

River of Fire : Celebrating Plurality and Chronicling Histories

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Through her novel *Aag ka Darya* (1959) Qurratulain Hyder established herself as one of the most prominent woman writers of South Asia. The novel considered to be a landmark in Urdu literature; not only redefined Urdu fiction but also gave it the desired impetus. The novel was transcreated into English as *River of Fire* (1998) by Hyder herself. By doing so Hyder not only subverts the postcolonial but also liberates the English language from the hegemony of the British.

Hyder discards 'evolutionary' view of civilization as she sketches India of fourth century B.C. – the India of Gautam Buddha, of scholars and mendicants, a flourishing nation in trade and commerce. Politics and political turmoil (in the garb of war and change of governance) is the demon that raises its ugly head and transforms the tranquil river into that of fire. India has redefined itself through all phases of history and has acted like the proverbial Phoenix which sings its own dirge and rises from its own ashes. It seems that the ugly moment of destruction will seal the fate of history and the nation, and its people will never overcome this treacherous event. But Hyder in her long narrative proves it amply that these moments of tranquility and that of disaster are played out again and again.

Hyder through her novel is not attempting a single history; rather she is trying to unfold layers of different histories. Each history as it is performed embraces the other – the former and the later as well. The present gives a better perspective of the past and a premonition of the future.

Partition was a grim reality at the time when Hyder was writing and she herself was a witness to it; but despite this fact Hyder never allows this reality to overwhelm her writings. *River of Fire* no doubt deals with the episode of Partition and the emotional and cultural vacuum that it created for people on both sides of the border. But it remains only an episode a mere chapter and cannot obliterate other histories that have been performed with Nation as its site.

Aijaz Ahmad writes in his book *In Theory*; that "Our 'nationalism' at this juncture was a nationalism of mourning, a form of Valediction...." (Ahmad 119). Countering the claim made by Ahmad it could be argued that the kind of nationalism that informs Hyder's book is the nationalism of celebration, grandeur, scholarship, understanding and comradeship. Many of the critics of Hyder feel that the novel ends on a pessimistic note as it ends with the partition of India and the loss of identity of people like Kamal Reza. But if we understand the construct of Hyder's novel, we will know that life is not all that dismal either for Kamal or for his friend Hari and Gautam. The novel begins with scene of complete serenity and peace but is soon swept away with the destruction of Shrawasti. Then the reader encounters the city of Jaunpur in its full glory, the Shiraz-e-Hind; the centre of learning and scholarship; a city which attracts Abul Mansur Kamaluddin to unravel the mysteries of India. Nothing remains permanent; not even devastation and readers are now transported into nineteenth century India when colonial powers are trying to establish their stronghold over India and its people.

The chain of events leads on to the mutiny of 1857 which is thwarted by the British and Hyder at this moment gives a grim record of the atrocities committed by the British on the Indians. There are descriptions of mass hangings that are executed by the roadside. But soon the scene shifts to 1930's and 1940's portraying the blissful lives of Talat, Tehmina and Kamal on one side and that of Laj, Nirmala and Hari on the other in the peaceful city of Lucknow. We encounter the Lucknow of Canning College (i.e. present day Lucknow University), Isabella Thoburn College, La Martiniere, Loreto and Karamat Girls' College and the ever peaceful Gomti flowing in the backdrop. It is definitely the city of the elite and the feudal and people like Champa Ahmad remain outsiders to this tranquil and blissful world. The tranquility of this city is disturbed again by the event of partition as it leads to willing or forced exodus. The novel ends at the twilight of a phase in Indian history and Hyder leaves us with the last impressions of Hari reminiscing about Kamal (the alter ego of Hari who has suddenly and ominously become the other) who is no more part of their existence and their struggles and has now been transported to the other country:

In the enveloping black void he heard Hari Shankar's melancholy voice: "Kamal was over-sensitive, an incorrigible fanatical idealist.... Something within him has died, otherwise he would not have avoided meeting you and me so scrupulously. It is his new incarnation in the other country. (*River of Fire* 426)

Hyder's concept of nation and national identity extends beyond borders. The end of the novel marks the beginning of a new chapter in Indian history. Past histories enable us to understand the fluidity of national identities. The worldview that she presents is remarkable for its liberal approach and outlook. Abul Mansur Kamaluddin's character is the outcome of this broad outlook of Hyder. Son of an Arab father and an Iranian mother, Kamaluddin is not an Indian by birth but is definitely one by his karma. He is a scholar who devotes his life in understanding Indian languages, translating Indian fables and is also overawed by the traditions and customs of India; gets attracted towards intelligent Indian females Ruqaiyya Bano Begum and Champavati; but as history takes its course finds himself drifted to Bengal where he marries a sudra girl Sujata Debi and settles down for a peaceful life near Sonargaon. But at the ripe age of 85 Kamaluddin breathes his last in "the lonely moonless night of Amavas" as he is beaten mercilessly by Sher Shah's soldiers while being branded as a traitor by them. By portraying the agony of this old man Hyder questions the established standards by which national identities are constructed and deconstructed:

This was his country, his children had been born here. He had put all his energy into making these fields bloom, spent years beautifying the language these men were speaking. He had written songs and collected stories and he was going to continue living right here no one had any right to call him an outsider or a traitor. (ROF 102)

The novel joins Abul Mansur Kamaluddin and Kamal Raza in pain – the pain of being suddenly perceived as the 'other' and plucked away from the nation and its consciousness. In the last section of novel Kamal goes down the memory lane as he visits East Pakistan and then India to his former homes in Lucknow and Dehradun. This visit of Kamal has been dealt with very sensitively by Hyder and the effect is heart-rending. On this visit Kamal also goes out in search of Champa Ahmad to

Moradabad. Champa who was previously seen with suspicion as the champion of Pakistan now emerges as a woman who decides her own actions and stays back in India:

Kamal used to think that while he was forging ahead, Champa had stayed behind. He would march on to new worlds, new vision, newer horizons. Today, he realized that perhaps he was receding and Champa, who was not lonely anymore, was moving forward (ROF 403)

The river of time in Hyder's novel flows both ways and is neither linear nor cyclic – the present is revisited by the past and the past acts out the present. Both Kamaluddin and Kamal perceive visions of the past and thus symbolically become part of the past experiencing simultaneously the glory and destructions of the past. A cavalcade of people pass through the mind's eye of Kamaluddin – from monarchs to intellectuals to politicians to beautiful princess and even Champa of the opening section from 4th century B.C.

Kamal Reza's visit to National Museum before leaving off for Pakistan is a significant moment when on seeing the stone image of Champa he realizes that how he has been dissociated from his cultural past and finds himself intellectually isolated from his childhood friend Hari.

As a postcolonial novel *River of Fire* documents the process of colonization and its subsequent decolonization in a very unique manner. Colonial experience has been rendered invisible by the sheer canvas of the novel where this episode can be compared to the *beerbahuti* which is brought to earth by a gust of wind. The novel also highlights the materialistic approach of the British who plundered India in a short span of time. Anna C. Oldfield writes that "Hyder acknowledges the colonial while removing it from the center of reference, as it must be in any post colonial endeavour". (Oldfield 30)

Cyril Ashley, the representative of the English in India is disempowered in a subtle manner; he is portrayed as a man who ushers in materialism, distrust, treachery and lust as he is the one who tries to fool innocent and gullible Indians. When Cyril stops a 'Sati' being performed, he in fact looks for rewards for his social work and thus in turn brings in far greater evils into the society. Cyril takes the sister of Prafulla Kumar as his bibi or mistress but considers it below his dignity to marry an Indian girl. Another woman who suffers at the hands of the whites is Champa Jan, a courtesan of refined manners and grace. As Lucknow was the site of resistance during mutiny it underwent a destruction that changed the face of the city and it is here that the novel deals with the ruin of courtesans of Lucknow:

The new British administration of the city ordered all courtesans to have themselves registered and obtain a license from the municipality. They were made to get themselves photographed, attach a copy of each with their license, and display their ages and rates on their doors. This was outrageous and they found it extremely insulting, because most of them were not whores – they were highly respected performing artists. (ROF 173)

Champa Jan is the victim of this new law; she eventually gets addicted to cocaine and is finally reduced to a beggar. Gautam Nilamber Dutt encounters Champa near Char Bagh railway station, old and fragile wearing tattered clothes and pleading for money to have her daily dose of cocaine. Stating about the courtesans of Lucknow the historian Veena Talwar Oldenburg observes:

The British usurpation of the kingdom of Awadh in 1856 and the forced exile of the king and many of his courtiers had abruptly put an end to royal patronage for the courtesans. The imposition of the contagious disease regulations and heavy fines and penalties on the courtesans for their role in the rebellion signaled the gradual debasement of an esteemed cultural institution into common prostitution. (Oldenburg 137)

Females play an important role in Hyder's novel as we find them to be dynamic, intelligent and vibrant individuals who have an equal participation in each phase of history. The females that inhabit the pages of *River of Fire* are of different shades and hues. Hyder frees history from male hegemony not just by the fictional characters that she lovingly portrays but also by bringing facts into fiction. There is a mention of queens like Razia Sultana, Rani Karnavati, Durgavati and Chand Sultana who were great warriors and "led their armies into battle" (ROF 137). Hyder a few pages later goes on to write about the mother of Wajid Ali Shah, Malika Kishwar, who proceeds to Britain to meet Queen Victoria to "present the case of unlawful dispossession" (153) of her son as he had been banished to Calcutta by the British. Here we see a woman who literally ventures out to sea to get justice for her son. It is the love and conviction of a mother that enables her to undertake this arduous journey. Hyder also pens down the bravery of Begum Hazrat Mahal who waged a war against the British and motivated the populace of Oudh to fight against the company.

Moving on to the fictional characters the novel abounds with Champas. Champa is the essence of feminine beauty charm and intelligence. She is the Champak, the Sudarshan Yakshini of 4th Century B.C., Champavati (the ever innocent woman who only understands the language of love) of the 15th Century A.D., Champa Jan of 19th Century colonial India and finally Champa Ahmed of pre and post independent India. Talking about women in *River of Fire* Kumkum Sangari says that "each story revolves around waiting and/or deserted women: Champak of the first story and Champavati of the second story are deserted women, Champa Jan of the third story is a woman who waits, while Champa Ahmed of the last story breaks the pattern and decides, after a series of failed relationships, to set up legal practice". (<http://www.museindia.com/viewarticle.asp?myr=2007&issid=14&id=756>)

The observation of Sangari underscores the complex narrative that *River of Fire* offers. Characters male or female are merely eddies in this huge river of fire and Champak or any of the Champas of the novel are not deserted women in the real sense of the word. It is Gautam who gets heavily drunk, loses control over his thoughts and is thrown out of the Mandap, after which he falls unconscious. At this stage Champak leaves him with her Myna as she is called off by the Chief Minister. After this episode Gautam searches for Champak but his search is cut short and he is maimed for life as the country is attacked by Chandragupta's army. It is only years later that Gautam Nilambar meets Champak who is now middle aged woman with a son and is mistress

of a mantri. In the next narrative we encounter how political turmoil and scholarly pursuits drift Kamaluddin away from Ruqaiyya Bano Begum and Champavati. Both Ruqqaiyya and Chamapavati are intelligent and learned women, indeed Ruqaiyya is a student at a college in Jaunpur.

The novel takes a leap of centuries and the reader is directly thrown into the storm when India is being ruled by the British and it is during this phase that we encounter Champa Jan – the very beautiful, enchanting, sensible and intelligent woman who cannot fool herself into a platonic relationship with Gautam Nilambar Dutt and puts an end to this affair. Gautam also understanding the futility of this relationship bids adieu to Champa Jan and heads out for Calcutta. Women are at the helm of affairs in the novel and can't be fooled around; nor are they inferior to men in their intellectual pursuits. In the last phase of the novel among other things we flow along the achievements and failures of Champa Ahmad. In her we encounter a woman who makes her own decisions and is able to hold the ground in turbulent times. Hyder pits the character of Champa Ahmad against the Lucknow group of girls *i.e.* Talat, Tehmima, Nirmala and Laj. Champa Ahmad refuses to be bound by conventions and remains unpredictable to the last as she is the one who stays back in India to carve her own path. She is able to hold her sanity even in the moments of ridicule and humiliation and at last emerges victorious.

The river symbolizes movement and thus, though the novel comes to an end, it heralds a new dawn in the history of Indian Nation. The night engulfs the scene and the novel ends with silence as the Nation prepares for a new era which holds new promises and sets new goals to achieve. Hyder had already marked the closure of the chapter of partition as she wants the nation to embark upon new beginnings. The influx of travelers continues as India is still the dream destination of many.

Works Cited

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