

# Dr. Fakhir Hussain: Some Reflections

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‘Repaying my debt to the past’ is the way Dr. Fakhir Hussain<sup>1</sup> (19-19), one of Britain’s most brilliant intellectuals, describes his literary work. Yet it is a debt that India seems curiously reluctant to collect. Dr. Hussain’s last five books in Urdu, translations from great writers like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, T. S. Eliot, and Arthur Miller, all had to be published outside India because no Indian publisher was interested. Neither were any government-backed Urdu societies (*Anjumans* or academies), although this is the first attempt to bring these important modern writers to an Urdu-speaking audience. Dr. Hussain believes that unless you are part of the ‘club’ of exclusive authors, you do not get published today in the vernacular languages. He would like his books to be translated into Hindi and Bengali as well, but there is no interest here either. He says wryly that the various organizations to promote learning seem more like ‘mutual admiration societies financed by the Indian taxpayer’.

When doctor Hussain talks about the great French writers like Camus, Sartre, and Malraux, he is not merely regurgitating well-known literary facts. He actually used to live with that French academic life in the 1950s, and his commentaries on their work come from a deep understanding of the milieu which produced their greatest books. How did this gentle, unassuming philosopher and writer come to be part of the hectic Left Bank life of post-war Paris? The story starts in Lucknow, in 1929, where he was born into a family of writers. Dr. Hussain's maternal great-grandfather was the poet Mir Anis, who has been described imaginatively as 'shining like the sun in the firmament of poetry and letters.' So modest was this literary genius that he declined to recite his work before the last Nawab of Awadh, claiming that he felt uncomfortable at the thought of donning Court dress.

Fakhir's father was the first member of the family to go out to work, in the Posts and Telegraph department. His British boss's wife persuaded him to get Fakhir admitted to La Martiniere School for Boys in Lucknow, but his grandfather refused to let him go because he was afraid that the young boy would be turned into a Christian. So, he was primarily educated at home before being admitted to Jubilee College and the University of Lucknow.

Fakhir came to London in 1951 to pursue a degree at the University of London in Psychology and Philosophy and then studied for a Ph.D. here at the University of Sorbonne in Paris. His subjects included European languages, politics, and culture and by the end of it, he had collected to doctorate. For a young and curious undergraduate, the Left Bank in the '50s was an exhilarating intellectual experience – truly life a la Bohème. 'If life is a matter of chance, then by a happy accident I was in the right place at the right time', he says.

As a student living in St. Germain des Pres, Fakhir Hussain came into contact with all the great names in the intellectual and artistic world at that time. He found Pablo Picasso drinking coffee next to him, standing at the bar, to save money. (It cost more to sit down.) Andre Malraux, the

writer, was another important influence, an engaging personality, to home Pandit Nehru reputedly said, 'You make even violence attractive in your novels'. Jean-Paul Sartre, the great philosopher, and his companion Simon de Beauvoir, the writer, was 'a real tough school-mistress, who could dismiss anything you said, but at the same time, though all students were hungry so she used to feed us'.

The Deux Magots Café was the place to meet. For years the slogan 'Le Café des Intellectual Elites' was printed on the bottom of each bill. When Dr. Hussain noticed during a visit that the words were no longer there, he quizzed the waiter about whether it was indeed a place for the intellectual elite. 'Oh yes, Sir', was the reply, 'we still have Simon de Beauvoir's teapot. Sartre was kinder than his companion, 'Have you anything you would like to ask me?', he said. 'No thank you', replied Hussain, with the unconscious arrogance of youth, 'I am also an existentialist'.

He began writing and two of his most important books were published in Urdu<sup>2</sup> in 1988, 'Rahsaaz' (Pathfinder) is a collection of personal impressions of Pablo, Neruda, Sartre, Yehudi, Menuhin, Malraux, Bertolt Brecht, Raja Muhammad Amir Ahmad Khan of Mahmudabad, Mulk Raj Anand, Yagana Changezi, and K.M. Ashraf. That same year he translated essays by British philosophers, critics, and art historians, Sir Ernst Gombrich, Kenneth Clark, and John Berger.

After working at the Institute of Aesthetics in Paris for several years, he found himself posted to Zambia and Zaire by UNESCO where he taught Psychology, Philosophy, Art, and Education. He set up a craft department employing local people to pass on their skills to the students so that their art would not be lost. He is particularly proud of this venture and his pride is reflected in the collection of African furniture and ornaments which decorate his luxurious home in southwest London. Also here are mementos of India, including a portrait of his famous ancestor, which he had specially commissioned. Illuminated addresses from Lucknow on the occasion of a Viceroy's visit hang on the walls, decorated

with the fish mermaid of the old Nawabs. Later Dr. Hussain became well-established as Principal Lecturer and Head of Department at St. Mary's College, London. When that job came to an end, he started volunteer work as a Clinical Psychologist at a London Hospital. But would he like to live in India again?

'Not really. When I returned from a holiday last Christmas there were only four people left in Lucknow that I knew from the past. All my family is gone along with friends and the entire milieu. Even the old houses and monuments are crumbling. I was also shocked at the violence around me'. In fact, Dr. Hussain had a narrow escape at Aligarh, when he missed, by a few minutes, the train in which some Muslim men were butchered in an outbreak of communal rioting. The experience left him badly shaken for months. Although he gave a series of academic lectures at Universities and Medical Colleges and appeared on Doordarshan, he could not raise any interest in his books.

Apart from the Urdu translations, he has written a short story of French literature, looking at the social and political background and the changing patterns of French society which created its writers. The book incidentally provides a useful guide to Parisian landmarks for the Urdu speaker. Sensibly, Hussain transliterates names as they are pronounced in French, so 'Victor Hugo' becomes 'Victor Ugo'. His most recent book introduces and translates the works of Albert Camus'. The profound, gentle, and sensitive tone adopted tells us why Camus has been described as the 'Conscience of our age' and why his work has been translated into more than fifty different languages over the last half-century.

London's social life continues to attract Hussain, and he attends Indian events like mushairas, concerts, and literary meetings, moving effortlessly through the upper strata of intellectual society. He considers Britain a less racist place than it used to be. While at University in London, he lived within a small circle of friends and did not encounter prejudice until he started looking for work. 'But today you can go into a bank, go

into an office and you find Asians working everywhere, which would have been unthinkable in the old days.’

AS for personal life, a marriage in England did not work out, although he has a son who writes poetry, following the family tradition, and is looking forward to becoming a grandfather. He is an accomplished Cordon Bleu cook, who attended evening classes in Paris for the sheer pleasure of being able to produce good food. A pipe smoker and connoisseur of fine wines, he plans to spend more time in the south of France but says romantically that there are rarely only two places worth living in, Paris or Lucknow.

Today he is probably best known for his translation of Maulana Abdul Halim Sharar’s book<sup>3</sup> ‘Lucknow: the Last Phase of an Oriental Culture’, which describes the country life of the old city. He produced this book with Colonel E. S. Harcourt, who lived in the city for 35 years, working for the Educational Corps of the British Army, before retiring to Oxford where he taught Urdu and Persian. Although he is proud of this book, which has recently been printed for the fifth time, he is sad that that no-one in India seems interested enough to publish anything else he has written. Widely appreciated in Europe, his country perversely neglects his stimulating contribution towards the aesthetic debate.

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I got to know Fakhir in the 1980s and we first met at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, London University) where I had been a student. Fakhir’s translation of ‘Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture’ was published in 1975, through UNESCO, and this was one of the set books in my Urdu course at the School so we had something in common.

He told me he was related to Mir Babar Ali Anis میر بابر علی انیس (1803–1874), also known as Mir Anis, who had been Court poet to King Wajid Ali Shah in Lucknow. Fakhir said he was a victim of *mahjub*, a feature of Muslim law, which means that a claimant’s son is barred from his inheritance if the claimant dies before he himself can inherit. At the

same time, Fakhir was not short of money. He lived in a large house near Richmond Park in southwest London, which was well furnished, including some furniture he had bought while working in Africa. He was at that time quite athletic and used to go swimming at the public swimming pool with a friend of mine.

As a young man, Fakhir had gone from Lucknow to Paris and had become part of the circle of the French writers and intellectuals, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre – he said Simone used to feel sorry for him and feed him. He spoke excellent French.

Long after he retired, he would continue to see patients privately as a psychotherapist. He was very hospitable and would give big lunch parties with delicious food that he had cooked himself. There was always plenty of good wine too.

It is incorrect, as the Lucknow Observer article says, that he and Ram Advani the Lucknow bookseller were good friends. They were acquaintances, that is all. Fakhir could be quite vague about things and during a visit to London by Ram and his wife, I arranged a Reception for the Advanis at my house and invited Fakhir. I sent him a written invitation and phoned him too, but even so, he arrived three hours late, by which time the Reception had finished and the Advanis had left.

I last saw Fakhir at the Memorial Service for my late partner, General Stanley Menezes in September 2012. He made the effort to attend the Reception at the Nehru Centre after the church service, although he was quite frail and was accompanied by a carer. He remained very attached to Lucknow and when I showed him some old photographs of the city, he became tearful. He said several times that he ‘wanted to die in his own language’ – that is, among people who spoke Urdu, but this did not happen. I was not informed of his death and so could not participate in his funeral service.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Fakhir Hussain was a reputed French scholar of Aesthetics and Philosophy. He was a practicing psychoanalyst too. He belonged to Lucknow. Dr. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, MBE, author of several books on Lucknow, has had close associations with him during his stay in London on account of her Lucknow projects (Hashmi, Ed.).

<sup>2</sup> Fakhir has written five books in Urdu: *Adab aur Adeeb*, *Rahsaaz*, *Fransvi Adab ke Aasar*, *Albert Camus*, and *Mazameen-e-Jamaliyat*. All books were published by *Nigarishat*, Lahore. His essays were published in Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi's *Funoon* (Lahore), and Prof. Muhammad Hasan's *Asari Adab* too (Hashmi, Ed.).

<sup>3</sup> 'Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture' was first published in 1975 by UNESCO. One of the reviewers of the 'Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies' hailed it as 'one of the most useful of the translations from Indian literature sponsored by UNESCO' (Hashmi, Ed.).