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### Reading Hyder in 2018: A Socio-Cultural Critique of Qurratulain Hyder's Short Story

#### "The Sound of Falling Leaves"

Abstract: On 21 August 2007, Qurratulain Hyder took her last breath, leaving behind a range of literary works that continue to keep her alive in the literary world. In 2018, almost eleven years after her death, Hyder continues to remain one of the most influential names in the world of Urdu literature and the social, political, cultural as well as the feminist issues highlighted by Hyder through her fictional narratives continue to remain prevalent even today in our contemporary society. With a vision that transcended time and a style that enriched the Urdu literary canon, Hyder and her work remain as contemporary as ever. Though most often remembered for her novels, particularly her magnum opus *Aag Ka Darya* (1959), Qurratulain Hyder is also regarded as one of the most celebrated short story writers of her time. This paper aims at presenting a socio-cultural critique of Hyder's short story "Patjhar ki Awaz", one of the most memorable creations of modern Urdu literature that brought forth a range of social and cultural issues through the first person narrative of its protagonist Tanvir Fatima. The paper aims at highlighting the contemporary relevance of this fictional account that foregrounds the invalidity of most claims of complete socio-cultural progression as most of the issues depicted in the short story continue to plague our contemporary society.

Keywords- Contemporary, Modernisation, Purdah, Partition, Woman.

The short story titled "Patjhar ki Awaz", translated into English as "The Sound of Falling Leaves" that gave the title to the Sahitya Akademi Award winning short story

collection by Qurratulain Hyder, is one of the most remarkable short stories penned by the author. Written in the first person narrative from the perspective of its woman protagonist, the story unfolds before the readers the changing scenarios in the life of a Muslim woman born in U.P., India, but now living in Lahore in the post partition era. In a frank and straightforward narrative, the protagonist recounts her life as she sees it now in the light of her own experiences and consciousness, bringing forth the various social and cultural issues that govern her life.

Hyder is widely credited for having been a stern critique of her contemporary society, particularly with regard to the changing cultural scenarios where traditions were rapidly fading away in the wake of modernity. The present short story “The Sound of Falling Leaves” also presents Hyder’s critique of the newly emerging society where the protagonist of the story finds herself lost within the changing socio-cultural contexts that portray a constant clash between tradition and modernity. The narrative also brings forth many social, feminist, political and cultural issues that remain prevalent in the contemporary society even today.

The story opens in the post-partition era in Pakistan, outside a small dark house in Lahore. It is here that an unknown woman narrator, in a first person narrative, begins to describe an unexpected meeting with an old friend. This brief encounter with an old acquaintance from her past life, throws the narrator’s mind back into a reverie of the past, and she begins to recount her life story, explaining her readers the circumstances that led to her present situation. Thus, while the physical setting of the story remains the same throughout, the narrator’s thoughts move back and forth in time and place, as she relates one event after another that moulded her life into its current shape.

At this initial point in the narrative, the narrator provides a short glimpse into her past life by describing this sudden appearance of an old friend whose name she could not recall. This past acquaintance was the same girl whose mother had first sent the narrator a marriage proposal for her son which had been turned down by the narrator’s parents. The narrator had now met her after twenty years and the fact that her eyes get filled with horror upon recognising the narrator hint the readers towards an unusual past to which the narrator belonged.

As also found in many other works by Qurratulain Hyder, this short story is also a fine example of the use of the stream of consciousness technique by the author. The first

person narrative closely reveals the various thought processes of the narrator as she relives in her mind the various turning points of her life that completely transformed her from what she once was, and what she once dreamt of becoming. The narrative thus unfolds before the readers not just the factual account of the narrator's life, but also unravels the emotional and psychological journey that the narrator had undergone during her lifetime.

Soon after describing her encounter with the old friend, the narrator begins to recount her life story with an introduction to herself. She reveals her name to be Tanvir Fatima, the daughter of a small zamindar in North India. Describing the social and cultural background, she recounts: "Our family observed strict purdah; I was kept in seclusion even from my cousins "(Hyder 5). In these very introductory lines recounted by the narrator regarding her life, Hyder highlights the social practise of 'purdah' and the seclusion and restrictions imposed upon the women by the purdah system.

The social and religious practise of purdah, which continues to remain prevalent in our contemporary society, usually occurs in the form of physical segregation of women from men or the requirement that women should cover their body completely. However, "in both cases [of spatial separation and veiling], women are expected to sacrifice their comfort and freedom to service the requirements of male sexuality: either to repress or to stimulate the male sex urge" (Brooks 24). Also, according to scholar Elizabeth White, purdah is "an accommodation to and a means of perpetuating the perceived differences between the sexes: the male being self-reliant and aggressive, the female weak, irresponsible, and in need of protection" (White 32).

However, in the contemporary times, instead of the word 'purdah', the word "Hijab" has become more popular among the younger section of the Muslim communities. In his article "Hijab and I", C.M. Naim, who also happens to be the English translator of much of Hyder's Urdu work including the story "Patjhar Ki Awaz", describes the evolution of the purdah system as witnessed by him during his early life in what is now the Uttar Pradesh, India. He writes:

The word 'Hijab' is relatively new for me. It was not a part of my vocabulary as I was growing up. I learned it much later, when I began to read literary and religious Urdu texts. ... The relevant word that I learned growing up was purdah. And I learned the word and its many meanings in the observed

practice of the various female members of my middle-class family in Bara Banki, a small town in north India. (Naim, "The Hijab and I" 1)

Tanvir's fictional childhood is also set by Hyder in close proximity to time and place described by Naim. Though, Tanvir, who is also brought up in U.P., India, during her narrative, does not criticise this purdah, her restricted childhood is later reflected upon by her to have been one of the many possible reasons that governed her personality and choices in life.

The narrative goes on as Tanvir continues with her story describing herself as a fortunate daughter who was given every opportunity of receiving the best education that could have been possible. She was sent to Delhi to matriculate and later to Aligarh for higher education. She again returned to Delhi to pursue her M.Sc. and it was during this time that much changed about her. Describing the socio-cultural scenario in Delhi during the 1940s, she recounts:

The war was going on, or perhaps it had just ended. I don't exactly remember. In any case, life in Delhi was in full swing in those days. All the college girls— daughters of rich businessmen and big shot civil service people—Hindu, Sikh, Muslim— were being whisked around in their father's limousines, from one social event to another. A play at Indraprastha College. A concert at Miranda House. A party at Chelmsford Club. Lady Irwin College... Lady Hardinge College... St. Stephen's College... Roshanara Club... Imperial Hotel... The Gymkhana Club. They were like settings from the Arabian Nights. And everywhere one ran into crowds of young men— unmarried military officers and civil service internees. Such fun! (Hyder 5-6)

In the above lines, Hyder paints a realistic portrait of the Delhi society that was rapidly modernising under the influence of the British colonial rule and had moved far from its traditional lifestyle. However, this rapid modernisation was also accompanied by a constant clash between the new and the old ways of life, particularly with regard to the conduct of women. As the narrator relates: "In those days, Delhi was buzzing with the tales of two 'loose' girls: how they were running around with men and making fools of their genteel parents " (Hyder 6). The adoption of the Western culture by the young girls could not gain acceptance by the society that was itself struggling to uphold its traditions in the wake of modernism. The narrator, who had also been brought up in a traditional atmosphere of Meerut and Aligarh, found it hard to accept the new form of life in Delhi. However, her own

narrative unfolds to describe the transformation of a young, well-educated girl who once felt “nervous” on hearing people talk of “loose girls” running around with men, into a woman who herself turns into one of them. She soon enters into an affair with a military officer named Khushwaqt Singh, gaining for herself the same reputation of a ‘loose’ girl from the same company of friends who had once warned her against that man.

The narrator’s relationship with Khushwaqt represented the newly emerging social order of the modern Delhi society of the 1940s. Khushwaqt, a dark and handsome Rajput man, belonged to this new socio-cultural landscape that greatly attracted Tanvir. It is with him that she is exposed to an entirely new world of freedom, adventure and luxury that she had never experienced before. It is this newly found freedom that attracts Tanvir closer and closer to Khushwaqt and she soon becomes his mistress. Her affair with Khushwaqt does not remain a secret and the narrator never even attempts to hide it. This proud and bold acceptance of her behaviour and conduct that is looked down upon by her friends is one of the chief characteristics of Tanvir’s character and a mark of her confidence as a woman who does not consider herself bound to obey the patriarchal societal norms. The clash between tradition and modernity is thus highlighted in the difference of opinions between Tanvir and her friends.

However, Tanvir’s relationship with Khushwaqt also brings forth other social, feminist and cultural issues existing in the society. As the narrator recounts: “Khushwaqt used to beat me up quite a bit; he also loved me more intensely than any man could have ever loved any woman” (Hyder 8). This statement strongly presents the author’s stern feminist critique of the fate of most girls. A girl might embrace her freedom and transgress the norms laid down by the patriarchal morality, but her quest for love ultimately takes her to a man who, although might love her, often views her as an object to be subjugated. In the present narrative, Khushwaqt ultimately proposes the narrator to marry her, and the latter’s denial leads to a violent fight in which Tanvir is severely beaten up by Khushwaqt who disappears from her life for some time.

Tanvir’s denial to marry Khushwaqt is chiefly based on the religious differences that existed between them. Hyder thus brings to light the tension that had long persisted between the Hindu and Muslim communities and their strong reluctance to enter into matrimonial bonds with one another. However, along with this socialist critique of the Indian society, Hyder also highlights through her narrator’s strong perspective, the greater necessity for a

woman to marry within her community. For a man, like Khushwaqt, it was easy to marry a girl belonging to another religion, but for a woman, like Tanvir, it was much more difficult to transgress her community norms. Besides, the narrator's ambitions and pride as a woman did not allow her to consent to such a marriage proposal. Her relationship with Khushwaqt however turns her into an object of condemnation among her friends and she is forced to lie to her parents regarding her injuries inflicted upon by Khushwaqt.

In an attempt to analyse her own condition and in order to vindicate her past choices, the narrator recounts the various reasons that appeared probable to her that led girls astray. She describes her reflections as follows:

I myself used to wonder: why do fairly reasonable, well-educated girls suddenly turn bad? One theory said, only the girls with low IQ turn bad, intelligent ones don't ruin themselves knowingly. But I have seen highly intelligent, super smart girls running around with men. A second theory proposed a host of reasons: excessive desire for fun, love of luxury, search for romance and adventure, sheer boredom, rebellion after a restricted childhood.... They must all be true. What other explanation can there be?  
(Hyder 10)

Although the above lines appear as the narrator's contemplations in general, but these lines perfectly encapsulate the essence of her own story, that is, the uncertainty as to what led her to become her present self; being at a loss to know as to whether it was the society or her own desires that guided her consciousness and choices in life. Through the example of Tanvir, Hyder thus presents the impact of the changing social and cultural scenarios on the young generation, particularly the young girls who find themselves caught between their traditional roles and modern desires.

The narrative soon introduces another character before the readers. After Khushwaqt Singh's departure both from Delhi and her life, the narrator goes on to recount her relationship with another man named Faruq, a man whom she had met as Khushwaqt's friend. With Faruq, an extremely rich middle-aged businessman, she enters Delhi's high society as his fiancé. Although Faruq was married, had children and was much older than her, their relationship was not considered wrong, both by religion and the society. Through her narrator, Hyder again presents a strong critique of the rapidly modernising high society, as Tanvir observes: "In any case, anything goes among the rich. It's only us, the middle class,

who insist on dos and don'ts" (Hyder 11). The narrative thus highlights the changing human values within the context of a new social order witnessed by the Indian subcontinent in the post-colonial era when the colonial rule was towards its end, but had managed to leave a deep impact upon the Indian society.

The narrator next recounts the changes imposed upon her life with the division of the country in 1947. With exclamations of horror and pity, the narrator continues her story as she experienced everything to have changed in a flash. Hyder thus presents a glimpse into the time that preceded and succeeded the Partition of the nation, with Tanvir describing the tumultuous conditions witnessed by her during that time. Also as found in other works by her, Hyder's chief concern always lay in the exploration of the psychological violence inflicted by the Partition. As C.M. Naim in the introduction to his translation of "Patjhar Ki Awaz" and two other novellas by Hyder (compiled as *A Season of Betrayals*) writes:

The days and months that preceded and followed August 1947—when the Indian subcontinent became free of colonial bonds—were filled with most horrific acts of physical violence.... It was also a time of other, equally rampant 'violences' that were not any less scarring for not being patently physical. These were violations of trust; they wounded and maimed the psyches of their victims, leaving the bodies intact. And their time—that season of betrayals—lasted longer than just several months. (Naim, "Introduction" vii)

In the present story as well, Tanvir does not suffer any physical violence during the Partition, but rather suffers a betrayal of her trust by Faruq. Due to the threat of communal violence, she is forced to leave for Pakistan and is settled in a small house in Lahore by Faruq who leaves her with the promise of visiting her from time to time. Although Faruq had been a very rich man, he leaves Tanvir with a refugee family in Lahore with a small income to live on and her life in the new nation is only subjected to solitude in the long periods of time spent in waiting for Faruq's arrival. Even though Faruq arranges a family to live with Tanvir, everything fails to compensate for the loss of trust suffered by her.

The alienation and feeling of exile suffered by those who were forced to relocate after Partition is reflected both in the life of Tanvir as well as the family with which Faruq settles her in Lahore. As the narrator Tanvir herself recounts: "The change in my life was sudden and drastic; it left me stunned. I just couldn't understand what had happened. One moment

there had been my gay and abundant life in undivided India, the next I found myself in a dark and dingy house in the Lahore of 48” (Hyder 12). However, with the passage of time as conditions gradually improve, the narrator also adapts to the new social and cultural atmosphere. But as time passes with no marriage proposal from Faruq and none expected by Tanvir, her relation with Faruq slowly fades away. It is during this time that she meets Viqar Khan, an old friend of Faruq whom she had met in Delhi.

The character of Sayyid Viqar Husain Khan presents another dimension of the social and cultural order of the time. He is described by the narrator as “one of a kind... [who] looked like a giant in a children’s book” (Hyder 14). In the undivided India, Viqar Khan ran a dancing school in Delhi. Being the son of a reputed family from Rampur, he had run away from home as a young boy. Working in circus, carnivals and touring theatres, he had travelled all over the world and had married all kinds of women. Having married the daughter of a Marwari moneylender in Calcutta, who was deeply devoted to him despite all odds, Viqar and his wife successfully managed a good living by attracting the elite in Delhi who never refrained from embracing any form of Western culture including dance forms. However, Viqar too had lost everything after the Partition and like Tanvir, had settled in Lahore in a small flat, reopening his dance school in the newly formed nation.

The description of the small flat in Lahore that had been allotted to Viqar Khan, highlights the cultural transformation brought about by the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. What belonged to a Hindu family was not just replaced by a Muslim owner, but the Western flavour of the Delhi society was also introduced to the comparatively conservative Lahore society. Describing the place, Tanvir narrates:

Before the Partition, the flat had housed a music school run by Arya Samaji Hindus: it had a nice hall with a wooden floor, two side rooms, a bathroom and a kitchen, a wooden balcony in the front and rickety stairs that led up to it. From the balcony dangled a sign: “Hindu Mata Sangeet Mahavidyalaya”. That sign was taken down and replaced by another; it said, “Viqar’s School of Ballroom and Tap Dancing”. Pictures of Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Frank Sinatra, Doris Day and others were cut out of American film magazines and pasted on the peeling walls of the hall. (Hyder 15)

Thus, Hyder brings forth the socio-cultural changes witnessed by the newly emerging societies formed after mass migrations and relocations enforced by the Partition.

However, at the point of time at which the narrator Tanvir is recounting her story, she is married to Viqar Khan who had left his previous wife and with whom she is now running the dance school in the same flat that is described above. Having turned down many opportunities of a successful career as a Chemistry teacher, Tanvir now finds herself unsure of what exactly had led her to become her present self. A young, well-educated girl from U.P. who had entered Delhi for higher education, now found herself in a small dark house in Lahore.

After having spent a life torn apart by the varied social and cultural transformations, Tanvir finds herself at a loss in deciding the factors that had governed the trajectory of her life. Regarding this, C.M. Naim, while describing Hyder's women protagonists (in "Patjhar Ki Awaz", *Sita Betrayed* and *The Housing Society*) writes: "... this uncertainty and not quite knowing what happened to them and why, is a feature common to these and several other female characters in Hyder's fiction." However, rather than being a weakness, it is more like a symbol of strength, as Naim goes on to describe: "Not that they are befuddled, unintelligent, or inert; rather, they seem unmoored, though not unnerved, by the cataclysmic events around them" (Naim, "Introduction" x).

The story thus ends on a note of uncertainty on the part of the narrator regarding her own life. The concluding section of the narrative conveys a deep sense of pathos and hollowness within her heart that somewhere lingered in the past. Although Tanvir now lived in a satisfactory condition with a man of her choice and with a comfortable income to support her, she could never relieve herself from the burden of her past experiences and memories that could never provide her the reasons for her present circumstances. Tanvir, who had once been an ambitious and confident girl who had boldly embraced a life of freedom and adventure in her youth, now finds herself weary of her life in an overwhelmingly transformed milieu.

The concluding lines of the narrative express the narrator's true state of agony as she confesses the deep sense of fear she experiences during the dark nights when she silently lays awake. Her thoughts wander back to Khushwaqt and her past life. The last line of the narrative in which the narrator calls out to Khushwaqt, is expressive of her agonised feelings that mourn the loss of her first love. The short story thus ends with this mournful call to Khushwaqt, conveying the narrator's deep sense of alienation within the familiar confinements of her domestic life. The title phrase "Patjhar Ki Awaz" or "The Sound of

Falling Leaves”, though not used by the author at any point during the narrative, may thus be interpreted in a metaphorical sense to refer to the haunting memories that torment the narrator, leaving her in a perpetual state of fear and unrest within her mind.

In the present short story, the narrator Tanvir Fatima, thus recounts her story before the readers that spans over her lifetime. Her childhood spent in Meerut, her time in Aligarh, her vivid experiences in Delhi of undivided India and her days being spent in Lahore of post partition era—all represent the changes imposed upon her life with the passage of time, which remains a recurrent theme in almost all of Hyder’s works. The need to accept and adapt to the changes brought about in the human lives by the faceless presence of time, is probably what most of Hyder’s fictional works including the narrative of Tanvir, attempt to convey. The following words by Professor Naim shed more light on this aspect of Hyder’s fictional works:

Though this inevitability of a change is our only permanent reality, Hyder persistently urges us to recognize that it has one face of gain and another of loss. A linearly progressing time brings about changes. Should we then take sides? Should we say that change is progress? Or should we say it is decline? Either, according to Hyder, would be simplistic and perilous, for such issues are not settled by a reference to the material world alone. What counts, for her, is the human spirit and the relationships it generates and nurtures. That is where the linearity of time seems to curve into a spiral, urging us to recognize a past that never quite disappears. (Naim, “Introduction” xix-xx)

Hyder thus emphasized this aspect of time in her fiction, and the present story, where the narrator Tanvir shares her life story, reliving the past within her mind, also highlights the impact of changing social and cultural scenarios that accompany the passage of time.

The narrative of Tanvir may also be regarded as belonging to the new style of writing that Hyder had introduced in the world of Urdu fiction that gained both acclaim as well as criticism from her contemporaries. As Sheela Reddy in her article on Hyder notes: “She [Hyder] introduced the “modern college girl factor into Urdu fiction”, as she once put it self-deprecatingly, earning for herself the memorable nickname of “Pom Pom Darling” ” (3). But despite her new style and creation of characters that did not exactly reflect the traditional forms, Hyder’s fictional works as well as her protagonists were always deeply realistic and convincing. Hyder’s protagonist in the present story is also an example of a young college

girl who embraces the modern ways of life which plays an important role in shaping her consciousness and decisions in life.

Although more than fifty years have passed since the short story “The Sound of Falling Leaves”, as a part of Hyder’s collection, received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967, the issues highlighted by Hyder through Tanvir’s narrative, continue to resonate in our contemporary society in some form or the other. The social and cultural issues like the practise of purdah, the Hindu-Muslim ties, the freedom of women and the clash between tradition and modernity that are highlighted through the short story still prevail in 2018, making the story relevant in the contemporary context as well. While the society continues to progress with the passage of time, the fictional narratives like those of Tanvir sketched by Qurratulain Hyder continue to demonstrate the impact of the changing socio-cultural values on human lives. The short story “The Sound of Falling Leaves” may thus be regarded as a classic work of modern Urdu fiction that presents a convincing portrayal of the human destinies caught within the changing dimensions of social and cultural contexts.

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