

LAUREL STEELE

“We Just Stayed on the Ship to Bombay ...”
Tea and Consequences with
Qurratulain Hyder

QURRATULAIN HYDER’S prolific writing life is now ended. Urdu literature’s chronicler of a pre-Partition culture in India, and of its aftermath in Pakistan and India, has left us. Her tiny white-clad figure, with its great crest of unlikely red hair, making its way through the Lodhi gardens to yet another Indian International Center seminar will not be seen again. And the chance to meet with her once more on a sunny Delhi afternoon is gone as well.

In the presence of Qurratulain Hyder we had the opportunity to engage with a hyper-literate, multilingual, cosmopolitan consciousness. That consciousness is now found only in the pages of her writings. Her literary output, hidden for the most part from the international reading public, is a powerful legacy. She may be gone, but she has left behind a huge and eclectic body of work that perfectly exemplifies her iconoclastic life, her civilized taste and her bold political choices. From the blockbuster novel of the fifties, *Āg kā Daryā* (River of Fire), to recent collections of letters such as *Dāman-e Bāghbān: Majmū‘a-e Khuṭūṭ* (Gathered in the Gardener’s Hem: Collection of Letters), from her marvelous novellas, such as *Sītā Haran* (Abduction of Sita), to her work on Ghālib and her study of the musician Ghulām ‘Alī Khān, and from her translations to her two-volume memoir *Kār-e Jabān Darāz hai* (The Work of the World is Long)—the list goes on, each work a gift and an addition to a universal literary heritage.

But it was the writer herself who turned her sensibilities and experiences into this legacy. Qurratulain Hyder was, at the base of it all, a personality and an individual who had used her own personal encounters and private thoughts to capture on paper issues of transcendent literary, political and historical importance. To meet her was to be reminded of the raw material of her unique existence.

In December 1985, Qurratulain Hyder invited me to tea. When I visited her she told me about her return to India, having first gone to Pakistan after Partition. One sentence echoed in my mind for years: “We were coming back from London, and instead of getting off in Karachi, we just stayed on the ship to Bombay.”

She was talking acidly of Pakistan and its politics. She recalled that after the outcry over her 1959 novel *Āg kā Daryā* there was no way for her to remain in Pakistan. The very geography of her remark about sailing past Karachi struck me. I could see the boat, harbored just off the sun-baked city, swaying in the waters of the Arabian Sea. The city names: London, Karachi, Bombay were as familiar and as easy to say as running one’s fingers over a map—and yet the decision to return to India, made within the axis of these cities, was so final and complex. With little tracings on maps, the course of a boat, the lines of a border crossing, so many lives were affected.

In 1985 Qurratulain Hyder was still living on New Delhi’s Okhla Road. After a long scooter-rickshaw ride from Connaught Place, I located the block of flats that she had described on the phone. The apartment was part of a complex built in the sixties and faced a popular cinema hall. Within the complex there were exterior cement stairways at various locations. Finding her door and climbing the stairs to her flat took some time.

Her maid answered the door and led me into an airy, cozily furnished set of rooms where Annie Apa greeted me from a sofa. She wore a blue cotton sari. The rooms were filled with old, brown, wood and wicker furniture and dark china cabinets. There were faded handloom covers on the sofas. Books lay stacked on shelves. Pictures with folk motifs hung on the walls. It all spoke of that comfortable existence of an Indian intellectual. There was no one at home except the author and her maid. Noise from the street was muted, though there was an occasional drift of Hindi film music coming from outside.

Intense, seeming more fragile up close than in her pictures, and her glasses tipping down her nose, Annie Apa welcomed the gifts I had brought her from her nieces in Pakistan. The nieces were grown women now, government civil servants. They were her brother’s daughters and they had done well.

The gifts started a conversation about women in Pakistan. She spoke with disdain of the “glitter and sparkle,” of what she called the “manufactured” look of Pakistani women. I had heard these sorts of opinions from Indian women before. “They wear too much lipstick,” she said. At a deeper level, I thought this was a re-working of stereotyped perceptions Indians have of Muslim women in India—the *filmī* look, flashy and

sexual. Decent women wore handloom and never put on nail polish.... Of course, at that time Pakistani women had access to cosmetics and imported fabrics that Indians did not. Maybe they did seem more glamorous! She said to me, “What do you think of Pakistani women?” I told her that I knew Pakistani women poets and writers who would not have matched her perception.

Before tea she asked if I wanted to see her flat. She led me through the quiet, crowded rooms. Past the living room, in a back verandah, there was a small wooden table set up. It was covered with papers, handwritten in Urdu, which were interspersed with painted illustrations. Looking closer, I saw that these pages were part of large, bound, blank books. Watercolor tubes lay scattered. She had been working on one of her stories, carefully painting miniature pictures of the characters next to the text she was writing. I saw three little painted people in a tiny picture—some sort of dramatic encounter in miniature. The effect was compelling: Qurratulain Hyder was illustrating her own stories as she wrote them. She told me she always illustrated her writing as she worked and that she had manuscripts filled with paintings and drawings.

It was unavoidable, she now reminded me of one of her women characters. She was vivid and creative. I thought of the scene in *Āg kā Daryā* when Tehmīna directs a Rām Līlā performance at her graduation from the “Jāpānī mētrik” course. As I looked at the tiny, bright watercolors covering Qurratulain Hyder’s table, I thought of the larger context in which her creativity functioned. Here was a person who had to make heartrending choices. Here was a major creative voice whose struggle to write and whose need for an audience had made her an exile over and over again. Yet, the tiny paintings sprang up like flowers.

On that back verandah, the nearby cinema house added to the traffic noise outside. Loudspeakers—film music. It was ironic: Urdu poetry and its images were preserved in snippets of pop music floating by while the Urdu author toiled inside. As we made our way back to the living room, Annie Apa showed me the china in the cabinet. A set of lusterware art deco dishes gleamed from inside the old glass-fronted almirah, echoing the same greens and oranges and violets of her tiny watercolor paintings. The shapes of the cups recalled the fashions of the twenties—oval and simple, with geometric painted-on designs. The maid—there had been some domestic crisis—at last brought the tea. We used those deco cups, carefully removed from the almirah for the occasion. They were very thin and delicate. The bowl of each cup was pearly white and glistening. Annie Apa told me they had belonged to her mother.

It was then that we had a conversation about how her novel *Āg kā*

Daryā had changed her life. She described how it was first published in India in 1959 and then came out in Pakistan. It had been immediately popular and highly controversial. “You see,” she said, “I could not stay in Pakistan after that book. There was no place for me.” I mentioned to her that an Urdu-speaking friend had told me there was a joke at the time the book first came out that it was so much a topic of conversation one had to say “river of water” in Urdu if one meant simply a river and not the cause *célèbre*. Annie Apa started to laugh.

Her novel had addressed big themes with a confident imagination and a huge sweep, claiming all of Indian history for its canvas. It has never been out of print in Urdu (or now in its Hindi-script version). After its publication, Qurratulain Hyder went on to produce many more novels, short stories, memoirs and translations, but she never again attempted a fictional work so long, with such historical range and with so broad a cast of characters. Our talk returned to her remaining on the ship from London—she and her mother were sailing home, home to Pakistan, and she just kept going, to the other home, the older home—India. The novel had changed everything. But her translation of *Āg kā Daryā* into English was still, even as we drank our tea, more than ten years away. It would take forty years in all for her masterpiece to reach an English-reading South Asian audience, let alone an international readership.

There were several complexities in her career as a writer that I would like to explore here. Foremost, perhaps, were the problems of translating her work. Her location as an Urdu writer in post-Independence India was also a problem, and her refusal to be part of the socialist/progressive school of Indian and Pakistani fiction writers complicated matters as well. These three issues were related to choices she had made concerning her life as a writer. The consequences of her choices impeded her ability to be perceived as a major contemporary writer, and certainly delayed her entrance into an international arena. Behind these three issues lay Partition itself.

She wrote in Urdu and her books were printed in Urdu script. For most of her life, she insisted on translating her own work into English and this task was slow. Writing in Urdu and controlling translations limited her audience. Some of her books were eventually printed in Devanagari script and some were eventually translated into English, but, for the most part, her readers remained Urdu readers with cosmopolitan tastes.

During her lifetime, the Indian English-reading public did in fact seek out homegrown authors, but since her work was mostly not available in English she was cut off from that homegrown readership as well. Shopping in bookstores in Delhi’s Connaught Place, there were no Urdu books

to buy at all, and until the 1990s only one translated short novel of Hyder's was available. In downtown Delhi, even collections of poems by Ghālib could be found only in translation—I presume the issue for these shops was why would a major bookstore stock a regional language? And only Aijaz Ahmad's, David Mathews' and Christopher Shackle's poetry collections contained dual-text translations with Urdu script. Books published in Urdu were found in ramshackle stalls up around the Jama Masjid. In Connaught Place, requests for books in Urdu were met with superior smiles.

That day in Delhi when Qurratulain Hyder spoke to me about *Āg kā Daryā* and about reading her, with the exception of a few stories and her own translation of *A Woman's Life*¹ (which had appeared in 1979), she was already in her sixties. I still remember C. M. Naim reporting his difficulties in getting her to agree to his translating *Sītā Haran*. Even at her death, very little has been translated given how much she has written. Right now, *Kār-e Jahān Darāz hai*, her multi-volume memoir, and *Kōh-e Damāvand* (Mount Demavand), her travelogue set in the Shah's Iran are still only available in Urdu. These are two works that come immediately to mind which would have compelling interest for a wider audience. There are many, many untranslated short stories. Some of her own literary activities are simply unknown to critics and other writers. For example, in the 1950s Hyder translated Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* into Urdu (as *Hamīn Āirāgh*, *Hamīn Parvānē*). It was a monumental production that was available in Pakistan every decade I visited, and many had read it. In all the writing about Hyder after her death, there is no mention of it.

The second issue that affected Qurratulain Hyder's writing life was her place as an Urdu writer specifically, and unapologetically, located in India. From the beginnings of the struggle for Independence from the British, and in the lead up to the division of the Indian subcontinent, Urdu became increasingly politicized for it became identified with being Muslim. The well-known short story writer and novelist Premchand dramatically and symbolically switched from writing in Urdu to writing in Hindi. After Independence, politicized Hindus rewrote the history and culture of the Muslims and Urdu-speakers in their midst. Gone was the paen to linguistic syncretism. Muslim artists and writers in India trod an uncertain ground. Urdu writers were ranked as "regional writers," like those writing in Gujarati or Kannada. The fact that spoken Urdu is found throughout India was not acknowledged officially—indeed, spoken Hindi was examined and purged of its Arabic and Persian words and made to function

¹It has not been possible to ascertain the Urdu title of this translation.

as a new lingua franca.

Officially, Hyder attracted what little notice she did as an “Urdu” writer in India, as a regional writer, not as a national writer. Writing in Urdu yet living in India, national awards were bestowed on her very late in the day. She might have done better if she had proclaimed political allegiance to socialist/progressive writers and formed bonds across the regional languages, but she did not—she was who she was.

In her novels, novellas and short stories, Hyder captured lost times and current cultural realities. Her portrayal of both was her own and conformed to no official versions. This was her third problem as a writer. She made choices to represent a reality that were unacceptable to many—unacceptable to both Indian and Pakistani Marxists, to Pakistani officialdom, and to religious dogmatists. She rejected binary divisions when the larger society embraced those divisions. Urdu versus English (she claimed both); Muslim versus Hindu (she wrote of a syncretic culture where relationships were complex and symbiotic); India versus Pakistan (she wrote about both)—to her, these divisions were simplistic and artificial. Her subtlety and sophistication earned her readers, but some writers and critics were defensive. Ismat Chughtai meanly mocked her as “Pom Pom Darling.” Somewhere, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi is found pronouncing *Āg kā Daryā* as “perhaps great.” Facing her complexity, Aijaz Ahmad derided her subject matter as “a very upper-class affair, at times insufferably so” (2000, 107). In fact, she herself found the reaction to her by dogmatic thinkers of all persuasions “insufferable,” though she did not complain.

Her work was too nuanced for the Soviet-style literary analysis that still infuses critical thinking in many Subcontinental literary discussions. Writers and artists were graded on their ability to portray the life of “the people,” and their class origins were scrutinized. Long after the Russians had rolled into Hungary, the literary establishment in South Asia was happily picking up Lenin awards. Hyder was not in the running. She was a complex thinker in a cultural establishment not given to complexity. Who but Hyder could have written a scene (in the short story “Housing Society”) in which, as a posh party plays itself out, she weaves in an awareness that a political prisoner is being tortured just offstage? This story, first published in 1965, was not available in English until 1994. Another short story, “*Ajnabi*” (The Stranger), still untranslated, captures her interaction with a German tourist. After dinner with his hostess in Bombay, he dies months later at a border crossing in Southeast Asia. Hyder’s portrayal of the needless death of a tourist, of her own apprehension about the war in Vietnam and how it comes to her via the media is a

consummate piece of political writing.

So there she wrote, a largely untranslated author, with no country to promote her—neither India nor Pakistan, with no influential critical constituency to agree on her worthiness, and with her own physical location and opinions making her politically difficult. Her readers kept her writing, while her language, location and politics earned her no supporters in the official literary establishment anywhere.

Whatever her struggles with translation and her difficulty with being an Urdu writer in India may have been, she came from a profoundly literary culture, and she drew from a very deep well. There was a line from nineteenth-century Urdu writers to present-day successful South Asian writers in English, and she was part of that heritage. This was the culture of South Asian Muslims that produced writers from Ghālib to Muḥammad Iqbāl. This was the North Indian culture that gave readers a Premchand. And this was the syncretic culture that is now reflected in Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai and Vikram Seth.

As time went by, there was more potential space for her work. Beyond South Asia, as Hyder continued to write and publish, the international English-reading public embraced translated writers such as Mario Vargas Llosa and Günter Grass. Earlier, international readers had welcomed bilingual writers such as Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov. Then gradually, over the more than fifty years she was being published, South Asians writing in English began to assume a prominent place in the literary firmament. Clearly, there was room for her creations, with their complex genesis. The reading public and critics celebrated such authors with the awards and prizes—and the sales—that are due to internationally-acclaimed writers with a global appeal. The time was ripe: Naguib Mahfouz had won the Nobel Prize.

But this kind of acclaim passed Hyder by. Only in 1998, with the publication of her own translation of *Āg kā Daryā* as *River of Fire*, was she even reviewed in international literary journals. And there was still no rush to acknowledge her preeminence among South Asian writers. Even when she finally sought to present herself on the international stage, it seems she did not know how to do it. The journalist Khalid Hasan recalls:

In June 1982, she wrote to me from Bombay, “Tell me, how does one get published in Vilayat? 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 which has always baffled me about the Indo-Anglicans—or 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 also got rave reviews in the US 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*’ types finding publication in the West, I had handed over to you a collection of my stories [in her beautiful English translation]. Well, it is apparent that nothing came of it at your end. I am two-thirds done with my translation of *Aakhir-e Shab ke Hamsafar*. How can it get published in the West? [It wasn’t.] You try.”

(2007, n.p.)

Her lack of a wider readership could in fact be seen as the result of the far-reaching consequences of Partition. Like Urdu itself, the frame of her creative world had shifted. With the attack on the old syncretic culture of undivided India, and the politicization of Urdu in both Pakistan and India, her own personal and literary choices took on heavy political and cultural import. Even vernacular writing itself eventually became the subject of scorn, as Salman Rushdie’s notorious (in India) remarks in his preface to a collection of Indian writing in English attested:

[...] the prose writing—both fiction and non-fiction—created in this period by Indian writers writing in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 “official languages” of India; the so-called “vernacular languages,” during the same time.

(1997, viii)

Could Rushdie, in a roundabout way, be right? Was it India’s insistence on ranking Urdu as a “vernacular” and the politicization of writing in any one Indian language that ensured English was the language of power for a South Asian writer? Rushdie uses the adjective “strong.” In India, was not the English voice the stronger voice—the voice of pan-South Asian cultural authority? And was this why Hyder insisted on doing her own translations? Because English was the international “writer’s language?” Ironically, the only story in the Rushdie/West collection that was not originally in English was indeed in Urdu.

Indeed, with the 1998 publication of *Āg kā Daryā* in English, Quratulain Hyder made that bid for her place in the new international literary landscape. She claimed territory that English readers might have thought belonged to the Rushdies, Seths and Sidhwas. The reemergence of *Āg kā Daryā*, with its wide range of cultural references and literary allusions, stated emphatically, by its very existence, that “multicultural” did not occupy a place found only in Indian novels in English.

Āg kā Daryā is obviously linked, stylistically and culturally, to many subsequent novels born on the Subcontinent—novels written in Urdu,

such as *Udās Naslēñ* (1963, *Weary Generations*) by Abdullah Hussein and *Bastī* (1979) by Intizar Husain, whose characters come from multiple traditions. It can be tied as well to novels written later in English, such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1994), in which translations and multi-linguality and literary references propel the action. When *River of Fire* appeared, it was reviewed enthusiastically in both the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) and the *New York Review of Books*. In remarks from the TLS, reproduced in a great blurb across the back of the dust jacket, Aamer Hussein wrote that the new English "transcreation" is "to Urdu fiction what *A Hundred Years of Solitude* is to Hispanic literature." He is quoted as saying—again referring to its being Hyder's own translation—"Now anglophone readers can see whether the fierce beauty of her imagination transcends the limits of language and nation." Inside the book, and rather excitedly making it sound like a magic trick, the title page refers to its being "transcreated from the original Urdu by the author."

Hyder made some significant changes in the translated version of her *Āg kā Daryā*, and it was she who called it a "transcreation." Taking the original and the translated versions together, one can see how Hyder moved the world of *Āg kā Daryā* beyond the Urdu reader and outwards. She repositioned her work for a different readership—an international one. Most apparent, she changed many of the literary allusions she used, abandoning some, reworking others, and introducing new ones as well. This essay is not the place to look at these changes in detail, but I would like to mention a few, and in particular, how she changed her chapter on Partition.

The first pages of the original Urdu novel use part of T. S. Eliot's "Dry Salvages" from his *Four Quartets* as a locus, which Hyder translated into Urdu. In the English version of the novel, the Eliot poem is excised and thus the clues to the structure of the novel, with its linkages to time, time as a river, and to a major modernist English poet, are obscured. Many more references to Urdu poets are inserted into the English version. For the English reader, the cultural and social environment is fleshed out. The Urdu reader would already carry information about that environment. In reading the volumes side by side, I noted numerous additional changes, particularly when Hyder writes about art and literature. Throughout *River of Fire* she has also inserted explanations of the historical situation, excised information about family backgrounds and family interactions, and cut out conversations between secondary characters.

But of all the changes from the Urdu original to the English, the most significant revolves around the moment of Partition itself. If Qurratulain

Hyder is to claim her place as a chronicler of Partition, how she moves between her Urdu novel, for its Urdu readership, and her now transcribed novel in English is highly significant. This powerful scene depicting a group of students discussing Partition, which uses references to Urdu literature, English literature, and music, exists only in *River of Fire*.

Two sections in the Urdu novel cover the precise moment of Partition. One section is literally, physically blank; there is a white space on the page. In the first section (467, Section 57; the Urdu novel has numbered, but not named, sections), the story of Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield is retold. This story from the *Bhagavad Gita* is presaged in the Urdu novel by the very early philosophical discussions Gautam has had with others. Krishna and Arjuna also are referred to in the section of Eliot's *Four Quartets* in the Urdu version. Now the story of Krishna and Arjuna is told again, in Urdu. Then, in Section 58 in the Urdu novel, all that is written is "Hindustan, 1947." There is nothing else in this section. It is the only section in more than 700 pages that is just a few words. And there is no direct reference to Partition in either section 57 or 58.

In *River of Fire* there is no retelling of the Krishna and Arjuna exchange—neither by Eliot nor Hyder. There is no section simply marked "Hindustan, 1947." Instead, Hyder writes a completely new scene. It is set in the India Coffee House, Lucknow. It is such a powerful passage that one can envision future versions of *Āg kā Daryā* with this scene inserted, making explicit what is only implicit in the original. The climax of the scene comes when the students in the India Coffee House recite, and then try to translate into English, the most famous Urdu poem about Partition. Hyder attempts to explain the dividing of the culture she has spent the previous several hundred pages describing, as well as the difficulty of translating and communicating culture. Even some of the other Indians in the audience have trouble understanding the poem, and yet the poem is about them all. This is from *River of Fire* and does not exist in the original:

Talat interrupted him as a grim reminder. "Have you read Faiz Ahmed Faiz's latest poem. *The Morning of Freedom? Yeh daag daag ujala, yeh shab-gazida sabar ...*" She went on to recite the poem. The audience became very still.

Poathan Abraham, the Malayali who worked for *The Pioneer*, broke the silence. "Now translate it into pidgin English, I couldn't understand a word."

"Translate Urdu poetry into English? How can you render *jigaar ki aag* as the liver's fire?"

"Try," said Abraham, smoking his pipe dreamily.

"Talat pondered awhile, then began, "Okay—This blighted dawn, this darkened sun. This is not the morn we waited for. We went forth in the

desert of heaven, hoping to reach our destination of stars. We hoped that, somewhere, we would come ashore from the placid river of the night, that the barge of sorrow would end its cruise. Whence came the early morning breeze, where did it go? The wayside lamp does not know. The night's burden has not diminished, the hour of deliverance for eye and heart has not arrived. Face forward! For our destination is not yet in sight."

There was a gloomy silence again.

Meanwhile, Malcolm got busy with his pen and sketchbook.

[... Then there is a discussion about Malcolm's sketch, which includes a broken tanpura that Talat wants mended but Malcolm suggests it may be broken forever.]

"You mean Humpty can never be put together again?" asked Talat, raising an eyebrow.

"Talat!" Tehmina admonished her as usual. "From Faiz Ahmed Faiz you descend to Humpty Dumpty—grow up!"

(1998, 275)

We know now, in hindsight, that the sobering and evocative effect the poem had on the fictional listeners in 1947 would persist in the non-fictional world. The poem would speak for the generation. Yet, one of the characters needs to have it translated in order to understand it. It has often been used as a coda on the ambivalence of gaining freedom at the expense of Partition. For example, a line from it is quoted to make this point in Ayesha Jalal's *Self and Sovereignty* (2000). The passage in *River of Fire* also mentions other poets (*ibid.*, 273): Louis MacNiece, the Anglo-Irish poet of the thirties and forties—who was in India during Partition; Sarojini Naidu, who, like Toru Dutt, wrote poetry in English; and a young, upcoming, unnamed Urdu poet. Hyder is able to convey to the English reader a complex message about culture and political change using this scene, and only those who can read the Urdu novel know that this passage is a special key for the English reader.

This scene in the India Coffee House is an elaborate and artful insertion of a group of literary allusions in order to convey powerful messages to an international reader: the importance of Urdu poetry, the pain of Partition, the inability of all Indians to have access to their shared culture and the difficulty of translation, to name a few. The passage is not simply explanatory. By its use of references and allusions to poems and language, the scene succeeds in capturing the dislocations and disappointments of the time. Again, its insertion alters the original novel's handling of Partition, providing in words, or at least in metaphor, some approximation of what has happened politically and culturally.

Āg k̄ā Daryā, by remaining wordless on the subject, picks up on one of its own themes: the inability of words to convey reality, and the spuriousness of words. As Hari Shankar says to Gautam at the beginning of both novels, “Then I also realized that words created much confusion, they led to misunderstandings and bloodshed and wars. So I stopped believing in them” (1959, 20; 1998, 12). As Eliot says regarding words in the first of the *Four Quartets* (“Burnt Norton”), to conclude where Hyder begins her Urdu novel: “Words, after speech, reach / Into the silence” they “strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden” (1943, 19). Both versions end with a meditation on existence. We can see this presaged in Hyder’s initial use of Eliot in *Āg k̄ā Daryā*, again absent in the English version:

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.

(*ibid.*, “East Coker,” 23)

In August 2007, Hyder died. Very little was written upon her death, even in India. *The Hindu* did a nice piece. The usual disclaimers accompanied some of the articles. “I heard she was great, I have been meaning to read her.” Someone on the Internet asked if she was a Punjabi. For me, in the month after her death, her choices and the consequences of them were much on my mind. Then, there occurred a catalyst for these thoughts: Doris Lessing won the Nobel Prize. As accolades for Lessing poured in, to me it was striking how easily they could have been applied to Hyder. I could not shake the sensation that Hyder’s spirit was standing nearby, so close in time were the two events. Robert McCrum, literary editor of the *Observer* (London), said of Lessing:

Here is a great contemporary woman and [...] intellectual who has dedicated her long life and impressive body of work to the tireless and unflinching exploration of man’s (and woman’s) place in the world, together with issues of race, gender and social justice. This prize finally acknowledges what has been true for at least 40 years: that she is one of the most important literary voices of her generation.

(2007, n.p.)

Suddenly, the death of one author and the prize for the other did not seem like unconnected phenomena at all. The similarities between the two octogenarian women novelists echoed. They had both made deeply personal choices that had stark consequences—what to write about,

where and how to live—and the choices had been recast into political statements. Like Lessing, Hyder had tackled big topics and suffered the consequences. In announcing the award, the Nobel Committee described Lessing as “that epicist of the female experience who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny... (Nobel, n.p.). These words about Doris Lessing formed a ghostly obituary for Qurratulain Hyder.

A Nobel Prize for Hyder would not have been a foreign, unnecessary honor or an artifact of colonialism, nor is comparing Hyder to Lessing an intellectual trap. This is not a case of insisting how the “other” can match up with some Western counterpart. Those, like Hyder, with no or little access to the international arena, for whatever reason, are denied a world audience. It is exactly global recognition and acceptance on an international stage for all languages and literatures that will save us from intellectual blindness, bigotry and provincialism. Thinking of Hyder and Lessing in the same context honors them both.

Of course Lessing, for so long the Communist Party stalwart, and Hyder, much derided by Indian Marxists, had different political perspectives. But Hyder, like Lessing, was on the far edge of feminism for her generation. She observed a colonial to postcolonial landscape, angering governments and fellow writers as she captured the experiences of her generation and earned devoted audiences. Women’s intellectual and creative lives were a driving force in Hyder’s work, just as they had been in Lessing’s early masterpieces. The vision of a writerly sisterhood persists. There they are: two old women, toiling away, writing, writing banned from this country or that, unwelcome by governments or in disfavor with this political group or that.

If Hyder had lived ten years more, and the translation of her numerous books had continued, surely she would have been considered for this sort of international recognition. We will never know. But “*kār-e jabān darāz hai.*” Bringing her to a wider audience is a task that must continue. So, on with the translation, for “the work of the world is long.” And may she rest in peace, in a land with no borders. □

Works Cited

- Ahmad, Aijaz. 2000. *Lineages of the Present: Ideology and Politics of Contemporary South Asia*. London; New York: Verso.
- Eliot, T.S. 1943. *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1971.
- Hasan, Khalid. 2007. *Friday Times* (Lahore) 31 August. <http://www.khalidhasan.net/fridaytimes/2007-08-31.htm>.

- Hussein, Aamer. 1998. *Times Literary Supplement*. "Chaos and Upheaval." 6 November.
- Hyder, Qurratulain. 1959. *Āg kā Daryā*. Delhi: Urdu Kitab Ghar, 1984.
- . 1998. *River of Fire*. Transcreated from the original Urdu by the author. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- McCrum, Robert. 2007. *Observer* (London). 14 October. <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/general-fiction/story/0,,2190693,00.html>.
- Mishra, Pankaj. 1999. *New York Review of Books*. "A Spirit of Their Own." 20 May. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/485>.
- Nobel Prize. 2007. http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2007/.
- Rushdie, Salman and Elizabeth West, eds. 1997. Preface to *Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing 1947–1997*. New York: Holt & Company.