

## REVISITING HISTORY IN QURRATULAIN HYDER’S: THE RIVER OF FIRE

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### ABSTRACT

*River of Fire*, is a land mark novel that explores the vast sweep of time and history. It tells a story that moves from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC to the post-independence period in India and Pakistan, pausing at the many crucial epochs of history. The novel gives a detailed account of North Indian history parallel to its characters overall, through a long, complicated narrative, the subcontinent is represented as a repository of varying cultures that enrich the soil and are tamed by India. The present paper is an attempt to explore that how the novel offers an alternative view of male centric history where women are only mute spectator of things happening around them and happening to them. Hyder gives an account of history which is based on her first hand experiences at various places where she lives.

“History in the narrow sense is the science of the human past. In the wider sense, it studies and of the species, as well as of civilization.”

(Novel as History, p.24)

For ordinary man, the term history means a history of a country, primarily its political history, which deals with the name of kings and monarchs and the details pertaining to ‘who succeeded whom and how’ at a particular point of time. However, it is difficult to define and describe the nature and subject of history in order to get a comprehensive idea of any particular period of time, it is necessary to take into account religious, inventions, warfare, expansion of trade and other cultural and economical activities. Juliet Gardiner describes history as “an unending dialogue between the present and the past”.

The origin of history can be traced back to the oldest documents of “Eolithic” or “Paleolithic” ages; the historiography did not come into existence until the art of writing has been mastered. The earliest and the simplest form of a more authenticable kind of historical account consist of dynastic lists, which are found at ancient Sumer and Egypt. After that, the very first objective account of history is of the Persian War, in Fifth century B.C by Herodotus.

Then onward history was divorced from folk tales and myth as the latter were divorced to be opposite to “truth” and “fact”. The changed concept of history proposed that history is based on the fact, is linear and objective and deals with material very different from fiction. However, the idea of historical progress is one of the contributions of the Bible. The Bible is not only the basis of Western literature and culture; it has also influenced the concept of human history.

History can also be described as “... the complex of social and material forces which modify the individual and community in a succession of experienced presents,” and yet again as a “supra-individual, supra-communal, Trans temporal continuum, genetically or teleological oriented.” Both these meanings of history are, broadly speaking, a rejection of history. Foucault rejects history on the ground that “for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for reacting the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled. According to the theorists like Ernest Renan and Homi Bhabha amongst others, grouping of provinces affected by a dynasty, by its wars, its marriages, and its treaties, ends with the dynasty which had established it”. It is quite true that the majority of modern nations were made by a family of feudal origin, which had contracted a marriage with the soil and which was in some sense a nucleus of centralization. The issue of narrating the nation can be linked with its people, their lives, their beliefs and inter-communal relations.

It must be admitted that a nation can exist without a dynastic principle. The historians of the early days unable to grapple with the changing meaning of nation had followed an unvarying method; they simply wrote of the parts played by the individuals who held the power and followed the role of the humanity to find its place in literature. Historians often miss the circumstances that influence the morals and manners of people, the transition of communities and silent revolutions, as they are not required by the armies or enacted by governments. The literary writers, on the other hand, try to find out such gaps and fissures in history and fill these gaps with lively events, engulfed by literary imaginations. Obviously history has been his or her tool. What is narrated depends on ‘who’ narrates and ‘why’. The revolt of 1857, for instance, can be an illustration in sight. Will Durant, observes, “This is what the English call the Sepoy Mutiny, and the Hindus call the War of Independence”.

History and the novel shared the same source of origin in their initial days. In its earliest days, the majority of the tales in Norman England focused around Arthur, Alexander the Great, and the Seize of Troy, assuming the form of histories and biographies, which in recent time is better known as cycles of romance. In the ancient India, one would observe history enveloped in myths and legends; in most of the cases the facts are found to panegyric fiction and poetical embellishment. To put it differently, Indians did not develop history as a science or an art as the Europeans did. They developed it in their own way; adding to its myths and legends and rendering it ‘timeless’. To them, history need not have just a factual statement of occurrences of past; it has to be something more than that. History was considered means through which the inculcation in posterity of fourfold objects of the life is to be attempted, as the complete definition of history says:

Dharmath Kam Mokshanupadesa samnritam.

Purvvrutkathayuktamitihasm prachkshte.

Which means that history teaches us all about *dharm*(religion), *arth*(science of wealth), *kam*(action) and *moksh*(salvation).

A good number of novelists in English as well as in regional languages with enthusiasm of reviving and re-narrating the past opted for the novel as a suitable form of expression. History

has come to constitute an important pre-occupation with the writers in recent time and especially so amongst the post-colonial as may be witnessed in a good number of works that overt or subtle use of history. The writers have made significant experiments in fictional form and have captured realities of their time and the past. It is their sensitiveness to history-personal, racial and national that compels them to respond history.

Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* is a landmark novel that explores the vast sweep of time and history. It tells a story that moves from the fourth century BC to the post-independence period in India and Pakistan, pausing at a very crucial epochs of history. *River of Fire* captures two hundred years of Indian history through the lived experiences of four recurring characters: Gautam, Champak, Kamal and Cyril. The novel is staged in four historical periods: first, the expansion of the Mauryan empire under Chandragupta in the fourth century BC; second, the end of the Lodi dynasty and the beginning of the Mughal rule in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries; third, the late eighteenth and beginning of East India company rule until its consolidation in the 1870's; and fourth, the two decades leading up to the 1950 that encompassed nationalist struggle, partition and independence. These constitute four sequential yet discrete experimental moments that can neither be made amenable to a casual and technological reading, nor slotted in as the discontinuous fragments, a prominent characteristic of a high modernism.

In *River of Fire* the four historical moments remain linked to each other through sedimentation and retrieval. In each of these moments, a set of characters reappear with partly altered names either as different persons or in recognizably similar situations. Women and men, scholars, historians, travelers, seekers, and artists, they relive individual trajectories of mutilation, desertion, uprooting, exile, wandering and settlement, often repeating a 'cycle' of withdrawal into personal and spiritual resolutions in the face of gross violence. For instance, Champak in the first story, daughter of the chief minister, is deserted by her prince-fiance who becomes a Buddhist bhikshu but she rejects the same option for herself separated by war from Gautam Nilambar, captured and forced to join the harem of an old mantra. Champavati in the second story is the sister of a learned Brahmin pandit in Ayodhya; she agrees to wed Sayed Abdul Mansur Kamaluddin and seems ready to convert to Islam but Kamal, the travelling scholar, never returns; she searches for him, then joins a band of Vaishnav sannyasins and retries to Brindaban. Champa jan in the third story is a rich and intelligent courtesan in Awadh who fell in love with the Bhadro Gautum Nilambar a loyal East Indian Company servant; she waits for his return in the train to Calcutta. Her middle age is spent as chowdhra in Lucknow. Looted and destroyed in the 1857 revolt, she eventually becomes an old beggar who still lurks at the railway station, still in love with an ultimately indifferent man. Champa Ahmed in the fourth story, daughter of a gentle lawyer who supports the Muslim league, is a petit bourgeois, self-fictionalizing social climber, an outsider in the upper class Lucknow circle, who plays out a series of relationships with various men including Gautam Nilambar and Cyril Ashley in England, ends up not marrying any of them, works in England for a while, and returns in 1954 to set up a legal practice with her father in her hometown, Benaras.

Another central character, Abdul Mansur Kamaluddin of Nishapur appears for the first time in the second story. The son of Persian mother and an Arab father, he comes to India in 1476 in search of a fortune on the advice of a Phoenician Jew, becomes a court translator in Jaunpur, and begins to write *The Marvels and Strange Tales of Hindustan*. His affair through an 'intellectual' romance with Ruqqaiya Bano Begum, a kinswoman of Sultan Hussain Shah, then falls in love with Champavati. Separated by war, he makes no real effort to find her until it is too

late. When Jaunpur is destroyed by Sikandar Lodi, he deserts the sultan he serves Buddhist Bikshur and Kabir and finally settles down in Bengal, tills the land and marries the Sundra Sujata Devi. His elder son goes into Mughal service and because of this; Kamal is dubbed a traitor, beaten and left to die by Sher Shah's soldiers. In the third story, he is symbolically split between two characters that may or may not be his descendants: the impoverished Bengali boatman Abdul Mansur and Kamal, a hereditary landowner in Avadh. This Kamal, though married, is an admirer of Champa Jan and befriends Gautum Nilamber. Later he recounts the events of 1857 to Gautum –as a sign of Hindu-Muslim unity, a tale of British adroitly, a proof of the valor of militant women. He goes to England and two years later when returned back, after the revolt, he finds his city (Lucknow) in ruins. Kamal in the fourth story is split between two cousins – the Switzerland returned Amir Raza who does not marry Champa Ahmed and migrates to Pakistan and the ardently socialist and nationalist Kamal Raza who studies in Cambridge, come back to a derelict Lucknow, but cannot find a job; the land reforms impoverish his parents, their ancestral property is unfairly confiscated as evacuee property; dispossessed, they are compelled to emigrate to Pakistan.

In each part, characters become more complex as they are inflected by their previous persona- they are distant from yet related to the earlier characters. Caught in political calamities, connected to each other through relations of love and friendship, the characters exist in fullness of each historical moment as well as stretch across time. Overall, through a long, complicated narrative, the subcontinent is represented as a repository of varying culture that enriches the soil and is tamed by India. The final chapters capture the post-partition history of India and Pakistan within the metaphor of the family. It is important to note that the novel's overall progression is dialectical: all new additions to the larger India that Hyder attempts to represent. Her focus, however is not articulating the objective differences but the possibilities of merger and coherence in India's two hundred years journey.

Oudh is the main setting of her novel's modern historical part. The choice of Oudh over Delhi is strategic and deserves our attention. There were two major cultural centers of pre-British India under Muslims: Delhi and Oudh. In choosing Lucknow as a model of Indian possibilities of convergence over difference, for it was in Lucknow the most culturally diverse city in the kingdom of Oudh, that the Muslims and Hindus were able to develop a culture that transcended their religio-linguistic objective differences. Hyder portrays this particular aspect of the Lucknow culture as:

The Nawab Vazirs of Oudh banned the killing of monkeys in deference to the Hindu monkey-god, Hanuman. Dussehra and Holi were officially celebrated by many Mughal kings in the Red Fort at Delhi, Holi and Basant were official festivals in Lucknow. Sadat Ali Khan, the fifth Nawab Vazir's mother, Rajmata Chhatar Kunwar, built the famous Hanuman temple in Ali Gunj Lucknow, with a crescent atop its spire. The Nawab Vazirs created a culture which combined the finest element of the civilizations of Iran and India.

(The River of Fire 42, p-260)

Hyder's critical quest is not about the partition-plebian aspects of articulation, rather she has emphasized precisely at retrieving and introducing the writer's attempt at imagining a different history and future of nation at the point in Indian history when that past and the possible

future had already been altered in the name of irreconcilable differences that resulted in the nation- state of India and Pakistan. Hyder also portrays the degree of inter-religious alliances during the Indian rebellion. In a chapter entitled, “The Queen and Her Knights”, Hyder captures this inter-religious allegiance in the following words: “On 16<sup>th</sup> September Colin Campbell.....along with the robe of honour”. (Chapter 42, p-260). It is this shared heritage, privileged by Hyder that had to be abandoned to articulate the future Hindu-Muslim politics of India.

The world created by a composite high culture of Lucknow is replaced by the realities of partition. These characters, thus, enact their altered national identities through their interactions. The aspect of a new reality had already become obvious even before these characters had left India for London. Immediately after the announcement of partition, Champa had experienced it at a wedding at which both Hindus and Muslims were invited guests. A young Bengali asks Champa:

Hellow, there! How is Mr.Jinnah? How is it that he has gone away to Karachi and left you behind? Champa was completely taken aback who was this stranger? How had he guessed that she was a Muslim? Was it written on her face? Was this how Muslims were going to be sneered in future?

(Chapter 44, p.263)

This brief encounter between Champa and the Bengali stranger signifies that for those who chose to remain in the age-old homes and hometown the partition had introduced a new reality, a sort of national consciousness that had bothered the very people who had previously seen each other as part of one large high culture. In Champa’s case this problem is further compounded by her interaction with her friend, Kamal, who had known Champa all this time, accosted her same evening the following words:

Champa Baji, congratulations! Your Pakistan has come into being, after all.

(Chapter 44, p.264)

Part of this certainty comes from Kamal’s own bitterness, for him, unlike Champa who was sympathized with the Muslim League was completely opposed to the idea of partition. On an individual level, they are still the same people but the change in political structures within which they existed has also altered their individual view of each other.

Hyder traces the impact of slowly changing national identity through the experiences of Kamal who reluctantly decides to leave for Pakistan. Kamal’s experience also hints at the lack of possibilities for the Muslims in India immediately after the partition. When he reaches Lucknow, he sees the immediate consequences of the partition. Hyder in sharing Kamal’s experiences foregrounds the often neglected lives of the Muslims who chose to stay behind, for whom their own country had become a foreign place. Kamal eventually immigrates to Pakistan, but through his story, Hyder enacts the failure of a composite culture that had been created over centuries. *River of Fire* records, a particular moment when popular culture and popular colonial national retrievals were yet not quite archive, not-yet-post-modern-pastiche, but a sediment overfull and paradoxically contemporaneous archive, which gave a sense of fullness, a fullness that destroyed by partition but remembered and experienced as loss as pressure. Thus the novel enforces a

secular nationalism imaged as civilization strength with still retrieval potentials that is nationalism in itself is a source and support for concurrence.

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