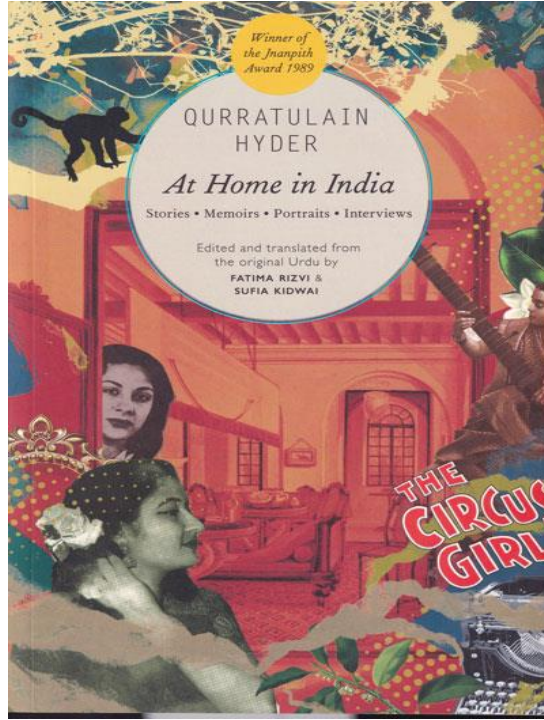


**Qurratulain Hyder. 2024. *At Home in India: Stories. Memoirs. Portraits. Interviews.* Trans. Fatima Rizvi & Sufia Kidwai. New Delhi: Women Unlimited. 2023, 438 pp. ISBN:978-93-85606-44-1**



Qurratulain Hyder (1927–2007), born in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, is one of the most celebrated Urdu fiction writers. A fearless writer, she defined much of the art of the novel in its very incipient stages in Urdu literature. She remains one of the most original and forceful voices of Urdu fiction, ushering in new perspectives and style. Hyder wrote twelve novels and novellas, four collections of short stories, and did a significant amount of translation of classics. *Aag Ka Darya* (River of Fire), her magnum opus, is a unique novel that takes an expansive view of time and history. She received the Jnanpith Award in 1989 for her novel *Aakhir-e-Shab ke Hamsafar* (Travellers unto the Night). Additionally, she received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967, Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1969, Ghalib Award in 1985, and was given the title of Padma Shri (Order of the Lotus) by the Government of India for her outstanding contribution to Urdu literature.

Despite her notable contributions, there is an acute dearth of translations of her significant literary works, especially in English. Except for her self-translated works, the scenario has been bleak. *At Home in India: Stories. Memoirs.*

*Portraits. Interviews* offers a comprehensive selection of Hyder's works in translation, thereby filling up the vacuum in the literary landscape. While her novels have enjoyed a wide readership, her untranslated non-fiction have for long been inaccessible to the English readership. This particular selection of her non-fiction works in translation offers to address that lacuna.

As the title of the book suggests, *At Home in India: Stories. Memoirs. Portraits. Interviews* is a beautiful collage. The editors and translators Fatima Rizvi and Sufia Kidwai have offered a delightful diversity in choosing the different genres that represent Hyder's craft and her persona as the artist, writer, journalist, and broadcaster. They admit that such a selection was a challenging task owing to the sheer volume and variety of Hyder's creative oeuvre.

The collection includes six short stories that have women at the heart of the narrative, caught in the tragic nexus of life. The stories have a poetic intensity and a surreal quality almost reminiscent of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. They bring out the aspects of loss, betrayal, alienation, banishment, and estrangement. The technique of storytelling is unique to each story and there is an unmistakable twist in the narrative pattern. The stories lay a sensitive finger on the pulse of human emotions. And there is a heart wrenching quality to Hyder's understated yet subtle and masterful depiction of the human condition.

The memoirs of Hyder take the reader back in time to witness the lives of her family, friends, relatives, and near and dear ones. The "Memories of an Indian Childhood" and "The Magic Mountain" are redolent with childhood experiences. The gardens and the ripe opulence of fruit laden trees are reminiscent of Charles Lamb's descriptions of the idyllic gardenscape in "The Dream Children." They capture a world of innocence that is inevitably lost in time. The more ambitious pieces translated from *Kar-e Jaban* (*As the World Turns*) document "her life and times." Hyder calls *Kar-e Jaban* a "bibliographical non-fiction novel" as reality for her is far more intriguing and engaging than fiction. It offers the reader a close view of her extensive and illustrious family and a nation dealing with the fissures of Partition. This three-volume family saga begins in 740 in Tajikistan and concludes in the year 2002 in Delhi, zooming across nations, cities, and cultures. Volume I narrates the story of her family from 740 to 1947. Volume II records the lives of her own and her now Pakistani relatives from 1948 to 1978. A third volume promised to capture the stories of India, from 1962 till date, of her relatives, friends, and those who showered their love and affection on her. The ambitious montage of memory and sensibility is perhaps unmatched in terms of scale and treatment. However, the reader tends to get lost in the maze of names and relations, therefore losing grip over the narrative. Hyder assumes a narrative stance as she records her family saga "like a

medieval historian, a writer of Sufi history, a writer recapitulating the events of a durbar, a feudal story-teller, a Victorian novelist, a political columnist, in the garb of an Urdu story teller.” *Kar-e Jahan* is a striking ode to memory.

Fatima Rizvi in the “Introduction” talks about a ‘khaka’ or pen portrait as a non-fictional literary genre that developed more or less alongside the novel. It is an “honest” portrayal of an individual known to the writer personally, socially, or professionally. Since khakas are subjective delineations, they carry an imprint of the writer’s personality and perception. However, Rizvi observes that while Hyder has written many khakas, they have not been translated, except for the solitary one on Ismat Chughtai. The six portraits in this volume throw light on a diverse milieu of acclaimed women, from actors, political activists, and social workers to women writers. Hyder offers interesting insights into their work, life, and times.

The two interviews throw light upon Hyder’s literary leanings and her love for music, both being generational. The interviewers Akhlaq Mohammad Khan aka Shahryar and Abul Kalam Qasmi take us through the different stages of her writing career and the myriad nuances of her craft. The interview compiled by Abul Kalam Qasmi provides a rare insight into Hyder’s confessions as an artist. The experimentations with style and technique, their subsequent evolution and the unchanging patterns that make her writings iconic, character sketches, the incorporation of the stream of consciousness technique to the romantic sensibilities in her writings, are all explored through the course of the interview. The privilege of being born into an illustrious family and the exposure to the various groups of writers acquainted her with litterateurs, young and old. Therefore, writing came naturally to her since her childhood days. She talks about being branded as “an upper crust writer” and about literature being a philosophy that in itself is a contemplation of the human condition, both real and imagined. The second interview with Jameel Akhtar traces the influence of music on Hyder’s family and subsequently on Hyder herself. Music becomes transgressive when her mother starts learning music at home, since at that time singing and music were a taboo in respectable homes. Hyder reflects on her musical journey at Banaras Hindu University where she did a formal course in classical music and the music school in Baker Street, London.

Translating the essence, stylistics, and syntactical patterns of Urdu into English is no mean feat. Both Rizvi and Kidwai have been able to transfer the sense as well as the essence of the Urdu language in their translations. The extensive footnotes act as important reference points to Hyder’s dense social, political, familial, and literary allusions. This collection promises to curate the best

of her writings while giving the reader a chance to indulge in the complex, multifarious, and sophisticated literary world of Qurratulain Hyder.

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