parables, possibly a fictional equivalent of one of those “miscellaneous mystical discourses” included in his *Fihī mā Fihī*, written down in Persian in the late thirteenth century. Within that parable is an extended riddle that this Rūmī—ventriloquizing through the late-twentieth-century narrator on the printed pages before us—claims was composed by Haji Gul Baba Naqshbandi “six centuries ago,” that is, also in the thirteenth century. Both of these outer frames are quasi-prophetic: Rūmī is the earliest in historical time, but is able to project the future with mystical precision; and Gul Baba, meant to be a younger contemporary of Rūmī, is an ancestor of the Haji Salim whom the female narrator meets apparently in the seventeenth century, but who also projects himself, through Haji Salim (who is both “a human being” and “a symbol” [p. 245]), into the late twentieth century. And inside Gul Baba's frame is the fabulatory narrative of an unnamed woman who starts out in the Lower Caucasus, walks to the vicinity of Mount Ararat, flies on a rook to Tughlaqabad, walks into Shahjahanabad, has an encounter with a young actor wearing a goatee—and solves the mystery of the wife in denial, the executed husband, and the son wandering in search of a meal of freshwater fish in post-Bangladesh Delhi. In less than a dozen richly lyrical pages, the story thus deploys a multi-layered structure to accomplish its tasks with great imaginative intensity, and its implications open up a three-dimensional perspective on Hyder's more ambitious strategies and concerns as an artist.

“The Sermons of Haji Gul Baba Bektashi” lifts the Subcontinent's spiritual and psychic history of the past six centuries out of its linear Western-colonialist time frame and renarrates it in fluid, cyclical time. What is significant is that the outermost frame of the story casts Rūmī, historically a religious figure, as the prime narrator, but its cyclical narrative time, as such, remains secular. Hyder achieves this secularization with the help of a complex mechanism that depends as much on the conventions of mimeticism as on the relations of Sufism to the orthodox institutions of Islam. The revelation that Rūmī is the final fabricator of the parable comes as a surprise, and its suddenness is designed to make us accept it without hesitation; but we accept it only for a moment, recognizing it immediately as nothing more than a fiction-making authorial

device. The latter recognition, which undercuts and ambiguates the former, is triggered by our subscription to realism. Hyder's story is thoroughly antirealistic, but it works precisely because she expects us to function as realists: our readerly sense of historical realism, as also of the realism we encounter in mimetic and naturalistic fiction, reminds us that the thirteenth-century Rūmī could not possibly have foreseen actual events in the twentieth century, and he can therefore be only a fictional construct in this text, a "device" created by the flesh-and-blood contemporary writer known as Qurratulain Hyder. Moreover, our realistic readerly imaginations also promptly notice the comedy at work in such a device—Hyder is having a bit of fun at our expense, pulling a series of tricks at the last moment, toying with the narrative contract that brings us together on the pages of her story. This is fiction at play, and its playfulness stands outside its apparently religious framework. It is precisely the "exteriority" of the playfulness woven into the device of a fictional Rūmī as the final narrator that secularizes the story's cyclical time. The twist, of course, is that Sufi discourse itself is characterized by a disorienting playfulness that constantly undermines the ponderousness and rigidity of institutional dogma. Hyder uses "Sufism" in her fiction as a code to citationally distance herself from the exclusionary orthodoxies of Islam: she identifies herself as a "humanist," and believes that her version of humanism flows, in part, from "the strong *Sufi-secular* undercurrent and tradition of Persian and Urdu literature" (p. v; emphasis added).

Even as it dismantles rational, chronological time in this manner, "The Sermons of Haji Gul Baba Bektashi" goes on to disband the geopolitical segmentation of the Subcontinent left behind by European colonialism, whether in its internal divisions or in its divisions from the nations around it. In reorganizing space, the story reconnects South Asia as a whole to Iran, Afghanistan, Trans-Oxania, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe all the way to Hungary. The effect of Hyder's double dismantling of the temporal and spatial order imposed on Asia by the West is that she disrupts our modern conception of causality in the domain of history as well as in the domain of culture. That is, once she has broken down the boundaries erected within and around modern South Asia, and has taken apart the logic of irreversible, serial time—in which every moment that enters the present is unique and determinate, and therefore distinguishable from all other moments before and after it—she can set into motion an alternative dynamics of cause and effect. Hyder does not lay out these abstract principles in a systematic form, but she does suggest strongly that when we place the Subcontinent on a continuum with the rest of Asia,

and view it from the vantage point of a consciousness that can travel back and forth in time over the past one thousand years, we begin to see what the West's ideologies of linearized time, segmented space, and rationalist causality tend to suppress in our histories and cultures.²

The objects of such suppression become evident in the story's deliberate, and perhaps outrageous, desire to establish a playful continuity between Sufi mysticism and Zen Buddhism. At one point in their conversation, Haji Salim deflects the female narrator from her original purpose—to trace the whereabouts of her correspondent's missing husband—by asking her to look into a cupful of water. She obliges him reluctantly:

I looked hard and said, "But, Effendi, this has nothing to do with what I'm looking for. I see only a horse-drawn carriage. It's crossing a papery, Japanese sort of bridge. And a puppet's sitting inside it, wearing a Noh mask. And the coachman has no face. Yes—the coachman has no face. Effendi, it seems to be a place near Nara or Kyoto ... in the times of the Shoguns ... you know what I mean.... Oh, well. And it's so quiet that you can hear the dew falling on the cherry blossoms. Yes, and now a fragile canoe is sailing in the distance on a misty river, and there are mountains of a delicate sort, and a reed hut half hidden in the bamboos, and a little man sitting on the veranda, painting ... in infinite loneliness.... Effendi, I'm afraid all this looks suspiciously like Zen."

"Zen, too, is right," he said, raising his head. "Look again carefully—is it a fragile canoe or an armored tank?"

"Effendi ... the water in this cup of yours has turned red." (pp. 244–5;

²Hyder refers elliptically to "the integrated presence of all history ... how one thing led to another [in the past], the chain of cause and effect" (p. xi). Her preface shows precisely that in modern Indian culture, as she experienced it while growing up in the 1930s and 1940s, the past manifests itself in the constellation of traces that constitute the present, so that: (a) elements from different historical moments coexist here and now—or, as T.S. Eliot put it in the context of Europe, "compose a simultaneous order"; (b) history can be accessed directly and easily through its residual fragments in the present; and (c) what is old and what is new at this moment blur into each other, making it virtually impossible, in practice as well as theory, to establish clear-cut chronological distinctions between "past" and "present" and, hence, clear-cut categorical distinctions between a prior "cause" and a subsequent "effect."

modified)³

Whereas the other riddles and esoteric passages in the conversation travel up and down in time within the primary spaces of Sufi history—from Uzbekistan to Anatolia to Hungary to India—this vivid vignette takes a “synchronic” leap in space from the banks of Lake Van to the eastern extremities of Asia. What makes such a leap plausible is the fact that the beginnings of Zen in Japan (having been brought in from China) were roughly contemporaneous with the beginnings of organized Sufism in West Asia in the twelfth century, but these two subversive movements did not meet in an atmosphere of cultural relativism until the nineteenth century, when they were both absorbed into the cosmopolitan consciousness produced by European colonialism and its distinctive internationalization of knowledge. And yet the fictional Sufi in Hyder’s story, presumably a seventeenth-century figure to begin with, or even a ventriloquist from the thirteenth century, already knows and understands Zen Buddhism, and appreciates the potential parallels between it and Bektashi mysticism. Again, this is not merely a postmodernist “smoke-and-mirrors” trick in the narrative. We know that the Japanese term *zen* translates the Chinese term *ch’an*, which in turn translates the classical Sanskrit word *dhyana*, which had migrated from India to China by the latter half of the first millennium CE; and that when Sufism arrived in north India, one of the connections it established with Hinduism by the middle of the second millennium was through the apparent parallel between the Sufi practice of *dhikr* and the yogic practices of *nama-smarana* and mantra-recitation during *dhyana* or meditative concentration (attested, for example, in *Kabir’s sant-bhasha* poems and the Sikh *Guru Granth Sahib* from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries).

Working through her fictional female narrator as well as her fictionalized Sufi, Hyder thus “a-historically” and “non-causally” intuits a connection between the mystical states induced by Sufi spiritual discipline and by Zen techniques of entrancement by shock, precisely the kind of

³I have modified Hyder’s version for stylistic consistency in English. The word “effendi” needs comment. Hyder’s text seems to assume that it is a Latin term, and would be “effendum” in the singular and “effendi” in the vocative. The word and its peculiar form actually come to English from Turkish *efendi*, which is derived from the modern Greek *aphentes*, a variation on the older Greek *authentes*, both of which mean “master.” The correct form in the vocative singular would be “effendi,” simply equivalent to “sir.”

connection that is rendered impossible by European linear time and rational causality. And, once more, the clearest evidence of her intentions is ironic—as she notes, her approach to representation is frequently “tongue-in-cheek” (p. xiv). On the one hand, while the female narrator sits talking to the young Bangladeshi in a Shahjahanabad restaurant, she observes the coexistence of Mughal imperial grandeur and sordid poverty outside the window, and accepts it bitterly, “Because all is Zen anyway, and Bektash has His Face everywhere” (p. 247). On the other, Hyder is aware that Zen Buddhism influenced the Noh theatrical tradition in Japan after the sixteenth century, so that some aspects of subsequent Noh represent, at least in part, a socialized and public poetics of reclusive Zen mysticism. So when the female narrator concludes the main story with the statement, “I was a puppet or a character in a Noh play which nobody understood” (p. 249), the reader immediately knows that it is no different from saying, “I was a figure in a Bektashi parable that nobody understood.” In the story’s contra-factual conceptual framework, disciplined spiritual power operates transitively, moving back and forth between Sufism/West Asia and Zen/the Far East without temporal, causal, or geopolitical interruption.

Moreover, Hyder’s piece of fiction strongly reconfigures the historical evolution and internal differentiation of Sufism over the past millennium. It mentions three of the major Sufi orders and sets them on a transhistorical continuum. The first is the Maulaviya order, or the order of whirling dervishes, which is centered around Rūmī, who was born in Afghanistan but wrote in Persian and established a following in Turkey in the thirteenth century. The second is the Naqshbandiya order, which was founded in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, in the fourteenth century, but spread across Central Asia, India, Malaysia, and China during the next five hundred years. And the third is the Bektashi order, which was founded in Khorasan, Iran, in the fifteenth century, but developed its canonical form in Turkey in the sixteenth century, and spread from there to the Ottoman Balkans, particularly to Albania, where it aligned itself contrarily with Shi’a doctrine as well as with distinctly Christian practices. What is striking about this far-flung historical intertexture is that Hyder manipulates the modern or contemporary components of her narrative using two very postmodernist sleights-of-hand. On one side, in the title of the story, she names her second-level narrator Gul Baba Bektashi, but in the penultimate paragraph she identifies him as Gul Baba Naqshbandi, as if the Bektashi and Naqshbandiya orders were interchangeable, despite their differences. She pulls this off by explaining it in a symbolic form

early in the story: Haji Salim, the Sufi whom the female narrator supposedly encounters in person, is a Bektashi because his great-grandfather “converted” from the Naqshbandiya order in Yarkand, but his truly “revered ancestor” is Haji Gul Baba Naqshbandi, who lies buried beside the Danube, yet speaks, as if alive, through him (p. 241). On the other side, Hyder casts the modern father, brutally murdered in the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971, as a painter of wild ducks. This is an ingenious trick, because it playfully (con)fuses the Bektashi elements in the story with its Naqshbandi elements on another level: the modern painter seems to be a faint iconic shadow of Bahā’u ’d-Dīn, the founder of the Naqshbandiya order, who was called *an-naqshband*, “the painter,” because he iconoclastically claimed that the ritual prayers he prescribed for use in *dhikr* left a *painterly* image or impression of God upon the worshipper’s heart.⁴ When Haji Salim, a Bektashi, becomes indistinguishable from Gul Baba, a Naqshbandi, and both appear as spectral projections of Rūmī, the founder of the Maulaviyas, “Sufi mysticism” becomes a concerted, unpartitioned force in history.

Finally, Hyder’s polymorphous reworking of South Asian and Muslim history is not arbitrary. For her, it has an all-important autobiographical dimension: she is a descendant of Sufis from Bukhara, who migrated to Hindustan early in this millennium and became the forerunners of the Zaidis and the Rizvis (among other clans) in today’s Uttar Pradesh (p. vi). The re-opening of South Asian space and time to the overarching continuities of trans-Asian history and culture that she attempts here is thus not a fashionable postmodern pastiche, but a deeply personal textualization of memory, consciousness, and identity. Thus, when the story formed itself in her imagination in the early 1970s, its structure was shaped by the dual pressures of historical veracity and existential commitment, even though its concrete details were dictated largely by accident and coincidence. In Hyder’s own words:

⁴Bahā’u ’d-Dīn’s defining claim—that the *dhikr* he prescribed would leave a painterly image of God upon the worshipper’s heart—strongly counters the aniconism and anti-representationalism of orthodox Islam. Technically, Bahā’u ’d-Dīn’s strategy here is ekphrastic; ekphrasis not only produces icons, but also multiplies the mediums and levels of iconic representation. In the context of Naqshbandiya *dhikr*, voice, word, rhythm, and bodily movement, for example, all seek to culminate in a direct, interiorized, and iconic apprehension of God. This is, so to speak, iconism with a vengeance, and its brilliant paradox is that it is *iconoclastic* with respect to *aniconism*.

I wrote this story after a brief, chance meeting with a drama student from Bangladesh. He had told me, tonelessly, that his father, who was a painter, had died recently in the war. A little earlier I had received an incoherent, hysterical letter from an acquaintance whose industrialist husband had been gunned down in the turmoil. She firmly believed, however, that he was alive and had asked me to consult a *pir* or *yogi*—who would know her husband’s whereabouts. The young actor had lost his faith. The lady, who was a professor of English Literature, had been a formidable rationalist; she was now looking for seers. I made the distracted academic, and the cynical actor, mother and son in my story.

In [the] Samarkand Museum I had seen the model of a picturesque Bektashi dervish in a glass case, signifying the end of religion and mysticism in the U.S.S.R. During the same visit, in 1969, an Indian friend had told me that in Bukhara there was an underground revival of the Naqshbandi cult. I had also been to the lands of the Turkic races where the Naqshbandi and Bektashi Orders had once flourished. The tomb of a Naqshbandi saint still exists in Budapest. And in Turkey Maulana Jelaluddin Rumi’s Dancing Dervishes have become a part of their country’s tourist industry. Hence *The Sermons*... . (p. xv)

However we choose to interpret the story, the “truth” about Haji Gul Baba Bektashi (or Naqshbandi) is at best the truth of fiction, which persuades us less by its verisimilitude than by its constructional and imaginative coherence. In this particular case, the truth emerges as a comprehensive “tragi-comic vision” of historical process, cultural and demographic upheaval, geographical displacement, economic transformation, and the frustration of human desire.

Hyder’s critics on the Progressive flank have frequently attacked her for her aesthetic obsession with “timelessness,” her apparent cultural nostalgia, and her social conservatism anchored in an upper-middle-class background.⁵ As with so much of her other fiction, here too she focuses on remote times and recirculates them thickly through the present. But, despite all the evidence to the contrary, “The Sermons of Haji Gul Baba Bektashi” is concerned only tangentially with the past. Its true narrative

⁵As Hyder notes in her preface “... I drew a lot of flak from the leftists, as it was the heyday of the Progressive Movement. So quite unwittingly I became a controversial writer. The Progressives accused me of glorifying the bourgeoisie and the feudal classes” (pp. xiii-xiv).

center lies in the experience of political anguish in the present—the anguish radiating from Bangladesh’s violent birth-by-dismemberment in 1971. For this type of affliction, as Hyder knows well, the magical and melancholy history of Sufism can offer only a sketchy diagnosis and an illusory cure, but its consolations, however transient, prove to be essential for the exercise of empathy and imagination.⁶ □

⁶Hyder acknowledges her limitations explicitly. “I consider myself a humanist,” she says; but, at the same time, “Humanism has failed. Still, one must not despair, and must not give up the fight” (pp. v, xiv). It is important to stress that Hyder regards humanism as a strong form of (universal) human *resistance*, especially to regimes of power; it is linked directly to her desire to preserve, and persevere with, difference or otherness as a key element in the constitution of “literature.”