



## A GLIMPSE ON YESTERYEAR ICON QURRATULAIN HYDER AND HER WORK MY TEMPLES, TOO

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### ABSTRACT

*Qurratulain Hyder, a prolific and proclaimed Urdu fiction writer was born on 20th January 1927 in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh. She began writing at the young age of 11 years. Her literary works include some 12 novels and novellas and four collections of short stories. She was named after a successful Iranian poet Qurrat-ul-Ain Tahira. Qurratul Ain translated means "solace of the eyes". Urdu literature has been predominantly poetry oriented which included fantasy, romance and trivial realism but Qurratulain Hyder has been credited for bringing novel with thought provoking imagination in its fold. She has been compared to literary hero Gabriel Garcia Marquez for her masterpiece Aag ka Dariya (1959), the English version is River of Fire. My Temples, Too is another important literary works of hers. She said in an interview that it was the English version of Mere Bhi Sanamkhana (1949). The novel has been set in during the time of turmoil of Second World War and Partition of India. It is a beautiful narration about the nawabs of Lucknow and coffee house conversations. The novel opens with a prologue followed by the story which is not divided into chapters and ends with an epilogue. The story is about Rakshanda Begum, a visionary and idealistic editor of the Muslim magazine The New Era, her younger and elder brothers Peechu and Polu respectively; Vimal, their friend and radio correspondent; Kiran, the young journalist; Salim, the doctor; Ginnie Kaul and Diamond. The 'Gang' gets together all the time at Ghufraan Manzil, the ancestral home of Rakshanda's fore-fathers. Though, Ghufraan Manzil now is dilapidated and needs urgent renovation, it reminds one of the splendour of nawabs of the past. The gang when gathered together loved to talk and discuss various issues related to cultures and literatures of the world. They were all young and enthusiastic with progressive*

thoughts and ideas. The research paper gives insight to the novel *My Temples, Too* by Qurratulain Hyder with reference to the close relation of Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb of Lucknow in terms of literature, poetry and music. Furthermore, the paper also includes the historical events like Colonization, Independence and Partition and its effect on an individual lives.

**Key Words:** partition, independence, nawabs

Qurratulain Haider gained her early education in Aligarh and received her later education from *Indraprastha College*, Delhi and Lucknow University's *Isabella Thoburn College* with a degree in English literature. She also studied art at Government School of Arts, Lucknow and later in London. She migrated to Pakistan for a few years after partition but finally was obliged to return to India in 1960 and settled here. She has held various important positions under Government of India and Government of Pakistan and had been on the editorial staff of a number of well-known magazines. In 1950, she was appointed as information officer in Information and Broadcasting Ministry of Pakistan. She also served as Press Attache of Pakistan High Commission in London. She was involved as producer of numerous documentary films; she also worked as Acting Editor of *Pakistani Quarterly*. She was also associated with Pakistan Airlines. Apart from being a novelist and a short story writer, she worked as a journalist on radio and magazines to earn a living and has travelled widely all over the world. When she lived in England she also worked for BBC. She worked with reputed publications like *Imprint* and *Illustrated Weekly of India*. She has also been a fellow of the Sahitya Academy and was associated with the Central Board of Films. She was also the visiting Professor of Urdu at the Jamia Millia, Delhi and the Aligarh Muslim University. She served as a guest lecturer at the universities of California, Chicago, Wisconsin, and Arizona.

Apart from her highly acclaimed career, Qurratulain Haider has been honoured with several prestigious literary awards. In 1967, she received the Sahitya Academy award for her third collection of short stories *Putjhar ki Awaz* (1965) *The Sound of Falling Leaves* and Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1969 for her contribution in the field of translation. In 1982, Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy honoured her for her overall contribution to Urdu literature. She was also the recipient of Padma Shri from the Government of India in 1984 for her contribution to literature. In 1985, she was chosen for the Ghalib Award. She received the Jnanpith Award in 1989 for her novel *Aakhir-e-Shab ke Hamsafar* (*Travellers Unto the Night*). The Urdu Academy in Delhi conferred upon her the Bahadur Shah Zafar Award in 2000. In 2005 she

was conferred the Padma Bhushan the third highest civilian honour awarded by the Government of India for her contribution to Urdu Literature and education.

Feminism in India before independence and after independence was actively taken up by the stalwarts of India. Indian feminist movement was first undertaken by men and then women joined later. Educated middle class men such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahatma Gandhi, DD Karve and many other prominent members of society stood against social evils and struggled a lot to better the conditions of women in India. During this time Indian women also challenged their current situation in the background, struggling for their rightful place. The early 20th century saw the rise of many courageous and strong-willed women who were crucial in India's freedom struggle. The era also saw the rise of many women's organizations like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). Women within the national movement had begun insisting on greater political and economic participation. The organizations like *Bharat Stri Mandal* was formed in Kolkata in 1910 by Sarala Devi and the Women's India Association founded in 1917 by Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Malati Patwardhan, Ammu Swaminathan, Mrs Dadabhoy, and Mrs Ambujammal. Annie Besant also led the Home Rule League and was elected President of the Calcutta Congress in 1917. The year 1917 was also significant as Sarojini Naidu led a delegation of women to meet the Montagu-Chelmsford Committee to demand a series of reforms in the condition of Indian women. In 1925, Sarojini Naidu was elected President of Indian National Congress, the first Indian woman to hold that post.

In 1974, the Committee on Status of Women presented its findings in the report *Towards Equality* that laid the foundation of women's movement in independent India, highlighting discriminatory socio-cultural practices, political and economic processes. Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Indian feminism engaged with many other issues – from domestic violence and rape to victim shaming and consent. Indira Jaisingh's tireless work was instrumental in the framing of the Domestic Violence Act (2005). Jaisingh was also the first woman to be appointed as an Additional Solicitor General of India in 2009. Activist Kavita Krishnan organised a series of protests and uproar after the 2012 Nirbhaya rape case, which eventually led to the legislation of the Criminal Law Amendment 2013 that made changes in the existing rape laws in the nation. Identified by TIME magazine as one of the 100 most influential women in 2013, lawyer Vrinda Grover was also influential in the drafting of the Criminal Law Amendment of 2013.

Though the general conditions of women have improved a bit yet a lot of work has to be done, to secure rights for women and fight the forces of patriarchy. There were and still are

many other individuals and organizations who are also working for gender equality and justice in India and their efforts are paying off. The internet and information technology is also helping women to form communities and networks, giving them a bigger voice to organize themselves, form partnerships and demand their rights.

Qurratulain Hyder was popularly known by her nickname *Ainee Apa* among her friends and admirers. Her parents Sajjad Haidar Yildarim (1880-1943) and Nazar Zahra (1894-1967), were famous Urdu literature novelists and short story writers. Perhaps her literary lineage has helped her to achieve great heights in literary realm and she earned great fame for her works. Due to the early death of her four siblings, she was raised with great care and love. She was an inspiration for future female writers of South Asia, mainly India and Pakistan. She wrote on topics usually considered “bold” for women and brought in the element of history in her writings. Through her works, she challenged the stereotypical representation of women in South Asia and portrayed them as capable individuals who are in no way lesser than any man. The female characters in her novels were not *abla nari*. They were strong and able women who, if given equal opportunities as men, could do wonders. She was considered as feminist literary icon, and quite impressed by their ideologies; she chose to remain unmarried and lived alone.

Qurratulain Hyder faced a lot of adverse reaction for her novel, *Aag ka Darya*. The novel criticized the partition, two-nation theory and the basic idea of Pakistan. This caused uproar among the masses, particularly in Pakistan. This was the biggest controversy of Hyder’s life and career. This was the reason Hyder left Pakistan and moved to England before settling in India permanently. She was criticized for not acknowledging the sentiments of those who stayed behind in India after partition. She reviewed such content and deleted in the English translation of the novel. Some of her other best works include *Mere Bhi Sanam Khane* (1949) *My Temples, Too*, *Safina-e-Gham-e-Dil* (1952), *Patjhar ki Awaz* (1965) *The Voice of Autumn*, *Raushni ki Raftar* (1982) *The Speed of Light*. In her four novellas namely, *Chaye ke Bagh*, *Dilruba*, *Sita Haran*, and *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Na Kijo*, Hyder delved into the theme of gender imbalance and deep-rooted misogyny in the South Asian region. She wrote a comprehensive documentary novel, based in volumes, called *Gardish e Rang e Chaman*, which spoke about the post 1857 era and the tragedies befalling women of respectable families. She wrote a novel called, *Aakhir e Shab kay Hamsafar*, on the Naxalite Movement and Bengal unrest. Her novel, *Chandni Begum*, was based on the general social condition of Muslims forty years after the partition. She also wrote the family chronicle *Kar e Jahan Daraz Hai* (*The Work of the World Goes On*).

Hyder used a technique called *Stream of Consciousness* in her literary writings. It is a literary device, known as internal soliloquy which exposes and depicts the numerous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind of the characters. This style of literary writing can be seen in almost every novel and short story of hers. She penetrated deep into complicated topics by presenting to her readers what her characters are thinking; their struggles and pain, weaknesses, thought processing, moral standing, feelings etc. This gave her readers a better understanding of the dilemma that her characters were going through and thus, they could connect with them better and got immersed in the stories completely.

We are introduced to aristocratic Muslim family descendants of Nawabs of Northern India in *My Temples, Too*. The protagonist Rakshanda Begum or Roshi, daughter of the family is educated and progressive unlike majority of Muslim girls of that time. She feels quiet disheartened at the grandeur of her ancestral home Ghufra Manzil which was built at the cost of exploitation of the peasants. She is the editor of the magazine *The New Era* which she is managing along with some of the members of her 'Gang'. They are bright young people who form the central characters of the book. They are radicalized by the current freedom movement in the country. Their mind is filled with fire of rationalism, liberalism, idealism and nationalism.

“They talked of New Life and New Values and New Society and they were into Modern Indian Art, Group Theatre Movement and Folk Culture Movement. Their lives were a great big, exciting, very full-blooded Movement on the Whole. They led strikes and went to jail and studied agrarian reform and social reform and all manner of other reforms. They mostly wore rough handloom cotton and sang Tagore’s songs and wrote about realism in Literature. They were anti-British and passionately believed in Hindu-Muslim Unity, and discussed how the capitalists and the bourgeoisie of both the Hindu and Muslim communities had conspired among themselves to keep the Masses down.” (p. 5) “Many of them had suffered hardship in the national struggle and been tortured by the police during the 1942 Quit India Movement, in which some of their comrades had even lost their lives. They were optimists, courageous, honest, high-spirited.” (p. 5) They dreamt for better tomorrow and during their meetings in the coffee house talked of change for better future after the war and independence of the country. Their parents tried arranging marriages for them but they were busy in their own world; flirting and falling in love with the members of their Gang.

The novel is set during the mid-twentieth century when riots happened in the cities due to Partition. The group actively involved themselves in collecting money for helping the riot victims. “The girls had been working incessantly for the last few weeks to make this show a success, to raise a few thousand rupees for the riot victims in faraway Calcutta. Working with a tremendous feeling of self-righteousness and national emergency, engaged in the important work of serving poor bleeding India.” (p. 83) Though at that time they were not personally affected by the riots, they did think about the temporary nature of life. In the later part of the novel the violence of Partition and the destruction that came with it unnerved them. They gave importance to humanity rather than religion yet in the name of religion their very existence and everything that they loved and liked was at risk.

Hyder not only talks about the important characters Roshi and her Gang, she gives voice to a range of characters to help us decipher how the political turmoil of the country affected each character differently. One can't deny the fact that the plethora of characters does make the novel little complicated and one has to re-read to get a better understanding of the story. We are little confused as why and from where a particular character has appeared. The gist I could gather is that lesser known characters like Qamar Ara, Christabel, Queen Rose, Hafiz, Shehla Rahman, Syed Iftikhar, Zeenat Apa and others somehow touched the mental and emotional feelings of the members of the Gang and they gave us better idea about the people in general of that time. Roshi's father Kunwar Sahib could not understand his children and remained a passive father who passed his time with his old acquaintances. Her mother Kunwar Rani too failed to accept her younger son's love Christabel and referred her as 'white witch' and her daughter's inclination towards intellectual stuff. She wants her to accept the proposal of either Anwar Azam of Amberpur Raj or Lt. Jehangir Qadar of Murshidabad. She complains to her brother Chowdhry Shamim, “My children will drive me up the wall, Shamim Mian.” (p. 39)

*My Temples, Too* is basically a tragedy as it exposes the horrors of Partition of India. The characters of the novel otherwise in a comfortable space of their own suddenly face destruction of their homes, society and culture and death of their loved ones. There is utter chaos and loss everywhere. Rakshanda thought, “The hooded figures that filled this void, stalking about silently, have fallen and broken into pieces, and the beauty of life has come to an end. Do you recall what Krishna said to Arjuna, that time destroys its own creations?” (p. 94) She wondered with some hope about “Or consider all those good Hindus who are not

killing Muslims, and noble Muslims who are saving the lives of their Hindu friends in the riots.” (p. 95) The Partition was a failure which resulted in the forced separation of Hindus and Muslims due to narrow mindedness of certain politicians. The whole country was plunged into despair due to the selfishness of political parties who wanted to gain power and benefit at the cost of the lives of innocent people. Hindus and Muslims had actively participated and fought together for the freedom of the country against the Britishers was now vying for each other’s blood. This irony of love and hatred was unbearable.

Though there were ideological differences between Hindus and Muslims but they mingled and lived together. This kind of violence and hatred never came in their life. Hyder wondered at the present situation “All this talk about progress and the upliftment of the masses and the realization of Mahatma Gandhi’s vision of truth-? Were these swines who were bringing disgrace to India by murdering one another worth all these ideals? Probably not.” (p. 126) Rakshanda felt “Lucknow had changed greatly in her absence. It was teeming with a new kind of human beings called “refugees”. They looked lost and bitter and infinitely unhappy, having been driven away from their homes in the North-West by the Muslims.” (p. 127) It was difficult for both Hindus and Muslims who left their belongings, home, friends and neighbours to settle in the new locality. None had any clue why they were being killed or why they were killing. They had no personal enmity and they didn’t know each other yet they were thirsty for each other’s blood. In this milieu of confusion Rakshanda lost her brother Peechu at the hands of Hindu fanatics and her friend Kiran at the hands of Muslim fanatics. Rakshanda had lost her mental stability due to the vagaries of riot. One should always build bridges for the progress of the society rather than build walls. Partition was building walls between people on the basis of religion which resulted in huge loss of innocent lives and properties.

The gory incidents of riots portrayed by Hyder in the later part of *My Temples, Too* makes the reader shudder. One wonders what can be gained by killing each other. In the name of religion some perverted individuals create barrier between people who otherwise never bothered what religion an individual is following. She did present in the initial part of the novel how religion is an individual’s personal choice and she presented a picture of co-existence of people following different religions.

*My Temples, Too* is not a clear-cut autobiographical work. However, Qurratulain Hyder's description of incidents and occurrences in the novel certainly conclude the fact that she had lived through these events. She belonged to a Muslim family like Roshi. She was almost the same age as Roshi and like Roshi she was highly intellectual and involved in journalism. She had migrated to Pakistan in 1947. The book was published in 1949 that is after the Partition explicitly describes the consequences of Partition. She has finely and exquisitely presented the reality of division of Nation.

The legend passed away in a hospital in Noida, India on 21<sup>st</sup> August 2007, due to lung problem and old age. She is buried in the *Jamia Millia Islamia* cementary, New Delhi. Her death was mourned by people from across the globe, especially India and Pakistan. The Prime Minister of India at that time, Manmohan Singh said in his departing speech for Hyder that he is deeply saddened by her death; "She was a great teacher and scholar famous in India and abroad. She was one of the most celebrated and prolific writers of Urdu literature. *Aag Ka Dariya*, her magnum opus, is a landmark novel that explores the vast sweep of time and history. In her unfortunate passing away the country, especially Urdu literature, has lost a towering literary figure. She will be truly missed in literary circles in the country."

Qurratulain Hyder was a fascinating woman. Mustansar Hussain Tarar, a well renowned Pakistani novelist and writer wrote a memorial for her when she passed away with the title, "The Queen is dead, long live fiction" in *Dawn*. She was generally a reserved person and did not mingle with lot of people except a few selective ones. Her colleagues and even her contemporaries spoke high of her writing capabilities and how she had a strong command over Urdu language. Her personality reflected her passion for writing. Her friends, colleagues and close ones remember her as someone who "Kept her humour and her zest for living till almost the end."

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