



## Characterization in Qurratulain Hyder's *Honour and My Aunt Gracie*

Dr. Yogesh Singh Mohan

Assistant Professor (English), DAV College, Sadhaura, Yamuna Nagar, Haryana, India

Email: [ysmohan2007@gmail.com](mailto:ysmohan2007@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Honour in one's social status is related to perceptions about the structures of society which are not as concrete as they appear to be. There appear fissures and gaps in the actual experience in day-to-day life vis a vis the theoretical conceptions one carries in one's mind. Honour- the story is more accurate than most classroom analyses where academicians owing to their predilections towards over simplification of every sphere of human experience. In attempting the issues of social stratifications, the usual efforts revolve round theories imported from the west which somehow fail to get at the essence of the things.

Is it a stubbornness born out of being shielded from the harsh realities of life - an incorrigible stupidity common in a certain sub - species of privileged classes who take everything for granted owing to a life environment so secluded and secure that virtually nothing harsh or coarse gets to their soft skins.

In My Aunt Gracie the prime aspect of the aunt's personality is her motherly affection for children of the household. This affection is not merely an outward show but something deeply ingrained in her nature. By this token too she is a typical Indian woman. Although this image of Indian femininity has got somewhat diluted due to various interferences and implications of the western influence on the current generation but her likes still remain the stock representatives of Indian women as world has known them since eternity. Both the stories are a study in human nature and its variant shadows.

**Keywords:** honour, clan, society, partition, journey, loss, death, forgotten.

She was a woman born in a wealthy landlord family of Pathans in an area dominated by her caste from times of barbarity, a timespan

long enough to inject a certain sense of pride and nonchalance in the members of the community right from the opportune day of their birth. It is

something that resonates in behaviour, manner, actions and even countenance of people. This very thing fabricates make believes like honor – not just a personal honor- but something bigger, something more vibrant and worthwhile. It is but obvious that a person is supposed to situate himself or herself in the conditions and position of her birth and upbringing.

In the predicament of Aziz lies the sad narration of a schism that was drawn within the womb of this civilization. What options he had in such circumstances. His fate is the fate of fallen leaves in the month of autumn. His destiny coincides with the destiny of millions of his compatriots who were equally ineffective in face of the forces of destruction. The rattling leaves in a summer afternoon are bound to be scattered and overtime decompose.

The poison of religious divide, although not in the foreground, has been dealt with meticulously by Hyder in the story. Aziz, although a minor presence, plays out his destiny in the form of a passive drifter who dies an unclaimed death. His Death is equally problematic as his life appears to be,

The day the news came of his death Shamshad Begum was fast asleep in her Ottoman in the Verandah. It was late afternoon. Kallo came running to the gatehouse and banged on the closed door. 'Open the door!' she screamed hysterically. 'Please open the door! A terrible thing has happened! We are ruined!' (Hyder, Honour 244)

Hyder has presented a very bleak picture in his portrayal of the only male character of the story. Shamshad Begum at least has the good fortune of being alive through all the turmoil and hardships. Aziz unfortunately has no such privilege. He disappears from the story not once but twice. The only difference being his second disappearance hardly makes any difference to the female protagonist in contrast to his first disappearance which was devastating for her. Infect his first

disappearance goes very close to the psychological anomaly of Fugue. Nonetheless he is a crucial factor in determining the direction of the plot as well as the destiny of Shamshad Begum.

One unaltered and uncontested aspect of Shamshad Begum's personality is her chasteness. She seems to represent the timeless choice of an individual who is driven solely by the spiritual tendencies. It is not that the readers find her praying on every second instance in the story, but it is her conduct, her behavior and her outward actions which establish her intent and personal outlook beyond the limits of debate or doubt. She is an epitome of simplicity, authenticity and dedication towards her ideas of culture, ethics and morality. One may agree or disagree with her choices but the fact remains that one cannot but respect her for her truthfulness to her own self.

Times change and with changing times Shamshad begum evolves. She learns new lessons in life but she does not change her outlook. She does not compromise her individuality. This is the sole solace of this otherwise depressing tale of everything falling apart. In psychological terms one may define her personality as driven by the demands and drives of Superego. Her image reflects the spirit of sages. She is barely perturbed by the changes in physical realities around her. Like a stoic, she goes through life, untouched by pain and pleasures, if at all life bestows any of them on her. One may of course inquire whether she is a flat character or has the element and flexibility and durability and esthetics of a character full of life and rush of blood in her veins.

Kallo Bai is a minor character, the antagonist of Shamshad Begum. She is a rather dismal figure both in appearance and otherwise. She appears to be just opposite of the Begum. If the Begum is a tall and beautiful lady, she is small and dark. She is not a great admirer of ethics and values as is reflected from her profession as a dance girl. The lady is almost an

accidental entry in the story. Sometimes through the irony of chance the barriers of class are breached and some assumedly undeserving candidates end up becoming the part of the sophisticate circles. Usually, it happens when a member of elite class falls in their judgement and conduct either by fate or some inherent weakness of character. Was Aziz in his senses when he chose a 'whore' as his legitimate wife or was he under some influence, is not very clear but the anomaly of their relation is clearly eked out as the plot progresses and Kallo runs away with jewelry and other precious items upon learning of Aziz's death. In her running away she shows no respect either to Aziz's memory or to the institution of marriage. She appears to be a character of her circumstances. Although not much has been told about her background or the circumstances of her choosing such an ignoble career, one can easily construe the possible conditions of her life before Aziz came into her life. Nonetheless, she is a dark character who recedes into haze the moment her support disappears.

Hyder has presented two different aspects of our society through the journey and life travels of the Begum. There is one India that resides in villages and small towns and there is another India that resides in big cities and metropolitans. The social structure of the first India is different from that of the second. Although it is not a water tight situation but the fact remains that the two Indias are not identical. It is also true that the India of Metropolitans imbibes social changes much faster than rural India. The social hierarchies which remained unaltered for centuries and are slow to change have by and large lost their significance in urban areas.

Hyder does not pass any comment on the situation neither he takes sides but he categorically draws the socio- cultural milieu of these two worlds who barely coincide with each other. Begam's formative years were spent in rural hinterland where she imbibed the values and manners of her landlord family. It is but

obvious for a person born in such a family to be like her. But as the times start to change, she being a helpless onlooker, turned into a stoic woman – a specimen of countless such women of her generation who suffered a lot but took everything in her stride. Her migration to Delhi and later to Bombay as house help coincides with diminishing of her material status. But such outward fall in economic status did not in the least caused any change in her self- image. She remains the same Begam, the same Pathan lady who always held high the 'Honour' her background bestowed upon her. In essence it is a sad tale of an individual who is trapped in the whirlpool of time and situations whose whims are outside the approach of human beings.

Aunt Gracie is a docile character in the story *My Aunt Gracie*. Hyder has presented her as a specimen of traditional femininity. When the story begins, she is already past her youth. In fact, "She was about thirty-five, had been widowed at the age of twenty and had devotedly served Nasir Chacha's wife who died a few years ago, leaving little Asghar in her care" (Hyder, *My Aunt Gracie* 225).

Aunt Gracie is a house help who works diligently. On a personal level she is a very religious lady who to the amusement of the narrator talks with the idol of mother Mary. This by no means should be taken as a case of hallucination or any such psychological anomaly. She is just a naïve devotee, a specimen of Indian womanhood. She represents every semi-literate, middle and lower middle class Indian woman who believes in her gods and her worldview is but a reflection of the centuries old traditions intertwined with the present-day markers of culture. The idea of a woman talking to an idol as if a living goddess resides in it is not uncommon or strange in a country like India where religion reigns supreme. Moreover, she is a true Indian in the sense that she can pray to gods of different religions at the same time, a phenomenon which is simply impossible in many parts of the world where religion has demarcated the fault lines between different

segments of society. In this, she is a true Indian who embodies the various colors of her culture and traditions even while following the faiths from outside, depicting a full spectrum of assimilation and accommodation which are but the hallmarks of her personality.

Interestingly the journey of Aunt Gracie from Lucknow to Lahore and then back to her homeland in South India represents her situation as a powerless woman trapped in circumstances beyond her control, a theme not uncommon in Hyder's other stories. Aunt Gracie is not an independent woman, her dependence on her husband is the prime cause of her final departure from the plot. By the time the story ends, it is not clear where she has gone and the narrative ends on a very vague note about her whereabouts. It is almost a poetic end to an eventful story, quite abrupt and difficult to accept. But this is one of the features of Hyder.

Hyder's narrative has the uncanny quality to sketch round characters in full vigor. Even his flat characters are not without a life of their own. At the same time one of the features of his narrative is an abrupt speeding of events which may baffle an unprepared reader. At many points the plot takes quick turns and in stories like *My Aunt Gracie*, it gets to a sudden halt. Nonetheless as a true representative of life as it is, he has succeeded in giving a very authentic representation to the struggles of Shamshad Begum and Aunt Gracie in both the stories.

The nights of gloom are but a prelude to the sunshine of hope in lives of such desolate souls. Their wishes are buried and still not buried deep enough. There is always a chance of rain from distant clouds, a rain which will not only quench the perennial thirst but also act as balm on the open wounds that are covered by a thin, ostensibly decorated shred of a glory long lost in the travails of time. Begum's life is a reflection of myriad moments that fluctuate as the constant shifting moods of a coquettish fate. This lady has seen enough and has turned rather

stoic to the drama of broken menagerie where moments of respite are furtive and a slow sadness is the constant,

She was confronted by a shimmering, blue-green sea. She had never seen the sea before. It fascinated her. Then, suddenly, it occurred to her that Mecca and Medina were somewhere there, across these shining waters. 'God, in his great goodness and mercy, has brought me all the way to Bombay. Some day soon he will take me on the Haj pilgrimage as well.' The thought brought tears to her eyes. She moved away from the window. (Hyder, Honour 249)

Both the stories are very dark in tone and texture, almost like the flute of a melancholic philosopher who has seen the comings and goings of centuries and has finally turned is back to this world in a hope of a new beginning in a world beyond the valley and above the mountains. The only moral lesson if one is adamant to deduce from both the tales is unequivocally simple: Things Change. Entropy enters the best designs. Structures crumble. The things eventually fall apart,

Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at his friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That Man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." He could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked his words. (Achebe 51)

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