

RHYTHMIC IMAGERY IN A RIVER WITH THREE BANKS

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M.H. Abram has defined rhythm as “recognizable through variable pattern in the beat of the stresses in the stream of sound.” (112). In the novel *A River With Three Banks* of Shiv K Kumar imagery is used in such a pattern of repetition, variation and expansion that we start recognizing a proper rhythm in it.

The image of the river in the title of the novel imparts a three- dimensional meaning to the novel. On one level it symbolizes the vastness and depth of Indian culture, its universality itself. The three banks stand for the varied cultures and religions that have been imbibed into it. Thus the title of the book *A River with Three Banks* denotes the feature of unity in diversity on cultural and religious levels.

On further reading, one is struck by the rhythmic repetition, variation and expansion of the image of the river especially that of the three banks of the river. In the novel, as a musical symphony there is the easy rhythmic imagery of the parts as well as the more difficult and less apprehensible rhythm of the whole.

During the disturbances that were occurring in India soon after the partition, a Muslim girl called Haseena, gets kidnapped from Allahabad by a gang of abductors headed by Pannalal. She, along with many others Muslim girls, was being forced into prostitution at Delhi. Haseena's father Abdul Karim, who had gone to Delhi in search of his daughter, gets killed by an angry Hindu mob; his murder was witnessed from a distance by the protagonist of the novel, Gautam Mehta, a journalist at Delhi. He had been facing a storm in his family life at that time and had been successful in manipulating his divorce from his adulterous wife, Sarita through conversion into Christianity. Emotionally bruised, he allows himself to be talked by his friend Beery into spending a night with a call-girl. It is in this way, that Gautam meets Haseena in a brothel. Gautam helps her to escape from Delhi to Allahabad where she joins her family.

Gautam pursued Pannalal who catches up with him on the banks of Ganges. But in the duel that follows, it is Pannalal who gets killed. Gautam gets himself converted into Islam in order to marry Haseena. While her family migrates to Pakistan, she stays back, not as Haseena but as Haseena Gautam, to start a new race "sans religion, sans caste, sans nationality"(214).

The image of “Triveni” creates in the novel great and far reaching symbolic effects. First of all it stands for the real object itself - the "Sangam" or the meeting place of the three great holy rivers of India - Ganga, Jamuna, and Saraswati. Thus the words "three banks" in the title of the novel give symbolic connotations to the novel at the onset itself. "Triveni" is the living symbol of the most outstanding feature of India as a nation - its cultural and religious unity in diversity. Further, the qualities of peacefulness, purity and grandeur are attributed to the great holy river of India - Ganges. People bathe in it for the cleansing of their soul's impurities. The river Jamuna's water is dark in color and it is instable. The third river - Saraswati, although not physically visible, according to a contemporary myth, had existed way back in the past. It is

believed to be flowing as subterranean now. Knowledge and spirituality are the traits attributed to it. The "Triveni" is assumed to be the culminating point of all the qualities represented by each of these three rivers. The most important incidents of the novel are placed in and around the "Triveni"- the meeting place of all these important rivers of India which imparts symbolic aptness to the novel.

The image of "Triveni" expands further and achieves an even more important metaphoric significance in the protagonist Gautam's character, which is an amalgam of all the virtues attributed to the three holy rivers culminating as "Triveni". River Jamuna's dark hue is represented by the bruised mind of Gautam, who had to confront an emotional duel before he divorced his wife Sarita. Above all he is a highly knowledgeable person; this quality is attributed to river Saraswati. The spirituality of River Ganga is reflected in the philanthropy and humanity of Gautam's character.

Thus, Gautam's character, here assumes the significance of a metaphor, and becomes another "Triveni", a culminating field of varied philosophical principles. This can be best explained through the image of Gautam's character. But the Buddhist aspect of his character is even more prominent. Buddhism approves the doctrine of not self (anatmavada). The attachment with one's own self is the root cause of all conflicts, tensions and injustice in this world. Gautam's altruism is reflected in his relation with his wife. Although she indulged in an extramarital affair, he is ready to reconcile with her. "I don't really hate you", he started off. "I wish I could open out my heart to you(...) If at all I ask for divorce, it is because I feel we should live separately for a couple of years so that we may learn to miss each other. (...) You know I have seriously considered remarrying you." (25). He loves Rahul, his wife's illegitimate child as his own, and blames himself for his wife's illicit relationship. After the death of Rahul he never returns, but bequeaths all his property to Sarita. Buddhism teaches universal compassion, self-abnegation and renunciation. "When to myself, as to my fellow beings, fear and pain are unpleasant, what distinguishes my own self that protect it and not others?" (Joshi 58). At the time of partition, when most of the Hindus were prejudiced against Muslims, Gautam feels sorry for being unable to save the life of Abdul Karim and even recognizes a striking resemblance between Abdul and his own father. "...the same wheatish complexion, arched eyebrows, chiseled chin and nose" (38). "Doing good to others involves the practice of great moral virtues like harmlessness, friendliness and compassion. The practice of these virtues demands supreme renunciation (tyaga) and non-attachment. (viaragya)." (Quoted by Joshi 60). Gautam attains this state when towards the end, to save Haseena and her family he puts his own life into peril.

The best side of Gautam's character is reflected in the third aspect of the "Triveni", the Gandhian philosophy itself. Gautam felt no hesitation about changing his religion one after the other because, like Mahatma Gandhi, he also found no difference in the basic principles of all the great religions. To Haseena's question, "Are you a Muslim, Sir?" he replies, "I am now a Christian. A few years ago I was a Hindu. And I wouldn't mind becoming a Muslim." (80). This is reminiscent of Gandhiji's oft quoted words: "I am a Christian, and a Hindu and a Muslim and a Jew." Gandhian principles of non-violence, truth and chastity are also deep-rooted in Gautam's character. He does not indulge in any sort of violence, always tries to help the needy and the helpless, is always truthful to himself as well as others. In the brothel he does not take advantage of the situation to indulge in physical union with Haseena, instead he does his higher duty and utilizes the limited allotted time to help Haseena to escape from the clutches of her abductors. Bob, another character in the novel aptly comments on the self control of Gautam when he says, "Tremendous self-control. (...) balancing yourself between the Kama Sutra and the Geeta" (83).

As taught and practiced by Gandhiji, nonviolence does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil doer. It is a soul force or truth-force or truth seeking force. The highest violence can be the highest nonviolence. Pannalal was an incarnation of violence itself. Had he not been killed by Gautam, the latter would have been killed by him. Thus it was not only an act of self defense but that of eradicating violence itself or enlightened nonviolence of Gandhiji who said, "where there is a choice between cowardice and violence itself I would choose violence." Eventually when Gautam undergoes torture in the hands of the Sikhs in the train, and again when he is on the verge of being killed while rescuing Haseena and her family he emerges as another Christ. Thus the three banks of philosophy - that of Gautam (a rational, emotional human being), and of Buddha and that of Gandhi, culminate into the "Triveni" of Gautam Mehta's character.

But there is another more important kind of rhythm in the novel, which gives an internal organic stitching to it. When an orchestra stops we hear something that has actually never been played. This is what happens with *A River with Three Banks*. Something unheard and not read in the novel is apprehended when the novel is over. At the zenith of the crescendo of the rhythm of imagery it becomes an independent and eternal being, prophesying of the advent of a new generation - a new race - sans caste, sans religion, sans nationality, sans... It is this rhythmic quality of imagery, this repetition and variation, this expansion and liberation that attributes a unique musical quality to *A River with Three Banks*. Comparing this kind of rhythmic quality of fiction to music E. M. Forster says in *Aspects of the Novel*: "Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out. When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom. Cannot a novel be like that? ", asks E. M. Forster (137). This has been achieved by Shiv K Kumar in *A River with Three Banks*, and it is one of the highest achievements a novelist can achieve. Shiv K Kumar's reputation is definitely assured.

Workscited

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