

*Novel as a Nation and Nation as a Novel: a Study of Qurratulain Hyder's Aag ka Darya*

**Mitali Bhattacharya**

MA English

Department Of English

Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University

New Delhi

**Abstract:** *The paper delves deep into the intricacies of Qurratulain Hyder's novel, Aag ka Darya. The concerned text is one of the most brilliantly written literary piece which talks about history in a very creative manner. The paper talks about how the structure of a novel and the concept of a nation can be studied together through this text. Also, it talks about how this text is beyond any fixed genre, thereby being a magnum opus of its own kind. In order to support the main argument, theories brought in by Homi Bhabha, Sunil Khilnani and Benedict Anderson have also been incorporated. It is believed that history is factual and indeed it is. However, Hyder has given an altogether different meaning to history wherein the continuity and critical understanding of each and every era in the text have been brought out beautifully.*

**Keywords:** *civilizational importance, fixed identity, fluidity, totality, totality, Hybridity*

Qurratulain Hyder's Magnum Opus novel, 'Aag ka Darya' is an attempt on her part to delineate certain notions about nation and how a writer uses her/his creative acumen to rewrite history in the form of a novel. On the surface level, Aag ka Darya seems to present before its readers the plight and development of human condition across the subcontinent in four major phases. These phases comprise the Mauryan Empire under Chandragupta, the end of Lodi Dynasty and beginning of Mughal Empire in the late fifteenth century followed by the

eighteenth century beginnings of East India Company and power politics till 1870s. The last phase presented is the period of nationalist struggle, Partition and Independence. Hence, the novel may seem to be a historical narration of Gautam, Kamal, Harishankar, Champa and Nirmala about their own life experiences and the respective socio-political plight in the respective phases.

However, it is not a mere narration of historical events from fourth century BC to the 1950s. It is about the **civilizational importance** which is beyond any sequencing, chronology and objectivity as well as transcends linearity and limitedness. The novel has tried to define the concept of nation through the point of view of its respective characters. The structure of the novel which comprises the repetition of the same set of characters with slightly different names and different roles (though the essence remains the same) establishes the fact that human nature is beyond the shift in time and space. The constant implorations made by Champa to Kamal in the subsequent phases that they had some connections since previous births, signify that history, along with the element of documentation entails connection with the past as well. However, the essence of human love, primordial existence and quest for peace is timeless. The novel interrogates the issue of **fixed identity** through the reflections upon gender, caste, race and religion. Due to its multifarious approaches to understand history, the novel is beyond any fixed genre. In fact, nation is known by all its social, political and economic conditions. Hyder has given us the overview of all these factors in each of the phases. Be it peace during ancient times, the unrest caused by taking over of the Mughals or the poverty, famine and disparity during the partition, everything has been captured by Hyder in totality. From the system of Gurukul to the characters going abroad for studies, Hyder misses out nothing. That is why, within the span of the pages in the novel, entire nation has been traced out. This single novel is as heterogeneous and as ambiguous as the concept of nation itself which is fluid. It is this **fluidity** which Hyder has tried bring out in her novel

Through the description of Indian subcontinent in three stages of ancient, medieval and modern India, Hyder has touched upon the plight of socio-political leanings in these phases. A reader is not just supposed to concentrate on the facts which have been described in the novel, but also is required to understand the essence of Nation in **totality**, a nation which is not tainted with the aberrations of religion, race and gender. Also, no matter how much history gets manipulated, the essence of civilizational contours cannot be ignored. There is a teleology that is followed and each era/epoch is a continuation or repercussion of the previous era. Just as Jaques Derrida talks about the concept of trace which is the presence of essence in every new meaning. Similarly, be it

the period of Mauryan Empire, invasion by Lodi Dynasty or the event of Partition, they cannot be understood in isolation. Virginia Woolf aptly said, 'Everyone is partly their ancestors; just as everyone is partly man and partly woman'.

Hyder translated this work in 1959 in order to come to terms with the sufferings of the Partition. That is why, the first three phases of the novel talks about the peaceful co-existence of Hindus and Muslims in an undivided India. This is perhaps, a deliberate attempt on the part of the author to let the readers come to terms with another truth that existed before partition. It is interesting to note that each of the major characters is similar to their previous roles in the prior phases. Gautam Nilambar is a student of Shravasti Gurukul in the first phase. In the second, he serves the British government, a teacher in a Brahma Samaj school in the third phase and an intellectual living in London and New York in the last phase. There is a continuity in his description which entails a pattern that of a student turning into an intellectual. Similarly, there is a pattern in the description of Kamal who lacks rootedness. He signifies the history of Islamic presence in the subcontinent. In the fourth century, he had reached Tughlaqabad through Central Asia and Kashmir. In the second phase, he is Abdul Mansur Kamaluddin who comes to Jaunpur, Kashi and Ayodhya where he meets the Sufis. In the third phase he comes through as the synthesis of the Islamic and local cultures which is evident in his split between Abul Mansur and Abul Mansur Kamaluddin Reza Bahadur. Here also, the homogeneity is clearly visible. However, in the last phase Kamal is again split between Amir Raza who betrays Champa and Kamal Raza who studies at Cambridge. When he returns to Lucknow, he finds that his ancestral property is confiscated and his parents have been compelled to emigrate to Pakistan due to the two nation theory. He is left disillusioned and the pattern of non-fixity of his identity is quite evident throughout the four phases in the novel.

It is this ambiguity with which the novel starts as well. The lines in the beginning, 'Where does creation begin from? Where does it go? Why are we living? And how? Where will we go? And the last line towards the end, 'Where the hell I am? These lines are symbolical of the fact that there is not particular beginning and an end. All the actions within these two set of lines delineate the fact that no matter how much heterogeneity is generated among human beings through the concepts of religion, race, caste and gender, one's identity remains complex. And a nation is formed not with one single individual but it is a collective consciousness that functions in totality. This can be understood through a seminal essay, 'Location of Culture' by Homi Bhabha. There are six sub sections in this essay wherein the first section titled, 'The Time of the

Nation', tells about Nation as a site of difference. According to Bhabha, the Nation's discourse is about its time and space and how people living in each era contribute in bringing out the continuity. The people are not static or inert historical events. That is why, in the novel, Hyder does not use the same characters in every phase. She changes them slightly and takes adequate gaps for the readers to understand how the characters are changing their trajectories, locations and origins in the fiction. It is through this splitting between the two as a feature of ambivalence that becomes the viable site for 'narrating' the nation. Neither Gautam, Champa nor Kamal ever reach any finality. Champa's character is highly complex in the sense that her quest for knowledge, love and power through Champak, Champavati and Champa Jan allow her to come to terms with her identity. She is always forlorn by her lovers Gautam, Kamal, Harishankar and ultimately ends being a courtesan in order to create her own room for empowerment. Simultaneously, she is also in search of her love which does not give her any closure.

It is this ambivalence which Hyder talks about throughout the novel. She witnessed Partition and got disillusioned. That is why, she translated this work in the heat of the moment of Partition so that more and more people could relate to the pain and come to terms with the brutal reality which shook the roots of both Hindu and Muslims. Hyder is not taking any sides as she has talked about the cultural importance of both Hindu and Muslims in each other's way of living. The references to the Indo-Islamic culture of Greek, Buddhist, Vedic, Persian, Bhakta and the advent of the British symbolizes the act of mentioning everything that happened in history. Being a part of undivided subcontinent and due to her education in the West, Hyder is establishing her crisis of being a hybrid. **Hybridity** is the feeling of in-betweenness which makes one nostalgic when one witnesses a breach in the cultures one belongs to. It is this in-betweenness which can be witnessed in all the major characters in the novel. Perhaps, each of them is speaking on behalf of Hyder herself.

Sunil Khilnani, in his work, 'The Idea of India' has tried to understand Partition by raising the question, 'What exactly was done? Was it the division of one territory between two 'nations' or peoples? Or the breaking of one civilization into two territories? It is this breaking which Hyder is also talking about in her work. However, amidst the vagaries she has followed a pattern of order, disorder and reorder. Order which was prevalent in the subcontinent before the partition got disordered post the event. The element of re-order can be understood by the act of Hyder translating her work in English in order to share her feeling of ambiguity. The dialogue by Harishankar when he says, 'Kamal has deserted us- together we could have challenged the galaxies,' to

which Gautam responds, ‘We have all betrayed one other. Can these Western visitors to Shravasti understand the pain in our souls? In India’s, in Kamal’s, in mine? The outsider is the Westerner not the Muslim or the Hindu. Or then, really the alienation experienced by each one is ultimately existential and from one’s own self’. She has tried to bring out the deep, horizontal comradeship which Benedict Anderson talks about in his work, ‘Imagined Communities’. He brings out the point, ‘a nation is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship’. This is what is exactly happening in Aag ka Darya as well. In spite of all kinds of breaks, gaps and identity crisis, the novel carries a sense of subjectivity and totality, that is, the totality of individual experience of knowing about the rich and vibrant history and cultural ethos of the subcontinent. The concept and idea of nation lies in Kamal’s assertion that he does not want religion; India needs peace and bread. Millions of families cross the border in search of new lives; others stay back, often to an uncertain future. Here, peace and bread are important metaphors of survival on humanitarian grounds. Nation is just like the amalgamation of the ideas which get generated in the mind of the writer. Here, the ideas are various aspects of liberalism, power politics, religion, caste, and gender whereas the writer is/are the people residing in the nation. The method of coining the idea of nation and that of a novel are similar. Both are concepts in themselves. A novel is a concept developed by the author and then is given the shape of words. The concept is already there in the mind. Similarly, the idea of nation does not exist in itself. It is developed by its people. Both of the entities function together in order to not to let thoughts die and to avoid complacency. Hence, this piece of work can be read as nation as a novel in this light.

However, the other way round can also be understood. Just as there is an element of heterogeneity in the concept of Nation as it is made up of its own diverse people, novel as a genre is also not limited to set category. This novel can be studied as a historical text( talks about history of two thousand years), regional novel( as various regional cultures have been discussed), as a reformist novel( talks about change in one’s outlook to Hindu-Muslim divide), an autobiographical novel( each one of the characters narrates her/his story) and as a feminist text( as it talks about the **bildungsroman** of Champa from being an ordinary girl to her entry into power praxis when she becomes a courtesan). The respective narrative voices and their stories stand for respective novel genre. As it was translated in 1959, according to the temporal fact, it is a post-partition novel. However, in such a treatment, Hyder has tried to grasp the element of plurality in India. She aptly establishes the phrase of unity in diversity in the

novel by taking into consideration, the cultural richness, harmony and the sense of syncretism of Indo-Islamic tradition. Therefore, this text is an amalgamation of both the themes of nation as a novel and the novel as a nation. Both the idea of a nation and that of a novel cannot be limited to singular and linear concept and genre respectively. Aag ka Darya is temporally, a third world novel but is universal in its appeal with respect to human sentiments and nature. Although Hyder creates her own fictionalized characters, she has tried to elaborate upon her own experience of partition. Hence, the novel is again a mixture of fiction and reality. Imagination and experience go hand in hand both in the concept of novel and nation. Considering India, its civilizational importance cannot be understood with the denial of the history of undivided India. The idea of India as a nation lies its past and present both.

#### **REFERENCES**

- ANDERSON, B. (1983). *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES*. NEW YORK: VERSO.
- BHABHA, H. K. (1994). *THE LOCATION OF CULTURE*. NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE.
- HYDER, Q. (1998). *RIVER OF FIRE*. NEW DELHI: WOMEN UNLIMITED .
- JALIL, R. (2011). *THE RIVER OF FIRE: THE MEANING, SCOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF HER LEGACY*. PAKISTAN: OXFORD.
- KHILNANI, S. (2013). *THE IDEA OF INDIA*. PENGUIN BOOKS.
- KUMAR, S. P. *THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY*. [www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com)