

Beyond Stereotypes: The Complexity of Female Characters in Quratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*

Faridah Anjum

(Research Scholar)

P. G. Dept. of English

B.R.A. Bihar University

Muzaffarpur, Bihar.

&

Dr. Shagufta Naj

(Assistant Professor)

P.G. Department of English

M.D.D.M. College

B.R.A. Bihar University

Muzaffarpur, Bihar

Abstract

This paper attempts to highlight the postcolonial representation of women in Quratulain Hyder's novel *River of Fire*. Quratulain Hyder an eminent woman author of several novels and novellas and short stories, explored human dimensions of partition through her writings. She is best known for her magnum opus *River of Fire (Aag ka Darya)*, a novel first published in Urdu in 1959 later it was translated in English in the year 1998 with the title '*River of Fire*'. This novel shows how different linguistic, religious and cultural traditions coalesced into the multicultural diverse India. Set across four Indian epochs (Classical, Medieval, Colonial and Postcolonial), the novel mediates on history and human nature tracing four souls through time. In all four sections, representation of women is the main theme. There are different forms of women's exploitation in different societies. Women have been unjustly held back from achieving full equality in many societies around the world.

The narratives of Hyder are examples of the complex ideas of feminism that include the issue of the marginalization in socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural perspective where we can find diverse leaves of female marginalization in the different eras and of the diverse strata of the society. The study will try to analyse the ways in which Hyder represents her female characters, their roles and position during and after the partition of India.

Keywords: Female Identity, Values, Society, Culture, marginalization, Partition

Introduction

The partition of India in 1947 divided two independent dominions - India and Pakistan. This division was actually division of hearts. The partition of India led to massive human sufferings, including a largest - ever mass migration, widespread communal violence and atrocities against women resulting in the deaths of millions. Economically, it disrupted trade and livelihoods while politically it created lasting hostility and border disputes between India and Pakistan. Socially, it caused cultural disruption and identity crisis of many, with long term consequences still felt today. The migration was accompanied by unprecedented communal violence, with religious mob killings and maiming people. The people of subcontinent saw one of the biggest migrations and upheavals in human history. The lack of clarity in the government's laws and pronouncements relating to the rehabilitation and resettlement of migrants groups which added to the distress of the displaced groups of people. However, underneath the visible and reported histories of the partition lie its particularities, which pertain to the human dimensions of Partition. While recovering and discovering these histories, several silences in the narrative are encountered which relate especially to the experiences of women. There are histories of displacement and dispossession, lost identities, bonds of friendship, experiences of empathy and betrayal and nostalgia of the lost homeland. Partition in India divided people geographically. Men and Women both suffered enormously. But women faced horrific violence, including abduction, rape. They were used as tools for ethnic cleansing and subjected to public stripping, forced conversions and other humiliations. They were not only troubled by displacing themselves geographically but also emotionally as they were betrayed by the men in their lives as depicted by Hyder in her writings. She has portrayed many different aspects of women in her stories through her challenging Characters. *River of Fire* is a historical novel in the sense that its story runs parallel to Indian history. However, it is very different from the kind of epic novel which normally represents the historical novel. Hyder's novel is episodic. It depicts selected historical periods of Indian history, jumping over centuries-long "time-slots." For example, the first fifty pages of the novel take place in fourth century B.C.E. Then the narrative jumps (over the river Saryu) to the fifteenth century, just prior to the rise of Mughal India. This novel is divided into four different phases or time periods- 1. Classical (4th Century BCE), 2. Medieval (from 13th Century to 16th Century), 3. Colonial (18th to 19th Century) 4. Pre-Partition and Post Partition

(20th Century). Each time period has its own particular plot and character. This paper studies the female characters of Quratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*.

Quratulain Hyder as a Writer: Quratulain Hyder a prominent woman writer, scholar, academic, journalist and translator. She was born on 20 January 1927 in Aligarh, Uttarpradesh. Her father Syed Sajjad Haider Yaldram was also renowned urdu short story writer, travel writer, linguistic, translator, humorist. She was named after a notable Iranian poet Qurratul- Ain Tahirih. Qurratul-Ain, translated literally means 'solace of the eyes'. She was popularly known as 'Ainee Aapa' among her friends and admirers. She began to work at the early age of eleven. She has translated significant amount of classics. Her works have been translated into English and other languages. She explored the theme of women experiencing partition and looking for a lost identity and homeland in the world of patriarchy. She began to write at a time when the novel was yet to take deep roots as a serious genre in the poetry-oriented world of Urdu literature. She is the recipient of notable literary awards during her lifetime including the highest literary honour, Janpith Award in 1989, the Sahitya Academic Award in 1967, Padma Shri 1984, Padma Bhushan in 2005, is an influential Indian Urdu novelist and short story writer, academic and journalist. She is the best known for her masterpiece *Aag Ka Darya (River of Fire)*, a novel first published in Urdu in 1959. Hyder's great strength is to be able to capture multiple perspectives and social attitudes. Her juxtaposition of past and present, tradition and modern, east and west is brilliant. Her novel *My Temples Too* revolves around the post colonial) is a meditation of history and human nature. There are four main characters - Gautam and Champa (they appear through out the book) and Cyril and Kamal (they appear only in the latter parts) .The novel *Fireflies in the Mist* is jewel in Urdu's treasure. It was originally written in Urdu under the title '*Akhir-I-shab ke Humsafar*' published in 1979. The story covers a period of over 30 years onset with the widespread outbreak of World War II in 1939 and ends with the diaspora of Bangladeshis to different parts of the globe after 1971. *Chandni Begum*, Hyder's last novel centres around the lives of two aristocratic families living across the Gomti River of Lucknow and controversial estate with mosque and temple and simultaneously it is a moving story about the love, longing, loss and despair atmosphere of the nation. *A Season of Betrayal; A Short Story and Two Novellas* originally published separately under the titles '*Patjhar ki Awaaz*, *Housing Society* and *Sita Harana* ; the stories explore the cataclysmic events that unveiled the lives of the protagonists and how each in her own way battles with state of exile that is more internal than external.

Together they unfold a series of betrayal and struggle to come to terms with them. Her other published works include '*Safina-e-gham-e-Dil*'(1952), '*Raushni ki Raftar*'(1982), '*Chaye ke Bagh*', '*Dilruba*', '*Sita Haran*', '*Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya na Kijo*'(exploring gender injustice), the family chronicle '*Kar-e- Jahan Draz hai*'(the work of the world goes on) as well as '*Gardish-e- Rang-e- Chaman*'(a documentary novel on the post 1857 tragedy befalling women of respectable families), '*Akhir-e- Shab ke Hamsafar*' (a novel on the Naxalite Movement and Bengalunrest). Her first short story '*Bi- Chuhiya*' (Little Miss Mouse) was published in children's magazine '*Phool*' and at the age of nineteen she wrote her first novel '*Mere Bhi Sanam Khane*'. She was Managing Editor of the magazine *Imprint*, Bombay (1964-68) and a member of the editorial staff of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* (1968-75). Hyder also served as a guest lecturer at the Universities of California, Chicago, Wisconsin and Arizona. She was visiting professor at the Urdu Department of Aligarh Muslim University where her father had earlier been a registrar. She is widely regarded as the 'Grande Dame' of Urdu Literature.

Background : Quratulain Hyder's prolific novel, *River of Fire* is a historic example of an early post colonial novel by a woman writer, which opens a space for a historiographical analysis of her fictional account during and after partition of India. An embedded gender concern within feminist historiography often gives little attention to the women in colonial India. Feminist theorists of the 1960s and 1970s looked for new ways to analyse women oppression, often concluding that there were both overt and insidious forces in society that oppressed women. These feminists also drew on the work of earlier authors who had analysed the humiliation of women, including Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* and Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of Rights of women*.

Quratulain Hyder is one such writer who boldly and openly wrote on issues of discrimination, gender inequality and exploitation, her writings are set in the time frame of post - Independence Indo Pakistan subcontinent. Hyder has discursively created the identity of women in the history of the subcontinent. In the first part of the novel *River of Fire*, the identity of the female is constructed through the narrative of the novel. It is also one of the greatest works where we can notice feminine features at her best and Hyder has shown a variety of female predicaments even though the name of the female Characters is the same. This novel is considered one of the classics, not only because of the content but also because of the treatment given to the female characters. No one can say that the characters are not

appealing. The frame story develops the perspective in which specific statements about female identity are situated. Four major characters who belong to the upper class - two males and two ladies. Two other female characters also appear one is Sujata and other is Ambika. Gautam and Hari are male.

The frame story clearly establishes a particular perspective of male and female characters. However, there are specific statements in the narrative which relate to feminist themes. In the first part, there are numerous statements that develop the discourses of female identity in the novel. The theme of a woman waiting for the return of her lover is a consistent and common theme in the entire story. In all four parts, women seem to be waiting for the return of their lover. "Men who go away on long journeys are awaited anxiously in the rainy season by the women they leave behind. That's what all the rain songs say (P: 7)." It is however, important to note that this waiting is not presented as subjugation, marginalization or compulsion. It is presented as a cultural behavior of Indian women. Champa is waiting for Hari Shankar. But it is not a social compulsion but love. She was offered the choice to select a husband but she refused. "She had rejected many a fine suitor and was fast turning into a grumpy old maid. Soon, she may also have no option but to become a sanyasin or even a Buddhist nun (P: 7)". It means that women have the right to choose a way of life for themselves. The women who do want to enter a marriage contract can become Buddhist nun or 'sanyasin'. In the contemporary society in medieval India, women were adopting new trends which were disliked by some people in the society. Gautam comes across an old man with a child-wife criticizing the modernist trends. "All these newfangled notions of equality, no caste, no nothing. And this 'Renounce the World' business is catching on. Even the girls are shaving their silly heads and taking to the woods. This is what happens when you educate the women—they begin to seek nirvana. . . . The old householder's child-wife came out" (P: 7) This extract shows that women's education is a disputed trend in society. Women are adopting new trends which are unacceptable to conservative minds. But all the same, these new trends are in currency. Apart from upper-class women who enjoy some freedom, there are two other classes of women. The working-class woman has limited freedom. Sujata, the milkmaid, is such a character. The other class is that of the courtesan. The narrative introduced courtesans as free women, sometimes envied by upper-class women in some respect. Ambika, the courtesan, is presented as a powerful woman who is subdued only by her passion of love for Gautam. She was an enchantress without being a dangerous vish-kanya. She had also had strenuous training in the

performing arts. As a high-class vaishya she was an accomplished entertainer of nagar-seths, warlords and princes. (P: 26). This description introduces courtesans as a social institution of its own type. The courtesans are acknowledged by society as a class and they have an important role in the social milieu. They represent the performing art and are considered to be social entertainers.

Women and Partition; Humiliation and Oppression : Richard Lee in his article '*For What is Identity Without a Stake in One's Country?*' suggests that 'Women were arguably the worst victims of partition having to endure not only the destruction of their homes, displacement and violence but also abduction, mutilation, prostitutions and rape by men. Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* remarks that in the novel "for the first time a woman writer, Qurratulain Hyder, annexed over twenty-five centuries of Indian History as a subject matter" and articulates "the grand nationalist visions of a pluralist civilization" which had till then been a male domain, with Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru as notable propounders, "while women had been for almost two centuries the subjects of colonial, nationalist, or sectarian histories, often invented and usually patriarchal." Hyder's female characters live within a circle that is fully controlled by men, who are the members of a patriarchal society, which beliefs in the institution of domination and exploitation of women. Though her leading ladies are not openly challenging the patriarchy, still they are not bending in the face of it, either. However, this painful history of human violence and trauma of the past very much forms a part of the social and mental landscape of the woman's world for as long as she is alive. Hyder, in her writings explores the mental dilemma of partition and a woman's sense of belonging and identity in great details. The chief protagonists of her writings are women - Sita Mirchandani in 'Sita Betrayed' and Tanvir Fatima in *The Sound of Falling Leaves* the narratives eventually push them to the margins of the patriarchal order where different men seem to dictate and determine the lifeways of these. Champa the central female character in *River of Fire* reincarnates throughout the novel. First she presents as the daughter of Burgomaster, then as Champavati the sister of learned Brahmin of Ayodhya, Champa Jan in the third story, a rich courtesan in Awadh and finally, and finally Champa Ahmed a social climber. Her journey covers fourth periods can be read as a quest for identity and a journey of evolution into the 'new woman'. Though she has been sketched as knowledgeable about matters of philosophy, yet wandering like a vagrant that Hari Shankar and Gautam Nilambar indulge in is not for her. The worldly matters and scholarly pursuit remains the domain for the

men. Deserted by her fiancé, separated by war from Gautam Nilambar, she is forced to join the harem of the old mantri. When Gautam spots her in the audience, sitting cross-legged with a child beside her, she had turned into "a prosperous housewife and mother. No longer an ideal or a vision, just a smug matron with a double chin and a middle age spread" (Hyder 2003: 47). Thus for Sita, Fatima, Champa many other women in Hyder's writings, the patriarchal social order is a crucial part of their lives and a reality that they cannot although they have not completely compromised with the ways of the world of men, they do feel basic and essential need to secure home and for themselves - the need for care, love, belongingness. However, the catastrophic political partition and its long shadow displaces and disgraces them in ways that could not easily be reconciled with. These are histories of displacement, lost identities, dispossession, bonds of belonging, friendships, experiences of betrayal and empathy and nostalgia for the lost homeland.

Women Empowerment and the concept of New Women

The Indian society is something that can be termed as a conventional society but it has been developing day by day and the females are a really vital part of its development. Nonetheless, there are so many little things that can be changed or that can be improved in our society so that we can have a wonderful society. Among so many things to be improved, the females' position and their roles in society should be thought of. We have been talking about the term women empowerment ever since the term came into use but the things are hard to apply. The mindset of the males of the society is just like that they are not ready to give the females a proper condition or atmosphere to be developed to a certain degree so that they can compete with the males or can become equal to them. However, Hyder's females stand against the traditional concept of the patriarchal society that does not allow the females to rise. Being the females with revolutionary ideas, insolences and temperaments, they are often seen in complete contrast to the conventional females and can be distinguished from the general idea of the females as being obedient and passive in our social set up. The new women are motivated and enthusiastic unlike the traditional ones. The characters like Deepali, Rosie, Chandni Begum, Rakshanda, etc are seen as having rebellious attitudes and approaches that are different and challenging to the males of the society. Thus, women's empowerment is at its best in Hyder's novels. Qurratulain Hyder portrays society at its best in her works and in doing so she has worked upon some social theories among which the theory of Plato on 'justice' is used. Hyder gives the idea of justice as she wants justice for the females of our

society. Her females are educated, outspoken, brave, and bold as they want their equality to be noticed. Similarly, Rousseau talks about social liberty which attracts Hyder as she applies it too in her works. According to Hyder, liberty should be given to females and it is seen whether we talk about Deepali or Rosie in *Fireflies in the Mist* or Champa in *River of Fire*.

Conclusion:

The novels of Qurratulain Hyder have the dimension of the feminist approaches and the ideas which are related to the females. The functional narratives of these novels revolve around the females and their troubles and quandaries. The descriptions of these renowned novels are a kind of a post-colonial counter-discourse of the concept of feminism. It is often noticed that the point of view of Hindus and Muslims is never compared to that which has been shown by the Western feminist theories and the way Qurratulain Hyder has portrayed these females in the local context. However, Qurratulain Hyder has done this in her peculiar style without considering these western theories, which is the most amazing aspect. It is a fact that the novels are products of the experiences of being a female in the sub-continent and the other important aspect is the fact that Qurratulain Hyder holds a specific view of the identity that the females have and this is what we can notice all through these novels. Most of the novels are examples of the complex ideas of feminism that includes the issue of marginalization in social-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural perspective where we can find diverse lives of female marginalization in the different eras and of the diverse strata of the society. Qurratulain Hyder has tried to present females from the different times and their problems in each of these eras. We can find so many female characters in these novels and each of them has their own stories to tell and so Qurratulain Hyder has done amazingly well to include all such details in these novels and perhaps that is the reason why these novels are well known. The narratives of Hyder are often tied up with social stratifications and the liberty that these females do not get since the society does not permit them the Socio-political and cultural opportunities like the males. They also put forward the struggle, predicament, and marginalization that we come across in our society. Our novelist, like other great writers, like Manto, Ismat Chughtai, and others has put the world around her in her works which makes them unique as the readers have the dose of imagination and reality together. An exploration of Qurratulain Hyder's women and their lives provides us important insight into the complex questions of women and their agency, partition and patriarchal social order. Her women characters may not outrightly challenge patriarchy but they also do not succumb to it. The lives of these women are shown to be full of miseries, but they are not seen confused and do

not get numbed by the atrocities of society. They are examples of strong, bold, powerful, intelligent, audacious, opinionated, liberated, free-spirited, and rebellious and they are not easily avoided even in the patriarchal society. Hyder represents the dark and hidden issues of women in her novels. Her writings have been recognised and appreciated specially by females who find their voices being echoed. She advocates females' rights and liberty in her novels. She has portrayed female characters against the males to show the difference that exists in our society. She has tried to shift the attention of the readers from that of the males to the females and she is successful in allotting the gender consciousness to her female characters as they are shaping up a new kind of society where women are authoritative and equal to the males. These females, unlike the other females of the society, are rich in terms of the diversity that they are portrayed with, and the uniqueness that they possess. The proposed research work is an ardent attempt to explore how Quratulain Hyder has presented the foregrounded the habitations of marginalized womanhood within the changing face of emergent spirit of nationalism, to examine the literary and cultural reading of Quratulain Hyder's works, to analyse the ways in which Hyder represents her female characters, their roles and position during and after partition of India, to locate the simulated portico prevailing in the society related to women and their unsettling fractured identities in the society with respect to post colonial aspects , to find out the pain loss, displacement that her female characters faced during and after the partition. The present study will also try to explore the mental dilemma and the questions of women's sense of belonging and identity in a world where internally and externally everything was shattered during partition. Quratulain Hyder's works have always been fascinating to the readers and they are quite aware of the genius of Quratulain Hyder after reading her novels. However, the detailed study of the aspects such as culture, Feminism in Indian Writing in English, Women's predicament in Pakistan, history, socio-psychological aspects, partition, style of writing, and other co-existing elements can certainly help the readers to have a complete idea of as a novelist and they can enjoy her works if they know all these things. Thus, the present work under discussion is sincere effort to explore Quratulain Hyder's intricately crafted works in the rapid socio- cultural changed that have impacted India and to study her major concern of life philosophy, time and chaos during and after partition in the life of women.

References

- Baloria, Tania. 'Afflicted by Partition and Deceived by Men: A study of female characters in selected Novellas of Quratulain Hyder.' *Dialog* 36(2020) : 1-11.
- Balouch, Akhtar. "Why did Qurut-ul-Ain Hyder Leave Pakistan for India?" *Dawn*. October 3, 2015.
- Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*, edited by H.M. Parshley. Vintage Books, 1997. Print.
- Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2014
- Butalia, Urvashi. *Partition: The Long Shadow* (London: Penguin Books,2015)
- Hussain, Iqbalunnisa . *Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks* (Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2015)
- Hyder, Quratulain. *A Season of Betrayals: A Short Story and two Novellas* (C.M Naim trans.)New Delhi: Kali for women, 1999
- Hyder, Quratulain. *River of Fire (Aag ka Darya)*. Kali, 1998.
- Khan, Yasmin. *The Great Partition*, Penguin UK,2013
- Lee, Richard. "For What Is Identity without a Stake in One's Country?" *Quest*, Issue 5, Autumn 2007.
- Mishra, R. K. (2013). *Postcolonial feminism: Looking into within-beyond-to difference*, *International Journal of English and Literature*, 4(4), 129-134, June,2013
- Mistri, Deepti. *Beyond Partition: Gender, Violence and Representation in Post colonial India* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014)
- Raja, Masood A. "Qurut-ul-AinHaider's *River of Fire*: The Novel and the Politics of Writing beyond the Nation-State. *Interactions* 15, (2), 2006:49-60.
- Sajjad, Muhammad. "History and Fiction:The Depiction of 1857 in Qurratulain Hyder's Fiction." http://www.academia.edu/19181222_2011
- Sharma, Achla. "Status of Women: A Socio-Historical Analysis in Different Ages of Indian Society." *Research Journal of Literature, Language and Humanities*, 1 (01), 2014: 10-14. Retrieved from www.isca.in

