

*Jāre kī Chāndnī*¹

Qurratulain Hyder

Translated by

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Introduction to Qurratulain Hyder

Qurratulain Hyder was born in Aligarh in January, 1927 to Nazar Sajjad Hyder and Sajjad Hyder ‘Yildirim’, both, writers of considerable repute. She did her Intermediate from Isabella Thoburn College Lucknow; graduated from Indraprastha College, Delhi and did an MA in English, from the University of Lucknow. She trained in art and music around the same time. In December 1947, she migrated to Pakistan, with her mother. In 1961 she returned to Bombay, India. In 1984 she moved to New Delhi.

Hyder was a bilingual writer who wrote prolifically and translated regularly. She has written several novels and novellas and many of her short stories were anthologized or published in literary journals. Hyder has also written several critical essays, given interviews that illustrate her opinions and ideals and commented of fellow writers and their works. She received abundant recognition. Among the many awards conferred on her are the Sahitya Akademi Award in Urdu, for *Patjhar Ki Awaz* (1967); the Jnanpith Award for *Akhir-e Shab ke Humsafar* (1989), and the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship (1994). In 2005 she was decorated with the Padma Bhushan. She died in Noida, New Delhi in August, 2007.

Jāre kī Chāndnī is a review of Ghulam Abbas’ anthology of short stories. I found it particularly interesting because of the way Hyder continually likens Abbas to, or writes about him in relation to writers of world renown and treats of his writing in terms of

¹ “Jāre ki Chāndnī” (winter moonlight) from *Dastān-e Ahd-e Gul*; Educational Book House; 2004; pp.113-117.

painting and music, both art forms that resonated strongly with her.

Writing about Sinclair Lewis in “A Camera Man,” E M Forester began by paraphrasing an exchange between Carol Milford and Will Kennicott, the principal characters in *Main Street*: “‘I would like to see Gopher Prairie.’ says the heroine of Mr. Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* and her husband promptly replies: ‘Trust me! Here she is! Brought some snapshots down to show you.’ That in substance is what Mr Lewis has done himself. He has brought down some snapshots to show us and posterity. The collection is as vivid and stimulating as any writer who adopts this method can offer. Let us examine it; let us consider the method in general. And let us at once dismiss the notion that any fool can use a camera. Photography is a great gift, whether or no we rank it as an art.”

Forester’s opinion with regard to Sinclair Lewis can be extended to other writers as well. The story is like a picture that can be taken from several angles. Its modes are different. Like a painting, a story can be projected in different hues of light and shade. In some of them there may be scorching sunlight; in others, a dreamy twilight; Krishan Chander’s brush has the colors of a rainbow and the notes of music and in spite of this his stories are very truthful depictions of our own world; in some writers, the canvases illustrate blurred impressions. Ismat uses knives instead of brushes and brandishes them to tear her canvas so brutally that along with it, her viewer also suffers wounds. If we carry this metaphor forward, perhaps it would not be incorrect to say that Ghulam Abbas sensitively captures the ambiance of winter moonlight in his pictures. There’s a stout kinship between fiction and painting. In fact, as art forms, painting, music and the written word are diverse but harmonious notes of a single symphony. The mark of a good writer is that he ensures a total absence of dissonance among them. Very few Urdu writers have been able to achieve this and several of them fall prey to lack-luster writing. Abbas is an intelligent writer – he writes little but he writes lovingly. And though he has been writing for a long time – I think *Alhamra* was published in 1931 – and consequently he should be considered among our “elder” writers. However, the brilliance and freshness of his art has afforded him a place among the foremost post-1960 writers.

As I observed, Abbas writes lovingly – he chisels out each and every minute aspect of his story to perfection. However, one tragedy stalks him – his has been slotted as ‘the Ghulam Abbas of “Anandi”’ although apart from “Anandi,” he has written some very fine stories. His narrative style is matchless in the sense that he narrates an incident with calm confidence and extreme gentleness, in dulcet tones and never draws the reader’s attention by resorting to sensational or horrific descriptions.

Each writer has a landscape within which he remains contented. He has to make a conscious effort to step out of it if he wants to say something different or new. And it is perhaps because of this that we too have sub-consciously slotted story-writers in different niches. We tend to presuppose before we begin reading – Intizar Hussain? – Must be a sad story about an *Imambada* in Bulandshahar; A. Hameed? – The lanes of Amritsar, the *samawar*'s aromatic steam and yellow roses! Shaukat Siddiqui? – Goons, terror, persuasion; Jameela Hashmi? – Melodramatic stories centering the Sikhs; Qurratulain Hyder? – The same old sob-stories of Lucknow and Mussourie. Now, we also find ourselves wondering about what, or how Jeelani Bano and Wajeda Tabassum will narrate about some ill-fated feudal family of Hyderabad.

When we try to categorize Abbas's stories, "Anandi" is uppermost in our minds as though it is the trailblazer for all his works. Nevertheless, in spite of this, we cannot read Abbas against any single backdrop. His characters appear to be provincial and yet they are not – translate him in any world language and his characters will fit perfectly well in any country, against any cultural milieu.

Abbass's preferred technique is one of very gradual development. He begins by saying something on a very gentle note and then, very slowly but surely, he takes it to a high-point. He is keenly aware of how he should make his story rise steadily to a climax. In none of his stories, at any stage do we come across a sense of a dilemma, nervousness, irritation, a lack of caution or any other kind of slippage. As such, this carefulness, at times, converts into an artistic weakness ... I will talk about this later.

Abbass never gets involved in a story while narrating it. Calmly he goes about narrating incidents. Joseph Conrad has mentioned somewhere: "Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills." Abbas too narrates about the temporal world. There is no room for philosophizing, metaphysics or symbols in his stories. These are stories about ordinary people that despite being ordinary are extraordinary and thought-provoking. While narrating about slave-dealers, children, about destitute young men who go about wearing only overcoats, Abbas looks directly at meaninglessness and irony and the innocence of the people.

A great American critic has written somewhere about the distinguished novelist James T Farrell that in the era of the realistic novel, truthfulness is a wide expanse that most people like to lay claim upon at the very beginning, but an intelligent writer never lays claim on absolute truth in a story. All he desires is that his story or novel should not seem

imaginary nor that his characters, who are representatives of ordinary life, appear so original as to shatter the mold and become torchbearers.

This is the sense we get when we meet Abbas's characters face to face – that despite being so commonplace, they are so mysterious. This also makes us conscious of his meticulousness as a writer. "Uski Biwi" (his wife) is a story about a young man whose beloved wife has died and he keeps talking about her to a prostitute. The sudden disclosure at the dénouement is also typical of Abbas. I couldn't help but be drawn towards some of the facets he has so meticulously drawn out.

"By now she had plaited her hair and rolled it up in a chignon and was picking up the hair-pins and clips she used to do up her hair from the floor and putting them back in a shelf of the dressing table. While she was doing this the young man watched her fair-skinned fingers as they worked meticulously in her hair.

Two minutes passed in silence."

Similarly, elsewhere he writes,

"In front of him, on the white *chāndni* a black winged insect as big as a pea, lay motionless. Probably it had come into contact with the electric light as it flew, and had fallen. It waved its tiny hair-like legs in the air and rubbed its head against the *chāndni* again and again, in its attempts to get back on its feet. But no sooner would it achieve some measure of success, than the young man would turn it upside down once again with a tip of a burnt match-stick."

Notice the simplicity of the narrative –

"He has a pet goat, white as milk – not a single black hair. Zehra looks after it. A river flows close to our village. She takes it over there to drink water. One day it so happened that while the goat was drinking water, a large dog came by..." Nasreen went on narrating this simple, uninteresting anecdote with immense interest..."

And the skill of the story teller is such that we too read this 'simple, uninteresting anecdote' with great concentration.

Here's another:

"Nasreen did not purchase any single expensive item; rather, she bought several inexpensive ordinary articles of daily use – for instance, she bought a braid of false hair."

"Tinke ka Sahāra" (Clutch of Straw) also epitomizes Abbas's unique style. Let's take a look at yet another sample of his simplicity.

"In the afternoon, the bundle of old clothes was sent to Saeed's wife's place from Haji Sahab's house. Along with the bundle, Hajjin Bi sent word that it was to be sent to Kubra and Sughra – they should read the *Kalām Pāk* and plait their hair."

It surprises me that this story concludes in differently.

Personally, I feel that “Uski Biwi” is the best story of this collection. “Ġhāzi Mard” (The Victorious Muslim Warrior) is yet another very fine story. The tussle between evil and innocence or the descriptions of existential despondency and scenes of helplessness are portrayed in very soothing tones. I employed the word ‘portrayed’ because nowhere do we find any personal intervention or statement from Abbas. The lowest bass notes play alongside the high pitched trebles and at times, they take over them too. If we use the musical lexicon, we can refer to the innocence with which Abbas blends his different themes as counterpoint. Perhaps Abbas had Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” in mind while selecting a title for his collection *Jāre kī Chāndni*. His story “Fancy Hair Cutting Saloon” serves as a fine example of the skill with which he places little bricks, one on top of the other, in order to construct his building. We can also compare his art with a mosaic. Abbas brings together a few characters, discusses their different points of view, their dispositions and peculiarities, and then he constructs a house or a shop or a locality or even an entire city peopled by all of them, and in this way, under our watchful eye, an entire canvas comes into being. This technique of portraiture is one whereby characters are first sketched with a pencil; thereafter the first coat of paint is applied – at some places flat and at others with diverse tones. Then, the brush is used to make gentle or bold strokes which help to gradually fill in the details of the picture and bring it to completion. Abbas’s technique is one whereby he makes use of light shades of color instead of using dark or deep ones. Once he has filled in the colors, he “washes” his canvas so that the tones become agreeable, well-balanced and harmonious.

I also liked *Sāyeh* (shadows) and *Bhañwar* (whirlpool) very much. However, it would be incorrect to assume that all the stories in these collections are good. “Bambe wālā” (Bombay Wala), “Mukherjee Bābu ki Diary” (Mukherjee Babu’s Diary), “Do Tamāshe” (two performances) are weak. Even “Surkh Julooos” (red procession) is just about average.

Abbas’s gentle tone at times becomes so mild that his story seems to be heading towards an anti-climactic and weak conclusion. One gets the impression that the story-teller was narrating an incident and no more. This weakness was not to be found in his first collection of stories. This time one gets an impression that he began his stories enthusiastically but then, got bored and left them incomplete. Abbas can write very good fragments and this is one of the reasons for his success as a seasoned writer of the short story.

NM Rashid has written the Introduction to *Jāre ki Chāndni* (winter moonlight) and Chughtai Sahab’s painting on the dust cover is worth seeing.