

MUHAMMAD SALIM-UR-RAHMAN

Yesterday This Day's Madness Did Prepare

It is not a bad thing in a tale that you understand only half of it.

—ISAK DINESEN

AS A WRITER whose fiction is very much like a modulation of continuous crisis, Qurratulain Hyder (Qurratu'l-'Ain Ḥaidar) has no equal in Urdu literature. Her characters, always on the verge of becoming conditioned to the dictates of critical vagaries, which range from disturbed identities to traumas generated by history's implacable waywardness, try desperately to hang on to their shredded humanity. No finest hours await them. Only a steady mortification keeps them company.

What of this gallery of men and women one comes across in her novels and stories, each of them wrestling with his or her private nostalgias and public griefs, unhorsed by currents of history or force of circumstances? It is, arguably, a very rich and at times groovy assemblage of memorable, but not necessarily lovable, individuals.

Hyder has often been regarded as a lively portrayer of a glossy environment in which aesthetes, culture mongers, aristocrats, bureaucrats and careerists contend for ascendancy. To suggest that she is herself an aristocrat *manqué* and mourns in her fiction a changing society in which the emergent materialism has no sympathy for patrician ideals and the refinements of some cultural exclusivity is to put too restricted a premium on her achievement. In fact, her work has been, right from the beginning, an elegant mockery of the class she knows inside out, that is, the middle class with all its upper, lower and central tiers. This stance, a sort of satirical cloud with an affectionate lining, is detectable even in *Sitārōñ sé Āgē*, (Beyond the Stars), her first collection of stories. As an artist she is too intelligent to espouse anachronistic ideals and loyalties or roost among histories leftovers. At the same time she is perceptive and compassionate enough to notice feelingly the afterglow of the dynamism with which the cultural wreckage around her was once charged. The mockery always stops short of being intently remorseless. It is leavened

with a diffused elation and rendered bearable by a sensitive display of artistry.

Born Storyteller

The striking thing about her is her aptitude for fiction. She is a born storyteller. Her short stories and novellas are every whit as good as her novels and this characteristic alone suffices to put her in a class of her own. There are a number of commendable short story writers in Urdu but, apart from her, only a few who are equally at home in what can be rightly considered—because of the different technique and outlook required, as a related but distinct literary genre—the novel. Hyder, on the other hand, shuttles effortlessly between these twin poles of fiction. She has written some of the best short stories in Urdu. However, a large canvas invariably displays her fictional talent to advantage.

Āg kā Daryā (River of Fire), a very long and searching look at the Subcontinent's intricate history to unearth some sort of continuity in it, is possibly the best thing she has written. Never the one to compromise by oversimplification, this multifaceted and leisurely novel of hers can be described as an ingenious attempt to make sense of the here and now in the light of the monumentally irreducible past which we are all heir to but of whose inexorable burden she is more acutely aware than most.

Although less ambitious, her latest novel, *Gardish-e Rañg-e Āman* (Shifting Hues and Moods of the Garden), may be a better read than *Āg kā Daryā*. The touch is so much lighter and relaxed, almost impertinently innovative. One could term it a brilliantly ironic comedy were there not an undercurrent of melancholy coursing through it. The faces behind the cheerful masks are lined with an immense weariness.

The novel has no center. Rather it has two centers, like two adjacent circles whose circumferences are in touch. The connection is slight but unmistakable. What is less clear is the connection's implication. How do the two parts relate to each other? Is the second part to be read as an implied criticism of the first? Are they mirror images, reversals of some kind? One can think of no satisfactory answer. Perhaps further reading may help to clear the air.

It is not easy to summarize a plot in which adherence to linear progress is not much in evidence. The first part describes the lives of three girls who lost their parents when they were very young, fell into the hands of hetaeras and predictably took up the profession of their so-called mothers. But in their heart of hearts they always knew, not without

a sense of pride, that they were not hetaeras by birth but came of genteel stock. It is a rankling memory. One of their grand-daughters manages to get out of the rut and becomes a doctor. A return to respectability at last! Unluckily the shades of a disreputable past turn out to be too powerful and by the end her sanity is all but gone. Two villainous sisters upset her plans for a better life. The sisters belong to the lower middle class but have become enormously rich over the years and increasingly vulgar, also in a way only the nouveaux riches are capable of. One of them has literary pretensions, a droll amour propre, which provide considerable comic relief. It is impossible to laugh at the sisters, although they invite laughter. They are too vain and unconscionable.

The second part narrates the picaresque career of a gentleman from Lucknow who has migrated to London, is an expert cardsharp as well as a mafia man wanted by the Interpol. He comes back to blackmail the rich sisters; the plan misfires and afterwards he is introduced to a holy man, a long and diverting episode which is spread over nearly a hundred and fifty pages. The outcome is a complete transformation of the erstwhile swindler. He returns to London, gives up his ill-gotten wealth and leaves for the holy city of Makkah.

A bald summary such as this cannot do justice to the complexity of the plot or the expertise with which things have been manipulated. In fact, it can be positively misleading. But, inadequate as it is, it may serve to illuminate the remarks which follow.

The first portion can be read as a trenchant commentary on the hazards and infelicities which shadow women's liberation. The advantages which stem from it often prove on investigation to be wholly illusory. For a very long time indeed the only class of women who could be regarded as professional and independent were the courtesans. Cultured, accomplished and in general strikingly handsome, they were much sought after by the élite, amassed great riches and enjoyed a measure of freedom which aristocratic ladies and well-off housewives could only eye with envy. Such independence of means, so economically secure a life, one imagines would presumably be a privilege no woman in her senses would care to trade off. And yet most, if not all, of these courtesans cherished a dream of life with honor, a legalized wedlock, ready to swap their independence for bourgeois respectability, no matter how confining. Two of the courtesans in Hyder's novel try literally to buy their way back to an honorable life, blow all their savings in the process and fail miserably. The villains, of course, are men without scruples who exploit their peculiar weakness. The tragedy is summed up by one of the characters: "No matter what you do, sell yourself or buy someone, you are

the loser. When the roommate of the new woman, who stands up for total equality, ditches her, it is usually she who has to foot the unpaid bills and is also saddled with the children.” So, in the long run, there is really nothing to choose between the hetaeras of yesterday and the liberated women of today—both end up as losers. At least that is what the novel aims to establish.

Illusions Galore

But the main theme of *Gardish-e Rañg-e Āaman* is the pervasiveness of illusion. Appearances merely deceive. Nothing is what it seems to be. No one is who he or she seems to be. Each character concocts illusions, every incident is tailored to accentuate the fictive illusoriness. The courtesans belong to good families, playing out roles thrust on them by circumstances. The lady doctor regards herself as the daughter of a Syed who had married her mother only to learn, inadvertently, that she is in fact a natural child. Her father was a rich Hindu whose mistress her mother had been. Norma Drake, the Eurasian gold digger, is apt to mislead the gullible and Dilshād, the great cardsharp, can always be relied upon to assume some role or other. The rich sisters constantly pretend to be what they are not and are almost put out by their own web of deception. The holy man, too, is completely atypical—young, athletic and modish. It comes as no surprise as Dilshād, otherwise a pretty shrewd observer, at first mistakes him for someone else. The stepbrother of the rich sisters, although kept in chains, is not mad but feigns madness. The lady doctor pretends to be mad without realizing that she is actually teetering on the brink of lunacy. One can notice illusion at work everywhere, filtering down to the smallest details. The shabby old Nawab, whom the lady doctor, her mother and boyfriend chance upon in a garden, is yet another simulator. Dilshād mistakes an Italian woman for some timid, dutiful, Indian Muslim girl and a doctor of phenomenology for a physician. The air is always thick with confusion. It may not be amiss to rename *Gardish-e Rañg-e Āaman* as “Illusions Incorporated.”

The tragedy of the lady doctor is obviously the core around which the novel is structured. But the character that truly wrings one’s heart is Dilnavāz, one of the courtesans. She lost her good looks when her clothes caught fire and afterwards, in a mood of wild contrition, she gave up her worldly possessions to lead a life devastated by constant privation. She married a poor, ordinary man, went to perform the Hajj, lived for several years in Makkah and Madina, lost her husband, returned to India and

resumed her comfortless routine. She clung to her abject poverty as though it were an absolution and looked ahead only to a beggarly death. Her penitence is understandable, though not the masochistic savagery with which she had turned against herself. Her self-abasement has a weird, anarchic flavor. What a tenacious rearguard action it is as she embraces, without any second thoughts, a life of terrifying squalor. And this is something which Dilshād perhaps, for all his change of heart, will never experience. □

[Originally published in *The Pakistan Times* (Magazine Section, Books & Writers) January 8, 1988. Edited for the *AUS*.]