



## **Narrating the Female: Reading gender in the short stories of Qurratulain Hyder**

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### **Abstract**

The female narrates life differently. Her experiences are different, her language is different, and her stories are different. The French Feminists have established that there is a direct relation between the language that women used and the identity that they carry. It means that the language of the male and the female are different. The language of the male exhibits power, authority, and dominance, whereas the language of female is of sympathy, relationship, and peace. When a female narrates her experiences, her stories become different because her language is different her experiences are different.

In this paper I have attempted to understand the female experience as narrated by Qurratulain Hyder in her short stories. My focus will be on the narrative techniques and language, and their relationship with the female experiences. For the purpose of this paper I have selected three stories 'The Exiles', 'Honour', and 'The Sound of Falling Leaves'.

**Keywords:** exile, alienation, female sufferings, Honour, internal conflict and mental agonies

### **Introduction**

"I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femaleness and my femininity. And I want to be respected in all of my femaleness because I deserve to be."

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi, *We Should Be All Feminists*

Females have always been trapped in the patriarchal society and they were discriminated against therefore, the female narrates her stories of life in a different way. The French Feminists have established that there is a direct relation between the language that women used and the identity that they carry. It means that the language of the male and the female are different. The language of the man displayed dominance. But the language of the female is very kind towards man. When a female narrates her experiences, her stories become different because her language and her experiences are different. The French feminist Helen Cixous emphasized the significance of *écriture féminine*. By *écriture* she means that the female has to write her experiences to let the world know the real experiences that the female encounters, suffers, and undergoes in this life. Until and unless the woman acquires the language to tell her story, she would not be able to get freedom from the male domination. This way the French feminists presented a very different idea to fight against the patriarchy.

This paper explores the female experience in Qurratulain Hyder's short stories. My focus will be on the narrative techniques and language, and their relationship with the female experiences. Qurratulain Hyder in her writings has given voice to the unknown experiences of the female sufferings and miseries in the Indian situation. In her writings she has explored the complex cultural traditions and practices which helped the male to control the female. Qurratulain Hyder has written so many novels and short stories to narrate the female experiences, especially the female in the context of Awadhi Culture. In this paper I have taken up a few stories to argue that Qurratulain Hyder as a short story writer has very sensitively and effectively portrayed the female life of sorrows and sufferings in

dominant patriarchal system. One such story is "Honour" in which the female protagonist, Shamshad Beghum suffers just because she is a female. When she was young her property was controlled by the male cousin who does not let her use the resources for her good life. In spite of inheriting a lot of property she ultimately has to work as a family servant. As if this was not enough, when she was old enough she was taken away by another female relative to Bombay, to work in a place where she had to look after the home of a lady who is actually in the flesh trade. Thus we find that female in her life moves from one place to another but her problems never come to an end because of the patriarchal system. Qurratulain Hyder has narrated such stories by giving voice to the marginalized women in her short stories.

Hyder was experimental in every piece of her writing. History appears to be a source of great sorrow and longing. 'The Exiles (1953)' in this respect becomes a beautiful example in which we find the painful consequences of partition, feeling of exodus and exile, struggle of the human mind, cultural and moral degradation of higher society, hollowness of socio-political values, issues of class difference, aspirations for better life, tyranny of time and its secrets, fraternity, feeling of colour and creed, religion and nationality and so on.

Hyder's 'The Exiles' is a truthful portrayal of the plight of women in society. The story may be read on several grounds. At first it appears to be a love story full of disturbances secondly it presents the condition of Indian women moreover, it is also a study of feminism full of Indian culture and life style. At some extent the story appears to be ordinary but it has deep penetrations. The central characters that are of our concern are Kamal Kumari and Kishwari and it is important to note that both of them are very conscious and complete in themselves. There exists love between Kamal Kumari and Dr. Aftab Rai but it breaks due to the hammers of social bigotries. Being an educated and modern lady she was very clear in all her affairs but it was Dr. Aftab Rai who runs away because of his very

doubtful personality as he really does not know "the meaningfulness of existence"(27). When Aftab Rai left for London, eventually she had to get married with Jagan Nath Jain, ICS. She fitted herself well in this popularizing setting. Being the wife of an ICS she has to engage herself with social activities like party, club, debates etc. On one such occasion she faces a good number of silly questions because "She was simply attired, almost like a Man. No jewellery. No nothing nor even bangles. Bodded hair, Plain georgette Sari, Sleeveless blouse. And no nose flower adorned her right nostril". (26)

As we turn the pages we came to know that when Aftab Rai came to know about the marriage of Kamal Kumari through Mahipal he immediately puts forth a view that "the female tribe is an abominable tribe".(29)

Contrary to this Kamal Kumari could not forget him and feels exiled from her very self. She feels destroyed and wishes to die. Basically it is a reflection of female emotions and aspirations of having the right to expect something more from life than she has got and how she is controlled and manipulated. Hyder through Kamal Kumari demands a niche which is equal to man in the society. Kamal is a new woman who instead of security, comfort and respectability wants her emotional and spiritual needs to be recognized. So much is conveyed through these words: "Do you happen to know what kind of exile I am ? I have been banished to live in the cocktail circuit" (51). This is very similar to the views formulated by Anees Jung who many years later voices the same concerns.

"My reality no longer has one face. I have stepped out of an enclosed reality into one that is larger, more diverse, and mobile... I continue to live out an experience for which I have yet to find a name. (18)"

Unlike Kamal Kumari, Kishwari too suffers a lot on gender basis. Her journey starts by taking birth into a Zamindar family where she got her early education. She was a modern girl 'know the latest fashion' a 'forward-looking young woman'.. fond of reading (37). She was promised to get married to Aizaz Mian, an over blown personality which could not happen as she was not at all interested in getting married to him. She even plans to refuse him if forced to do so at the time of Nikah. As we turn the pages we came to know that she was engaged with Capt. Asghar and it was this proposal which brings for her the greater opportunity to get higher education. She was sent to Lucknow where she became an activist and joined the Muslim league. She was seen everywhere "...Badminton tournament Debates Activities of the Muslim Student Federation".

The story is set in the turbulent time of Indian freedom struggle and partition, which shattered the life of all Indians. Kishwari was one of them who took the decision to stay in India even when all her brothers and relatives migrated to Pakistan except her father. Her agricultural lands were taken up by tenant farmers and Asghar Abbas could not send money which resulted in financial deterioration. She started looking for a job but she could not get any because it was assumed: that "She was staying back because of some personal problem. The moment you get a chance, you'll also migrate" (46). Eventually she tried for a scholarship and got a stipend from British Council when she was on her way she got the news of her father's death. Upon hearing this news, she remains numb and is not able to express her grief

through tears. She decides to go to the cathedral where "once she saw a pale Hungarian girl who sat there motionless, rosary in her hand, lost in deep prayer" (52) she paints a portrait entitling it 'Escape from Freedom'. She again decided to make some more portrayals of "the exiles faces of despair and hope."(52) Kishwari is right in the context that there are certain feelings which cannot be expressed through words or colour.

With the social and cultural changes in the post independent India she finds herself standing at the crossroads. The consciousness of a changed time on one hand and the socio-cultural modes and values that has given her a defined role towards herself on the other hand, had led to the fragmentation of the very psyche of Kishwari. The story ends with a hope: "Our exile will be over, we have before us today's dawn, the future that the new creation of the entire world". This concluding line is suggestive of the 'becoming woman space of Inter-subjectivity". a space of destructed desire where the world is constructed on the grounds of reducing binary opposition (Man/woman, Hindu/Muslim, Colonizer/Colonized) which should be opposed relinquished and eventually made immaterial" (Orlando, 6-7).

Qurratul-ain-Hyder's 'The Sound of Falling Leaves' is a truthful portrayal of the plight of women in the society and their strenuous struggle to be recognized as a human being in male – dominated society. Life for a deserted woman Tanveer Fatima in Hyder's 'The Sound of Falling Leaves' offers no choice except endless sufferings. Like other women she too yearns for happiness, pleasure and a life free from all shackles and hindrances. For in her memories what stands treasured are the bickering, beating crises of depression humiliation and frustration.

Tanveer Fatima belongs to Meerut a small city in U.P. she grew up in a Zamindar family where Purdah was strictly followed and girls are kept secluded even from their cousins. But being the only daughter of her family she was the darling of her parents so she got education at Aligarh and Delhi. There (in Delhi) she met with Major Kushwaqt Singh who was a Chauhan Rajpoot. Gradually their meetings turn into a love affair.

It ruthlessly unmasks the dual standards of morality in society in respect of man-woman relationship the passive submissive role of a woman in man-woman relationship and the vindictive attitude of a woman in prolonging the suffering and ignoring of another woman by a male. Same thing happens with Tanveer when she went with Kushwaqt on a trip to Ooty, Kushwaqt and she had a big-fight and he "hit me till my face was bloodied and my arms and legs were left with dark bruises"(73) because of an Indian Christian girl who somehow manages to make him promise marriage. After that he pleaded with her and proposed her for marriage but she refuses. In the later part of the story we came to know that Tanveer becomes a mistress of Faruq. She was forced to leave for Pakistan by Faruq who promised to meet her later. In the early year Faruq visited her five-six times in a year but later on his visits becomes quite infrequent. So she was left with no other choice but to join a job as a teacher then she had to get married with Viqar Hussain Khan, an already married and an aged man because "Marriage provides a roof over girls head".(81)

This is an irony of Hyder's heroines that they pass through a transitional phase where they break through traditional norms onto a new path yet they fumble and turn back in anguish. In reality their boldness ends there and they lack

the courage to break through the patriarchal mould Tanveer is one of them who are unable to take their own decisions and other heroines of Hyder display the destiny of the educated Indian women. The emancipation of woman has taken place and things have changed drastically since yester – years but have they really?

She has given us these heroines who are representative of the so called emancipated educated Indian women in post-independent India. She has also shown the trauma of the partition on families, personal relationships and the females in particular who are caught in the throes of heart and head. Hyder has given them the courage to break the societal mould yet somewhere or the other the innate timidity of the female either makes her draw back, or compromise with the circumstances. Hyder has created a new type of female protagonist who tries to do things in a different manner yet ends up confused, bewildered and hopeless at times. What the writer is trying to display is that somewhere or the other the woman has to make choice due to various circumstances. The narration is a mixed bag of contradictions we have the females swinging between hope and hopelessness, love and hatred, freedom and repulsion. Thus the trauma special ly of the muslim women is depicted with great authenticity by Qurratulain Hyder in all hers writings and specially the three stories discussed in this paper. Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when we are debating on issues such as ‘Triple Talak’ and ‘Me Too’ and the rights of women to control their destiny it is pertinent to see that Hyder had displayed a boldness of approach so many years back but was curtailed by the social norms prevalent at that time that maybe forced her heroines to fall back on solutions that would toe the social criteria. May be if these stories had been written in the present scenario their ending might have been different and the narratives stronger as the present day female is much more independent than her older counterpart. Yet we have to admire Hyder’s courage in showing women who are not afraid to make choices driven by the heart whatever the consequences may be and that is where Hyder succeeds as a writer. Today many voices have emerged that strive to give the female voice through their narrative even though they too feel thwarted at times. One such voice is Anees Jung who in her book *Unveiling India* has tried to raise the literary consciousness of her reader regarding the position of women and their desire and need to speak and be heard. Anees Jung says.

"Not long ago a woman who spoke about herself was considered a loose woman. To voice a pain, to divulge a secret, was considered sacrilege, a breach of family trust. Today, voices are raised without fear, and are heard outside the walls of homes the once kept a woman protected, also isolated. Some of the women who speak here have stepped out. Other's who have not, are beginning to be aware, eager to find expression. But let them speak for themselves".  
(109)

To prove this point, I end this paper with some lines from a poem *Khabees* by Iqra Khilji that has gone quite viral these days in the social media and proves the point that the female of today is speaking out boldly and stridently, conveying her message to the male in general that enough is enough

"Nizaam-e-pidari se baghwat  
Hai tehreek meri,  
Kamzor-o-Kamzarf nhai hai ye taiweez meri  
Mai tumhare wazaarat khano  
Ka rukh bhi kar chuki hoo  
Ab ye khayal chood do ki  
Aaraaish hai takleeq meri".

The rough translation of this poem is –  
"My mutinity is against this patriarchy  
And my schemes are neither weak nor credulous  
I have made my way to the house of  
Power from where you oppress me  
It is time that you know that my creation,  
Was not the ornamentation of your world"

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