

India As A Novel: A Critical Study Of *River Of Fire*

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Abstract

Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* is all about the struggles of India. It is a fiction that narrates the history of a nation. Hyder's treatment of history in the *River of Fire* is very much calculated. She has used selective phases from India's history so as to merge imagination and reality. This very narrative style used by Hyder makes it a little difficult to put this novel under particular domain. She knitted the story using yarns from different two domains- history and fiction. Thus making it both a novel and a semi-documentation. In other words, it's not just a novel which records historical events. Instead, it echoes the story of India. A nation which is a novel in itself- with events in real time and space. A nation which saw rise and fall of many kings and emperors like Wajid Ali Shah, witnessed battles and invasions, experienced different religions and felt the pain of partition.

Keywords: National allegory, history, fiction, Indo-islamic, imagination and semi-documentation

Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* (1998) is a trans-creation of her Urdu novel *Aag Ka Darya* (1959). The time span between the original version and the trans-created version is an element that makes one curious. Perhaps, Hyder's observation of language shift might have played an important role behind the decision of trans-creation. Maybe, through this attempt she wanted to reach the minds of English-speaking generation of India. Thus trying to make them understand, the multi-cultural scenario that developed over the centuries. In doing so, she eventually brings in the historical background of India.

Hyder's treatment of history in *River of Fire* is very much calculated. She has used selective phases from Indian history so as to merge imagination and reality. This resulted in an individual consciousness which ultimately gets integrated into collective consciousness through socio-cultural details. As Mohammad Sajjad points out that:

“it is the domain of socio-cultural details where archival documents based historiography fails to reach that the fiction writers can be best appreciated. Thus s/he meditates between past and future. Here the past is cognizable while the future is imaginable (whereas, to historians, the past is verifiable). Through this medium s/he captures the realities. In this way a literature is at time a participant/observer and at times an observer of historical developments. (Jalil)”

As mentioned above, literature is sometimes an observer of historical developments. In the development of any nation's history time and space play an important role. Historical events take place at a particular time in a particular space. This very placement of historical events in time and space gives history its chronological form. This chronology can be traced in Hyder's *River of Fire*. The time period covered in these four phases is- fourth century BC, late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century, end of eighteenth century and the entire nineteenth century, and the post-partition era. Though the phases covered are in chronological form yet the novel is not a historical document. In order to maintain the difference between a literary work and a historical document Hyder tried to stick to the basic aspects of novel. It is where the narrative style of the author plays a vital role.

The narrative style of *River of Fire* weaves both fiction and history very tightly. The novel is complex in the sense that the integration and disintegration of fiction and history takes place simultaneously. This is because the presence of the historical events and the use of time lapse in the novel functions simultaneously. As mentioned earlier, time and space are important in history. The same is true for a novel. It is where three key aspects of the novel come in- i.e. the story, characters and the plot. Hyder merged historical events, historical figures, historical places with the fictional characters and time lapses. It is through her fictional characters that Hyder is able to merge the two different dimensions of space- i.e. fictional and historical.

As far as the story, people and the plot of the novel are concerned Hyder binds the fictional events with the actual events. She makes sure that her fictional characters experience the cultural and political changes that took place in India over the centuries. Her characters lived in the four different phases of Indian history. The reappearance of characters Gautam, Champa, Hari Shankar, Kamal and Cyril Ashley binds the four phases together. This reappearance/reincarnation of implies that time period and space may vary but wanderlust, desire for love, feelings and responses of people towards war and the questions about good/bad and one's own existence remains same. The continuity of questions and human actions provides a flow to the continuity of novel. Also, the reappearance of characters suggests that history keeps repeating itself. This is where the socio-cultural scenario enters in the novel and thus the role of politics and culture comes into play.

Hyder's fictional characters struggle to survive throughout the four phases. In all the phases the characters are influenced by the political and cultural shifts. Their actions are reactions in response to the political and cultural changes. In the first phase, a horrified Gautam is forced to pick a sword and kill "Magadhan foot soldiers till he was struck down by a spear and fainted" (Hyder, 40). Gautam, a student and a common man says "I'm not interested in King Nanda, Vishnu Sharma and Chandragupta. Why must they drag me into their conflict...?" (Hyder, 39) This dialogue of Gautam is relevant to all the characters throughout the novel. In the second phase, Sayed Abul Mansur Kamaluddin witnesses the destruction of Jaunpur caused during the power shift from Sharqi rulers to Sikandar Lodi (of Delhi Sultanate). Although Kamal "wore a sword, he didn't want to fight" (Hyder, 87). Affected by the destruction, he eventually moves to Bengal to adapt the life of a farmer. In the third phase, Cyril Ashley and Gautam Nilambar Dutt witnesses Western control and Western influence over India. Their relationship represents the relationship between the colonisers and the colonised. Gautam works as a clerk in Cyril's office. The factor behind his decision to

serve the East India Company (indirectly/directly) was his struggle to survive the era of oppression. In the post- partition phase both Kamal and Champa Ahmed struggle to survive the partition. Kamal is forced to migrate to Pakistan whereas, Champa is not able to come to terms with the scenario of partition and hence she feels exiled even while residing in India. The situation of these characters is relevant to all those people who throughout the history struggled to survive the shift in political powers. The common man is reluctantly dragged into political matters and hence s/he keeps asking “where is my refugee?” (Hyder, 51)

In addition to above, the novel reflects the socio-cultural scenario of India. The use of actual geographical places hints towards the authenticity of the facts mentioned in the novel. The treatment of cultural scenario is different in first two phases. In the first phase, the reader witnesses Hari Shankar- a prince, who had left all the luxuries behind to become a disciple of Buddha. In Shravasti, under the influence of Gautam Buddha “a lot of untouchable followed him and became touchable” (Hyder, 16). The one reason behind the conversion could be that in Buddhist philosophy everyone and everything is equal. Like Hinduism, it does not adhere to the caste system. In the second phase, Kamaluddin introduces us to the founder of Lodhi dynasty of Delhi sultanate- Bahlol Lodhi. He witnesses people chanting the hymn composed by Kabir. These first two phases shows the harmony between different religions and also the integration of Indian and Islamic culture.

In the third phase, the socio-cultural scenario gets more complicated when EIC takes control over India. “In January 1856 Sir James Outram, the new Resident, arrived in Lucknow and told Vajid Ali Shah to quit because he was no good” (Hyder, 151). Few years after Vajid Ali Shah’s abdication there emerged the first political party in India. The Indian National Congress party (1885) was formed with the motive of making India as an Independent nation. Later on, All India Muslim League (1906) was formed to protect the rights of Indian Muslims. It can be observed that both of these parties had their own motives. The former had nationalist inclination while the latter had religious inclination. Slowly the tension between these two parties grew as their motives began to clash. As a result, All India Muslim League demanded the formation of new nation- Pakistan. When the reader steps into the fourth phase, harmony linking the Indo-Islamic culture had already been crumbled with the formation of Pakistan and the new India. Kamal returns to Dehradun and finds that his house does not belong to him anymore. In order to survive he had to move to Pakistan. He is not Indian anymore. Though he moves to Pakistan he still stands “at the cross-road of conflicting loyalties” (Hyder, 419).

Kamal’s character projects the conflicting loyalties of all those people who felt betrayed during partition. Here, reincarnation of Kamal’s character plays an important role. In the first phase, Kamal was an outsider. After spending many years in different parts of India he became an India. In the fourth phase, Kamal says “you cannot discard your motherland like an old coat” (Hyder, 254). He is a nationalist but this national identity is questioned after the Formation of Pakistan. Now, he is a “refugee. Muhajir. Displaced Muslim from Uttar Pradesh [...] homeless” (Hyder, 419). Kamal once again becomes an outsider. After he had left to Pakistan without meeting Hari Shankar and Gautam, Hari Shankar says “Kamal has deserted us. Betrayed his friends” (Hyder, 425). In response to this Gautam says “we have all betrayed one another” (Hyder, 426).

A notable point in the novel is that Hyder pays more attention towards the end of eighteenth century and the entire nineteenth century, and the post-partition era. However, she had left an important part of Indian history. In the nineteenth century she covered the abdication of Wajid Ali Shah but she did not cover the revolt of Eighteen Fifty Seven. Here, Hyder's choice of historical events again plays an important role. Her major focus is on cultural harmony and indianness. She seems to be less concerned about India's struggle for Independence. In this sense, M. Asim Siddiqui rightly points out that Oudh/Awadh "for her becomes a metaphor for all that is good and noble about Indian Culture."

Almost seventy five percent space of the novel is covered by the end of eighteenth century and the entire nineteenth century, and the post-partition era. It is because in these two phases religion becomes an integral part of politics. This journey of religion and culture merging into politics is skilfully covered by Hyder. As mentioned earlier, questions about good/bad and one's own existence remains same. In first phase Gautam says "tell me why some killing is good and some bad?" (Hyder, 39) In between power shifts, the common man faces death either physically or metaphorically. During partition a lot of people were killed in the riots and those who survived felt nothing but confusion. Hari Shankar says for Kamal "something within him has died" (Hyder, 426). Through this novel, Hyder is narrating the story of an India where the integration of cultural harmony is left crumbled. At the same time she is questioning religion, culture, identity and Indianness. Rakshanda Jalil points out that Hyder is looking for answers of question like- "Who are real Indians? Can real Indians only be Hindu? Can culture be pure Hindu or pure Muslim?" However, the answers of these questions are questions themselves. The individual's identity gets integrated into collective one when his/her national identity is taken into consideration. As far as India is concerned, one's national identity gets more complicated because of multiple religions, languages and cultures.

Thus, *River of Fire* is a journey of India's political, religious and cultural changes. The merging of fiction and history gives this novel a complex form. It is a novel where historical events are recorded and incorporated into fictional events. It reflects "man's collective fate and the issues related to the general moral and cultural decline of Indian Subcontinent". Through this way Hyder succeeds in narrating a story which is placed in historical context. Mohammad Sajjad quotes Hanfi "that Hyder has employed semi-documentation in writing this novel and that 'her technique is Neo Historicism" in order to prove the importance of history in the novel. Therefore in words of Shamim Hanfi *River of Fire* is a "national allegory" where India is a novel in itself- with events in real time and space.

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