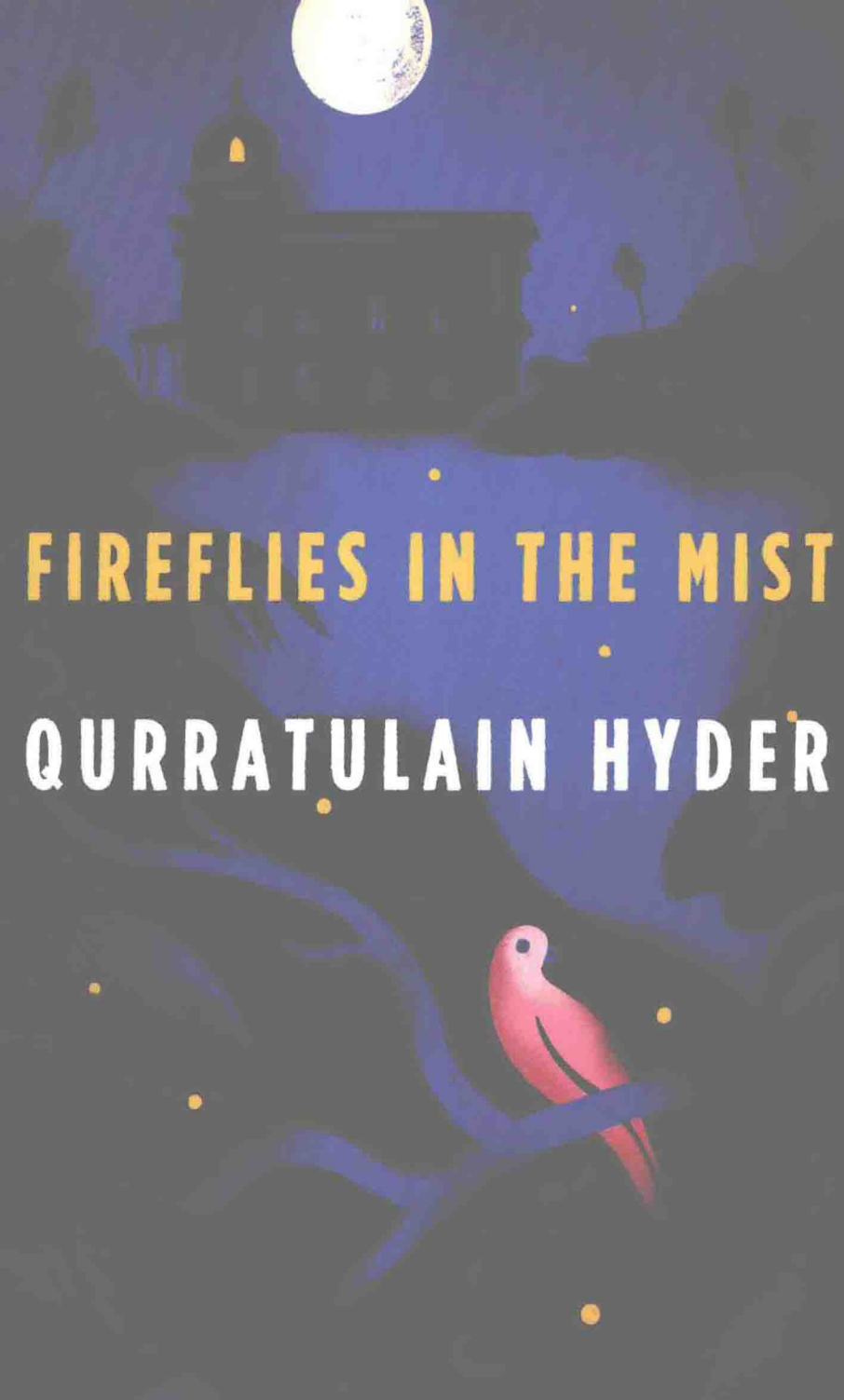
FIREFLIES IN THE MIST

QURRATULAIN HYDER



Qurratulain Hyder

Fireflies in the Mist

Translated from the original Urdu by the author

Introduction by
Aamer Hussein

A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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THAT LITTLE BIRD
REMEMBERING QURRATULAIN HYDER

"I am like that little bird which foolishly puts up its claws, hoping that it will stop the sky from falling."

1: ANNIE KHALA

In 1986, my sister rang to tell me that Qurratulain Hyder, along with some other Indian writers with whom she'd attended the Frankfurt Book Fair, would be reading at the Commonwealth Institute in London. Would I like to go along with her? She was our mother's friend, but we hadn't seen her for sixteen years; she might not even recognize us.

My mother called her Annie. I was the first among us to meet her, in 1968. I was thirteen. I didn't think that being a writer was that special—I'd met a few. Passing through Bombay on my way to school in Ooty, I'd been taken to visit her at her flat and, on learning that I was an inveterate reader, she arranged for copies of *Imprint*, the magazine for which she worked, to be sent all the way to the Nilgiris so that I could have my literary fix, since it published condensed versions of novels. (The novels I best remember reading in the journal were one by Aubrey Menen about the wives of Alexander of Macedonia—I think it was called *Conspiracy of Witches*—and *Rosemary's Baby*.) Then Annie Khala, as I called her, switched jobs. Issues of the *Illustrated Weekly* began to arrive. I remember the Ghalib issue, which she must have edited. My Urdu wasn't very good—once I'd started to study Hindi after my move to India, I'd forgotten most of the little Urdu I'd known—but to this day I can recall the excitement of reading, in English, about the life of this man whose words I'd been listening to and singing all my life, in the context of his troubled times. (I now have a beautiful little book which contains Qurratulain Hyder's writings about, and translations of, Ghalib.) Another issue had an extensive coverage of the life and times of the actor Balgandharva; it made me aware of indigenous theatrical traditions that I, who had only ever seen bits of the odd nautanki at the Gwalior fair, wouldn't even have guessed existed. (Indian theater is a constant motif in Hyder's fiction, and I am convinced she must have masterminded that issue.) Another focused on Balasaraswati, grande dame

of Bharatanatyam. So, in a way, she was my mentor at that time, even from a distance, connecting me, in English, to the sort of local vernacular traditions, high and low, that the urban bourgeoisie tended to marginalize or forget.

Then, in 1970, the time came for us to leave for London, and we were in Bombay again. Annie Khala invited my two sisters and me along with our mother to tea, and took us to a café nearby. That day, as we walked along the seafront, she talked about Nirad Chaudhuri's *Continent of Circe* and his theories of ancient India; I think she brought in Naipaul, too, of whom I'd never heard. Along with the erudition, the curiosity, and the resources of knowledge, were phrases from her vocabulary that I picked up: "male chauvinist pig," "LMC" (lower middle class was an aesthetic, not an economic, judgment with her); and there was the hospitality of the send-off she'd arranged for a friend's brood of teenaged children—so casual, and yet so thoughtful and warm.

I'd forgotten so much about my two years in India, but never her. I suppose she was, in one way, the kind of person I was used to: my Karachi milieu was full of women who worked in the arts, journalism, and the media, including at least one of her cousins. (In London in the early '50s, she'd worked for the *Telegraph*. Later, in Karachi, she had had a high position in the Ministry of Film and Information, and still later worked for the Pakistan High Commission in England.) But unlike most of them she was a single woman living on her own and entirely independent. Much later, I'd realize that leaving the relative affluence of her Pakistani life for well over a decade of near anonymity before she achieved true recognition in India, was the price she'd chosen to pay for literary freedom. She was, somehow, one of the most modern people I knew, not in the ultra-chic anglophone Karachi way we were familiar with, but in a manner all her own, which combined tradition and innovation in equal measure. Even at that early age I could see how strangely innovative it was of her to live in Bombay alone, without a family, far from her U.P. roots. At the time I first met her, she must have just received an award—the Sahitya Akademi—for *Patjhar ki Awaaz*, the collection of stories she'd recently published, and between 1966 and 1967, more than twenty chapters of her work in progress, *Aakhir-e-Shab ke Hamsafar* (a novel about East Bengal which would, in its final incarnation become *Fireflies in the Mist*), had appeared in the Urdu journal *Guftagu*.

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Over the years, my mother made regular trips to India to visit her mother and siblings, and would bring back news of Annie. My picture of the intellectual journalist gained new dimensions when I learned that her *Aag ka Dariya* was not only the most famous novel in Urdu, but that she was meant to have left Pakistan, where she'd lived and worked on and off for twelve years, soon after the book was released over some controversy connected with it. (Today it's said that as a civil servant she wasn't allowed to publish without permission; she did, and her book was seen to be overly critical of the regime and the raison d'etre of Pakistan.) Annie Khala herself would say, "*Arre nahin saab, aisi koi baat nahin thi. Bas chale gaye ham.* [No, nothing like that. I just left.]" My mother and she exchanged letters regularly. In 1980, my mother brought back a signed copy of *Aakhir-e-Shab ke Hamsafar,* which had been published a few months earlier. (I have that very copy beside me as I write this.) That, and *Kar-e-Jahan Daraaz Hai,* her two-volume memoir of her family—her parents were the pioneering Turcophile, Sajjad Hyder "Yildirim" and Nazar Sajjad Hyder, the most popular novelist of her time—silenced forever the people who'd thought that Hyder was a one-book wonder, and that Urdu in India was in its dying throes. I was studying Persian and Urdu then, and delighted to find an essay about her early work in an Italian textbook; but we weren't given any of her stories to read in our courses, though we read some by her older contemporaries: Manto, Krishan Chander, and Ismat Chughtai. My mother wanted me to read *Aakhir-e-Shab*, which I started but soon abandoned because I found its first few pages, with their meticulous description of an empty room, (oddly enough) too western and too unlike the robust progressives I was used to.

In 1981 my mother was in India again, but her mother died before she could see her, and for several years, six or seven, I think, she didn't go back. In the meantime, Annie Khala moved to Delhi, letters crossed, addresses were misplaced, and they were, for a couple of years at least, out of touch. Now, finally, after all these years, she was in London. My sister and I made our way to the CWI.

"The emaciated old man in the threadbare, shiny suit ..." The story Annie Khala read, in English, at the CWI was "Memories of an Indian Childhood." I had just begun to write myself, and it had everything I

looked for in a story about childhood: memory, music, something poignant, something elliptical. A little over a year later I wrote my "Little Tales," a story about children, inspired by "Memories." It was set in Karachi. Somehow, I'd learned more than I'd realized from her about the intimate connection between place, fiction, and memory. When it was published in 1990, Annie Khala wanted to translate it into Urdu, but it never happened: Fahmida Riaz got there before her. The last time I saw her, in early 2006, she said, with some regret, that it was one of those things she'd left undone. I pointed out the irony of her translating something that was so obviously influenced by her, because I'd written it as if her hand were guiding my pen. She blushed, smiled, but didn't make one of her usual self-deprecating and dismissive remarks. (That last time I met her was in a Delhi winter. I was on my way to Ajmer with my mother, who was trying to call her but found that the dialing codes for Noida had changed. At lunch with Githa Hariharan at the Jawaharlal Nehru University campus, I mentioned we hadn't been able to get through to her; Githa rang up Ritu Menon on her mobile and said, "Aamer Hussein is looking for his Annie Khala," and Ritu, who'd never met me, immediately rang back with the number. A day or two later Annie Khala sent her driver, Haldar, all the way from Noida to Friends Colony to pick us up and bring us to her. I went back to London and classes soon after that, but my mother saw a lot of her on that trip.)

Over the years, at least two other stories by Annie Khala would have a similar effect on me: "Exiles," that astonishing evocation of post-Partition expatriation, and "The Sound of Falling Leaves," with its laconic first-person account of a woman's existential crisis of bad faith and inauthenticity. I read both those in Urdu first; it wasn't till 1994, and *Fireflies*, that she would become and remain my favorite writer.

At the end of the reading my sister spoke to Annie Khala. "You won't recognize me," she said, "I'm ..."

"Of course I do," replied Annie Khala, "Shahrukh."

She'd been in her early forties when we last saw her; now she was nearly sixty. She hadn't changed a bit herself, but I certainly had: I was thirty-one, but she remembered me well. A few days later, when she'd spoken to Mother and met her as if the intervening five or six years counted for nothing, she brought over a few things and moved into

the guest room in my parents' flat. Life in Delhi, it was obvious, suited her more than Bombay had ever done. There wasn't going to be as long a gap between novels as there had with *Aag* and *Aakhir-e-Shab*. She'd been productive in the last few years and was working on what seemed to be a hugely ambitious polyphonic novel. In the mornings, dressed in neat western clothes and looking like any international postgraduate student, she'd take off for the India Office Library; in the evenings she'd come back and discuss her research, literature, the world. She must have been doing the final bits of research on *Gardish-i-Rang-i-Chaman*, because the next year, when she was back in London, she had an advance copy of the book and was giving public readings from it in libraries, community centers, the Urdu Markaz, and the School of Oriental and African Studies, where she was introduced by the then octogenarian Mulk Raj Anand. She created a furor in the Urdu literary community: when asked about *Aag ka Dariya* she'd display boredom and say, "Let's talk about today," and about her departure from Pakistan she'd respond that she left because she wanted to live in India, not because of any controversy. She stayed with us again, probably for a month, and this time she gave me a sheaf of her stories to read in translation: this was most of the manuscript that would become the English collection *The Street Singers of Lucknow*. I remember the picaresque magic of "Catherine Bolton," the surrealism of "St. Flora," the Gothic of "Pali Hill." (I realize now what I didn't then: the minute I started publishing, she treated me as a fellow-writer. No, as soon as she knew I wrote. Intellectually—on another level I'd always be a youngster, to be treated with indulgent affection. And my barrier of respect would never, ever be lowered.)

She had, she told us, just completed a translation of *Aakhir-e-Shab*. An editor at Cape had expressed an interest in it and, it seemed, one of the most powerful agents in town was going to represent her. She showed me only a part of the manuscript, a section entitled "Caledonia," which she said wasn't in the original Urdu edition, and it foregrounded the colonial connection between Britain and Bengal. Something went wrong and the book never appeared in England. I was writing professionally by then and frequented literary circles; I often discussed world literature and politics with her. I think she was here in 1988 again, and by that time Ismat Chughtai—in particular, for her

novel *Terhi Lakeer* and her novella *Dil ki Duniya*—had become my favorite South Asian writer. We had friendly arguments about that: Annie Khala preferred Manto's style.

The late '80s and early '90s were a prolific time for Annie Khala: *Chandni Begum* came out only three years after *Gardish*; and in 1989 she was awarded the Jnanpith. During the Gulf War she was in London and we would talk about the Muslim world, past, present, and future. The bombing of Iraq made her think of the fall of Baghdad, and then of Grenada, Istanbul and the Delhi of 1857 which she'd written about in *Gardish-i-Rang-i-Chaman*. History was an obsession with her; she saw time as a continuum.

Annie Khala's intellectual influence on me was growing. I began to research the modern Urdu short story in the late summer of that year of '91, with the idea of publishing an anthology of translations. I read more in a few months than many people do over three or four years of postgraduate research. We talked about what I might include, about the world of Urdu and Pakistani fiction which I was discovering like a child in the Simsim cave. We explored the possibility that I might translate one of her stories: she suggested "Makalma," a surreal dialogue between two Pakistanis, written in the '50s. Later she translated it herself as "Point, Counterpoint," but didn't give it to me for my book because she hadn't been a Pakistani writer for more than three decades. It must have been about then that I read her collection *Patjhar ki Awaaz*, which bowled me over and knocked me out, to put it crudely. (Annie Khala would enjoy this: she loved using slang when she spoke and wrote in English.) It had first appeared in the mid-'60s: how could people ever have said that after *Aag* she had written herself out? I hadn't read most of her novels then, so I couldn't have said with the same degree of conviction as I do now that the collection consists of some of her best and most representative work, including the short novel *Housing Society*, which is the greatest-ever evocation, in fiction or non-fiction, of upward mobility, shifting or assumed identity, financial scams, and political repression in post-independence Pakistan.

In 1991 or '92 I was commissioned to write an entry on her for *Contemporary Foreign Writers*. Little by her, beside a handful of stories, was available in English and it was then that I read her work in Urdu. Her use of first-person narration, in particular, changed my way of writing

in English. Her memoirs taught me more about the history of modern Urdu prose than any textbook and filled in the gaps in my knowledge of social history. Even when she avoided specific queries about her texts, she was very willing to answer my questions, and when I talked about one story would often lead me to another. We discussed genre and gender. She had never, she said, made a great distinction between long and short fiction: her stories had novelistic elements, particularly in their chronology, and her novels often framed short stories. Did I, she asked, believe there was a difference between male and female writers? Tentatively, I said I felt there was. Her response was quiet, reflective, and astonishingly simple: for a long time she hadn't thought about women's writing as a separate category, and then she'd realized that she saw the world as a woman and that that probably made her fiction different from her male contemporaries'.

One afternoon, she was sharing a platform with the redoubtable Gopichand Narang at SOAS. The Urdu establishment continued to be fascinated by whether she had or hadn't been the first to import the influence of Proust and Woolf and the techniques of modernism—streams of consciousness, interior monologue—into Urdu. None of that had much relevance to what she was doing now; technique was merely a vehicle for her ideas. She'd ceased to try to conceal her boredom at such questions, but Narang used updated terminology. Did you understand what he meant, she asked as we walked away from the lecture theater, by *pas-jadeed* and *sakhtiyat*? Postmodern and structuralism, I said, and she, who'd wanted to have a laugh with me about the pretentiousness of imported theoretical terminology, was instead mildly amused that I'd bothered to learn these arcane terms in Urdu. (It occurs to me now that critics, if they hadn't had recourse to French theorists, would have had to invent such terminology in order to deal with much of her work.)

Some years later, she'd tell me it was Elizabeth Bowen, not Virginia Woolf, who'd influenced her. Bloomsbury was an influence she had soon outgrown; as for Proust, well, in her introduction to her memoirs she actually refers to them as *gumshuda zamanon ki talaash*—a direct translation of Proust's original French title, *A la recherche du temps perdu*—so she may well have felt some affinity with his method and approach to memory. Then, in 1992, she published her translation of

Hasan Shah's eighteenth-century memoir, which she reclaimed as the first modern Indian novel. The text probably proved her point about gender, because one of the most compelling features of her translation, introduction, and notes to Hasan Shah's book is their foregrounding of the female protagonist, Khanum Jan's, voice and perspective. I wrote a long review of the book for the TLS; the second time, probably, that I had written about her. When I asked her to sign the book for me I addressed her, for the first time, as Annie Apa; many of her younger friends did, and at thirty-seven I was approaching middle age. She grimaced and said: "*Lo, ab main khala se apa ho gayi? Yeh bacche!* [So now I've become your sister? These children!]" The next time she phoned she said, "*Khala bol rahi hun tumhari.* [This is your aunt speaking.]" That was that. Henceforth all her messages, in Urdu and English, would be signed "Annie Khala," and I never referred to her as anything else. When I wrote about her work I kept a distance from our connection; in fact, I was more stern in my writing than I might have been with other writers I admired as much, if they'd been strangers. Sometimes I look at her handwriting below the crossed-out name on the title page and try to remember when—paradoxically, imperceptibly—the grande dame of Urdu literature and the witty, articulate, and hugely affectionate family friend, ceased to be two and became one person in my mind. It seems as if I'd always known that her public persona was only one dimension of this multifaceted woman, and that everything she was went into her writing, and all her writing, past and present, was there in her conversation and her presence.

2: FIREFLIES AND FELLOW-TRAVELERS

In 1994, I was commissioned by the TLS to review *Fireflies in the Mist*. That "lost" translation of *Aakhir-e-Shab* had finally surfaced. I read it, entranced. Though it had many of the features of her stories there were, of course, significant differences: the complex intricacy of its structure, the long poetic passages that punctuate the crisscrossing narratives that are both taut and sprawling, the huge canvas, the sheer ambition of the work. What also remains from that first reading is the brilliance of some of the English prose. Some readers have found that her writing in English isn't that of a native speaker and doesn't quite

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match up to the fluency of the Seths and the Roys; it is valuable only because it conveys the content of her writing to readers denied access to her native language. In tandem, many admirers of her Urdu claim that the author has made changes to the extent that her English versions are reworkings rather than translations. Does she or any writer (e.g., Nabokov) have the right to edit her or his own texts? And if she does, is it more acute if a linguistic bridge is being crossed, and what are the contingent implications for translators?

Two of her best works, *The Sound of Falling Leaves* and *Housing Society*, had been translated by others, but she'd done "Memories of an Indian Childhood" and "Exiles" herself and proved that, had she wanted to, she could have beaten many of the Anglophones at their game. Even if you didn't like her use of the language, you had to admit that as far as dissecting subcontinental modernity went, Hyder was light-years ahead of her contemporaries in any South Asian language at the time. "Exiles," published in book form in the early '50s in Pakistan, prompted the visiting J. T. Farrell to say: "At that age if she had appeared in a major western language, she would have won greater acclaim than Françoise Sagan," which made people in Karachi call her, quite mistakenly, the local Françoise Sagan for a while.

Fireflies in the Mist had new lessons for the writer who was trying to capture landscape—its short, sharp, lyrical fragments, evocative of Kalidasa, could switch from celebration to lament in the space of a few beats. Harvest superimposed itself on drought, drought on harvest. I had spent the winter of 1993, just after publishing my own first collection, in Dhaka, and that, of course, affected my reading of the Hyder text; I could see Dhaka as I read, and the voices of Bangladeshi friends and acquaintances echoed much of what she had written about the East Pakistan years and the creation of Bangladesh.

I was hugely impressed by the range and scope of the novel, and realized that there are, after all, things a novelist can do in one book that aren't really possible, except in miniature, in a short story. (The splendid "Exiles" remains a structural and stylistic precursor of Hyder's major novels.) What I also remember about that first reading is the power of the book's seeming randomness and its set pieces: the long evocations of the East Bengali landscape, of folk and classical poetry, and lengthy episodes that focused on a peripheral character, the expatriate

Yasmin Belmont. Reading it again, and looking at the review I wrote then, I find my views have changed little; *Fireflies* is still one of my favorite Hyder books, but coming to it now, all these years later and after reading so many other works by her, I see a continuity: how consistent her worldview is, and yet how varied her style within the political and philosophical frameworks she constructs. As in *My Temples, Too* and "Exiles," she brings together a group of idealistic intellectuals against the background of a changing world, and then switches the backdrop with such dexterity that it takes her characters—and the reader—time to realize that they have suddenly been placed by the scene-changer on a set they didn't even know existed. In this respect, at least, Hyder's vision is remarkably close to that of the Marxist Faiz; in fact, she took the title of the Urdu version from a verse in one of his famous ghazals that casts light not only on *Fireflies*, but on her entire oeuvre until that point:

Aakhir-e-shab ke hamsafar, Faiz, na jaane kya hue
Reh gayi kis jagah saba subah kidhar nikal gayi

(Those fellow-travelers of the night's last hours, Faiz—Who knows what became of them? / Where did they leave the morning breeze, what direction did the dawn take?)

Hyder was later to be accused of pessimism, for this novel in particular. But her project is evident in her first novel, and reiterated at various points in her work. A and B, the talking heads of "Point, Counterpoint" say, at one point of their abstract, surreal dialogue: "We are the culprits because we allowed our dreams to be lost." And Hyder herself, in her introduction to *The Sound of Falling Leaves*, the collection she published the year after *Fireflies*, writes: "Humanism has failed. Still, one must not despair, must not give up the fight."

In several of Hyder's works, an idealistic but very slightly doubtful heroine is left clinging to the wreckage of her hopes—the firefly illusion—while her companions (mostly male) are either martyred or join the oppressive system of capital and exploitation. Often, too, a vulnerable woman, sometimes a poet or a painter, allows men to exploit her—indeed, occasionally feels she is exploiting them—before she undoes herself or merely fades into anonymity. *Fireflies* retains these features,

but imbues them with a tragic darkness that is perhaps more suffocating here than in any other of her works, with only the faint gleam of hope that the English title suggests, at a remote and future distance.

Urdu critic Neelam Farzana, in her wide-ranging study of Hyder's major fictions, sees the remarkable continuity of Hyder's vision in her work, but maintains that *Fireflies* is more plot driven and, in spite of its constantly shifting points of view, a more cohesive narrative than her earlier fiction. I would argue that *Sita Haran* and *Housing Society*, though they are of course much shorter, are at least as cohesive; but I do agree that *Fireflies* is more accessible than the early Hyder works because the author has, to a large extent, learned to dramatize her philosophical and political concerns in the service of a taut, sinewy narrative mode. There is also a careful tying up of loose ends at the novel's conclusion, which may seem to some to hark back to nineteenth-century English models but actually has more in common with early Urdu novels such as *Umrao Jan Ada* and, indeed, those of her own mother. It also has, in fact, in its use of masks, disguises, and gradual revelations of identity, similarities to the traditional dastan, a genre from which Hyder, with her disdain for spurious exoticism, usually distanced herself, except in the use of its tropes as pastiche in some of her fictions. Whether this similarity is intentional or not is up to the reader to decide, but I find it endlessly tempting to speculate that she quite consciously and deliberately adapted techniques from our indigenous brand of magic realism to her own subversive postmodernist purpose. (It helps to remember that a mere eight years later Hyder was to publish *Gardish-i-Rang-i-Chaman*, with its princesses and courtesans and its painstaking reconstruction of 1857 and its aftermath, part of which is set at the very moment when the dastan would be rendered obsolete, and the bourgeois novel introduced under the auspices of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's reformist disciples.)

Another major departure for Hyder is, of course, the very different geography of the novel: whereas in her stories Hyder ranged far and wide, her novels tended to focus on her native U.P. and on Pakistan, very often using the diaspora of 1947 and after as a deliberate ellipse in the narrative to signal the rupture caused by Partition in her characters' lives. *Fireflies* is almost entirely located in a territory (today's Bangladesh) scarcely mapped by Anglophone fiction. (Hyder had written

about what was then East Pakistan before, in the playful "Tea Gardens of Sylhet," but that relatively slight work, though it does in Hyder's characteristic manner juxtapose the private and public spheres—continuing cross-border migration in Bengal and Assam—doesn't aspire to the range of the later work.) Ambitious, subtle and intricately structured, *Fireflies* spans nearly four decades from 1939 to 1979; its memories occasionally flash even further back, reliving East Bengal's history from a multiplicity of perspectives. Hyder's many characters witness the uprising of 1857, the dawn of nationalism, the partition of India and the creation of the two Pakistans, and the restless aftermath of the bloody struggle for an independent Bangladesh. While I was writing the early part of this piece, I discussed the novel with the writer Ananya Jahanara Kabir, who is a Bengali Muslim with familial roots in Faridpur. There had been, I said, some criticism of Hyder for venturing away from her familiar terrain of Awadh (and Karachi) into a land she knew less well. Was this justified? And were her aristocratic Bengalis perhaps too close to her U.P. aristocrats, in their effortless use of Urdu and their frequent recourse to the words of Amir Khusrau along with those of Lalan Shah and Nazrul?

"I was astonished at the accuracy of her portrayal," Ananya responded immediately by e-mail. "The Bengali Muslims were really close to home, really authentic. And that amount of Urdu was inevitable at the time."

Fireflies can be interpreted as another chapter in Hyder's epic history of the Muslim presence in the subcontinent, and particularly in the era of the Raj. *My Temples, Too* chronicles Awadh; *River of Fire* and more than a couple of the novellas and stories take us to newfound Pakistan and, to quote Faiz again, the "stained light, the night-bitten dawn" of post-Partition; *Fireflies* adds the saga of East Pakistan and Bangladesh (ironically, history overtook Hyder while she was writing the novel, which bravely articulates the rupture in its architecture). But the Muslim narrative of *Fireflies*, though crucial to its weave, is merely one among many. Never bound to a single ideology or perspective, Hyder articulates one viewpoint only to contradict it in another voice. Colonial officers, native Christians, feminists, fishermen, artists, the victor, the vanquished, the exiled, and the dispossessed, all take the platform to recount their stories, or to be represented, in a collage composed

of omniscient third-person narration, letters, diary entries, extended exchanges of dialogue, dream-sequences, interior monologue, bone-spare chronicle, and oral history. Lyrical descriptions of East Bengal's landscape in snatches of folk poetry are echoed by Hyder's own prose, which combines sound and vision: "Farmers have put on their conical straw hats as they stand in knee-deep water, planting rice ... The fishermen's nets are filled with a silvery haul ... Famine stalks the land. Allah, give us rain ... Allah ... Allah."

At the shifting center of this many-centered novel stand Deepali Sarkar, a young Hindu attracted to the extreme left wing of the nationalist movement, and Rehan Ahmed, a Muslim radical of Marxist inclinations who introduces her to the life of the rural deprived. Their common political engagement draws them into a quietly doomed love affair. Through their relationship, Hyder explores the growth of tension between Bengal's Hindus and Muslims, who had once shared a culture and a history. The secular Rehan dispassionately senses the need for a separate Muslim homeland, though not with the same vigor as his aging aristocratic uncle who voices the pro-Pakistan ideology of the Muslim League to Deepali, with conviction. Both, however, lay claim to the syncretism of Bengali culture by articulating the enormous, and unacknowledged, contribution made to it by Muslims: Sufis, poets, musicians. What may have been interpreted as a special plea for the case of the East Bengali Muslim is deftly subverted, however, by Hyder's use of Deepali's sceptical Kayastha perspective.

Like a hero from a dastan, Rehan is not quite what he seems: he is, we discover, linked through his mother to the aristocratic world he despises; after the massacre of his relatives during the war for Bangladesh, he returns to take his place as the rightful heir to the family's fortune. Here dark fable combines with critical realism in a metaphor of postnational compromise; for *Fireflies in the Mist* is a postnationalist epic that details the fervors of nationalist ideologies only to dissolve them in interlocking litanies of lost homes, blighted destinies, and bitter civil wars. Deepali resigns herself to an expatriate married life in the Caribbean after Partition. Richard Barlow, a staunch imperialist, never ceases to long for an India lost to him; his son turns to diluted Oriental spiritualism. Yasmin Majid, an emblematic diasporic character of the sort that Bharati Mukherjee would later write about,

leaves her strict Muslim background in search of love and art in Europe. Abandoned by her homosexual English husband, she drifts from job to degrading job, only to find herself shunned by her erstwhile compatriots when Pakistan changes shape in 1971. She writes of her double dispossession: "Going back to Hamburg. Now the river and the sea meet the ice. I tremble like a low-down bitch ... My heart is the Harlot's Alley of Sonagachi. My wishes and regrets, all garishly made up, stand against the dirty walls, hoping that the next man may bring salvation. All doors are locked." Dying, she longs for the solace of Muslim prayer. But posthumous consolation will come in another shape: Yasmin's recognition as a great Bengali artist. Hyder neatly ties up ends by having Yasmin's diary delivered to Deepali; this will ultimately be the reason for the latter's visit home. (Homecomings, of course, don't really happen in Hyder's universe: the past, as L. P. Hartley said, is a foreign country.) The tying up is too neat, perhaps, but plausible within the economy of Hyder's fiction; it's worth remembering that this great and epic novel with its realistic surface texture is also, with its voyages and crossings and discoveries, its lost loves and recovered identities, the closest thing we have to a modern dastan.

Rehan defects, yes. But on second reading, situated as we are in the cynical postnationalist world of the twenty-first century, his defection doesn't seem so terrible. In the short span between the establishment of Bangladesh as an independent nation-state and Deepali's first visit to her homeland, corruption is rife and identities once again in flux and in question. But the heritage of a lost generation is revived in Rehan's niece, Nadira, who kills a man in 1971 and is left traumatized by the senseless rape and carnage of war, but remains committed to the struggle for justice. "History," Hyder writes, "is another name for humanity's inability to learn its lesson."

3: AN EMIGRANT AND GYPSY OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

"Who is Pramoedya Ananta Toer?" Annie Khala asked me. "Some Sri Lankan writer?"

Writing about *Fireflies* I'd mentioned the Indonesian novelist's name in connection with hers, as a writer from Asia in the front rank of that

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