**Sita of Sindh**

Ghazi Salahuddin

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Far from the madding crowd that lurks in the underworld of Pakistan’s politics – a place presently haunted by audio leaks – the literary world was holding its breath this week for the announcement of this year’s Nobel Literature Prize. And the veil was lifted on Thursday, with the most prestigious literary award going to the French writer of fiction, Annie Ernaux.

There are reasons why I have grabbed this event as the peg for my column. Actually, I was already set to write about our own, Urdu literature and a great writer who was a woman. Almost through the entire week, I have been in a trance under the influence of a novellete I read again after an interval of about fifty years.

One regretful thought that also troubled my mind was why an Urdu writer of fiction of this reach and depth was not so widely recognized across the world and why this author did not win the Nobel Prize. However, I like the coincidence that the announcement of the Nobel Literature prize has overlapped with my emotional engagement with an Urdu novelette and its author.

Enough suspense. I am talking about ‘Sita Haran’ by Qurratulain Hyder (1927-2007). The French author is named Annie Ernaux. Her first name is how we could spell Qurratulain Hyder’s nickname for her family and friends, though the French pronunciation is different. She was for so many people just Annie or Aaini, with Apa often added in respect.

Qurratulain Hyder is mostly known for her ‘Aag ka Darya’, a creative triumph of no small measure, but she left a large body of work that includes novels, short stories, reportage, memoirs and essays. I can, within this space, only refer very briefly to ‘Sita Haran’.

At my age, re-reading books that you had read in your youth becomes an exciting and rewarding emotional and intellectual experience. So, I stumbled upon this novelette in one of my forays into my chaotic collection of books – and it cast a spell on me. It could be an overreaction, but Partition is a point of reference and there is a spiritual journey through Sindh and an exploration of Sri Lanka with which I am very familiar. It touched various cords in my consciousness.

Sita is Hindu Sindhi and her family migrated to India after ’47. While in the United States for higher studies she falls in love with and marries a Muslim whose family also lived in India. The story, mainly of Sita’s passionate wanderings, is long and I am not recounting it.

What is significant is that the story takes place in the late fifties. In an early twist of plot, Sita accompanies her husband’s – or ex-husband’s – relatives on a drive across Sindh and she, a foreigner, is the interpreter of the magic and the mysteries of her land of birth to its new migrants.

At this point, I wondered how my Sindhi friends, writers and intellectuals, would have responded to this account. Until his death in the early incursion of Covid-19, Asif Farrukhi would be my guide and philosopher in these matters. But a younger friend, Mahmudul Hasan, who lives in Lahore, was quick to find some answers for me. He WhatsApp-ed a few pages of a book that included Asif Farrukhi’s conversation with Qurratulain Hyder on ‘Sita Haran’.

That’s how I learnt that Shaik Ayaz, the pride of Sindh, had loved it and had wanted to translate it himself. Eventually, it was translated into Sindhi language by Vali Ram Valabh, a respected senior Sindhi scholar who lives in Hyderabad. Interestingly, Asif and the author of ‘Sita Haran’ also discuss relations between Sindhis and Mohajirs at that time.

There is so much more to ‘Sita Haran’ and the themes that are exemplified in it. To get a deeper understanding of it, I turned to old friend Iftikhar Arif, arguably the best living Urdu poet who is also a Sanskrit person. He explained that ‘haran’ means the act of kidnapping in Sanskrit. Hence, the symbolism extends to the Sita of the Hindu epic of Ramayana. Iftikhar recalled from his own personal encounters that this was one of Qarratulain Hyder’s beloved creations.

We know that Qarratulain Hyder had come to Pakistan and had returned to India after the publication of ‘Aag ka Darya’ in 1959. In India, she won top literary awards and this, of course, was long before Modi’s arrival. Here, I am appreciating Qarratulain Hyder as a writer of Urdu language, irrespective of her nationality.

One question that I had raised: why don’t our great writers and poets get international recognition even when they more than deserve it? I have thought about it and think that only those writers and poets are acknowledged abroad who are able to create a great impact in their own countries and cultures. If we do not voraciously read our own writers, why would the literary communities of other countries be interested in them?

This brings me to my usual refrain of grieving over our educational and intellectual deprivations. This situation is extremely depressing and my heart sinks when I look at the relevant facts and figures and share thoughts with concerned individuals. It is not just the madness that is rampant in the political sphere, a discourse on any other subject leads you into the same pit of anxiety and despondency.

With my spotlight on a book of fiction, I want to make a case for reading books – reading for pleasure. We should understand why the world gets so excited, among other things, about literature. The truth is that it can change the world and teach individuals to make sense of their own emotions and of the difficulties that they confront.

There is ample research to show that literary and artistic pursuits would improve your mental health. Studies have proved that reading improves your focus abilities. It affects your concentration, in a digital age. I would even say that it is our defence against insanity.

The writer is a senior journalist. He can be reached at: ghazi\_salahuddin @hotmail.com