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## Remembering Baji: The Journey to *Goodar ka La'l*

MANY MANY YEARS AGO, during a search for reading material in my husband's family home, where I had just arrived as the first daughter-in-law, I came upon an Urdu book that, thick and well-worn, seemed to be what I had been looking for: a novel. It was. And the well-thumbed, dog-eared pages, the loose binding and missing cover, the turmeric stains that attended other marks—marks of age, close handling and constant companionship—indicated that the book had old friends in this household. A middle-class Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) household, it had come naturally to this novel, whereas I, a Punjabi, had stumbled on it as an outsider and now felt drawn to it as many Punjabis are drawn to Urdu, with breathless wonderment. The novel was *Gūdar kā La'l* (Jewel Among Rags) and was a favorite of my mother-in-law, Bāji as we called her, whose real name was Muḥammad Fāṭima and who was a great-granddaughter of Maulānā Aḥṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī.

The author of the novel, enigmatic in the veiling of her true identity, was Vāḥida Afzāl 'Alī—the mother of Afzāl 'Alī. A woman who felt impelled to write a tome 728 pages long and who couldn't be kept down by the shame of such a desire. Her name was Akbarī Bēgam. She was Qurratulain Hyder's mother's aunt (from her father's side) and a contemporary of that other great early woman writer of India, Muḥammadī Bēgam. Her first novel, written in the late 1800's was titled *Guldasta-e-Muḥabbat* (The Bouquet of Love). Because of the then prevalent religious constraints that kept women's names as much in purdah as their very persons, she had the novel published by the Public Press at Muradabad under the pseudonym "Abbās Murtaḏā." Except for one copy which, by Qurratulain Hyder's own admission, is in her possession, the novel is lost to us. *Gūdar kā La'l* was Akbarī Bēgam's

second novel. Published for the first time in 1908, it created a commotion immediately and it wasn't long before it assumed a special position among women of the new Muslim middle class and soon was given to women as part of their dowry. That's how my mother-in-law and her female cousins came to have ownership of the work. My husband remembers that when he and his sister were very young his mother constantly read *Gūday kā La'l* by herself. Later, when both he and his sister were old enough to appreciate stories, she began reading portions to them, an activity that became part of their everyday routine. Sections that were read aloud to the children were usually selected for their humorous content. Even now, some fifty years later, my husband remembers Khēr 'Alī and his antics with a smile. He also mentions that when his father would walk into the house and see Bājī with her nose in *Gūday kā La'l* he would remark, "tō p<sup>h</sup>ir mūlī kē pattē hōngē" (so it must be the radish leaves again), the reference implying the worn and rumpled condition of the pages. The novel and the people who read it constitute an important chapter in the history of writing by Muslim women. The fates of the readers and the writers are irrevocably intertwined in social terms as much as the literary traditions that followed are linked with the emergence of these first Urdu narratives by women.

The massive novel is in three parts and, much like a Jane Austen novel, includes a rich tapestry of family life and manners, in this case, of course, of the U.P. Muslim middle class. It covers the lives and adventures, and in certain cases, misadventures, of two generations of a large, extended family. The issues related to the role and place of the *saut* (second wife) and *sautēlī mān* (stepmother) are central to the plot, although the changes occurring as an outcome of proper education and good upbringing constitute the main narrative thread. Part Three ends abruptly, almost as if Akbarī Bēgam had paused to take a deep breath and then, distracted by some other task, decided to come back to the writing later and didn't.

Taking its cue from Deputy Nazīr Aḥmad's *Taubatu 'n-Naṣūḥ* and *Mit'ātu 'l-Urūs*, and the educational essays of Maulānā Ḥālī, this work, along with others by women at the time, is rooted in the idea of reform for women through, most importantly, the channels of education, which include lessons learned at home, the *madrasa*, and finally school and college. Suraiyā Jabīn, the hero's younger sister, is studying to be a doctor in Part Three. The resemblance ends here however. These new novels took on the daunting task of moving into the *zenana* to reveal the real lives of women. An unselfconscious openness and spontaneity

accompanies this sojourn, affording the reader a view that had never before been made available by any writer. Incidentally, Suraiyā Jabīn is not only studying medicine, she also falls in love with a young man par excellence and thus gives Akbarī Bēgam reason to write a chapter that, taking into account the absolute curfew on expressions of love, is no less modern in its approach to romance than any by her Western counterparts of the time.

As ‘Iṣmat Čuġhtā’ī says in one of her essays, the *ṭavā’ifs* (courtesans) were all that men could really write about since they had firsthand knowledge of their lives, and until women began writing themselves, the life inside the purdah-driven world of the Muslim woman was a closed world. Referring to Ratan Nāt<sup>h</sup> Sarshār’s *Fasāna’-e Āzād* in this instance, ‘Iṣmat Čuġhtā’ī asks, “Where could poor Sarshar go to look for the woman of a respectable family, and a Muslim family at that?”<sup>1</sup> But Akbarī Bēgam, despite her sharp and detailed observations of life in the zenana, seems to tackle the presentation of male characters with equal skill and artistry. In *Gūdaṛ kā La’l*, if the writer did not occasionally break into an entreaty for change in the name of those of her sex, or launch into a tirade against the constraints of patriarchy that stifled women’s lives, there would be little to betray the writer’s sex; the male characters are drawn with as much verisimilitude as the female characters, every male character palpable and dynamic; Khēr ‘Alī, a crude, and at times silly man, is as human and richly drawn as Ḥasan Razā, the well-educated, reform-driven hero of our tale.

My mother-in-law’s copy of *Gūdaṛ kā La’l* is no longer around. In the thirty years since her death, the novel has been forgotten by subsequent generations of women in her family and in other families like hers. The work I have done on ‘Iṣmat Čuġhtā’ī has led to other work by women writing in Urdu, and it is from there that I have returned to *Gūdaṛ kā La’l*. My interest in the novel, as in the case of ‘Iṣmat Čuġhtā’ī, is a preoccupation with the recovery of U.P. culture. Once rich in tradition, customs, manners, and the colorful colloquialisms of Urdu, and dense with the culturality of the language, it is now a dying way of life. But although my excitement at discovering Akbarī Bēgam’s world in the crowded pages of her long narrative is immense, I feel weighed with

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<sup>1</sup>Ismat Chughtai, *My Friend, My Enemy: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits*, trans. Tahira Naqvi (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001), p. 26.

sadness at the same time. It is partly nostalgia for a world I never knew and also regret that we have let it go so easily.

Despite my commitment, however, I do not plan to translate all of *Gūdar kā La'ī*; it is a monumental undertaking. What I am trying to do instead is translate portions relevant to issues that are of particular interest to me and which I feel might also be of interest to others who are exploring the Urdu culture of U.P. and Urdu literature. For the moment I have categorized these as:

1. Customs, rituals and traditions covering all levels of social and class divisions.
2. Changing a woman's lot as a philosophical/historical notion and as an integral part of the story being told in *Gūdar kā La'ī*.
3. Examples of narrative techniques that will invite comparisons with the work of male contemporary writers as well as all writers of Urdu fiction ('Iṣmat Čughṭā'ī, Sa'ādat Ḥasan Maṇṭō, Qurratulain Hyder, 'Khadija Mastūr, Hājira Masrūr, etc.) who later took on the subject of the lives of Muslim women.

The four excerpts that follow are intended to provide *AUS* readers with a modest introduction to the work I've undertaken, a task that has only just begun. The edition of the novel which I have used for my translation was published in Lucknow by Nasim Book Depot. Unfortunately the date of publication is not given. In the first excerpt, which is the opening chapter of the novel and is translated in its entirety (pp. 3–15), the polarity of *p<sup>h</sup>ūhar* and *anpā<sup>b</sup>* (ill-mannered and illiterate) versus *salīqamand* and *ta'limyāfīa* (well-mannered and educated) that runs throughout the novel as its main thread, establishes itself very clearly; in the second excerpt, which constitutes only a small part of Chapter 22, Part Three (pp. 704–5), a Muslim woman's sorry lot is depicted and analyzed in frank and bitter terms. In the third piece, excerpted from Chapter 4, Part One (pp. 28–30), we see a wedding ceremony described in fantastic detail but not without the attending subtle critique which is always present as subtext; in the fourth, the whole of Chapter 23, Part Two (pp. 455–59), the young girl introduced in Chapter 1 is now a young woman studying medicine and in love, a leap indeed for both Suraiyā Jabīn and Akbarī Bēgam. □