

Aag ka Darya by Qurratulain Hyder : Saga of the Subcontinent

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study **Aag ka darya is a historical novel written by Qurratulain Hyder** providing context to the traumatic partition of the Indian subcontinent into two nation-states. Aag ka Darya in 1959, is without question the most important novel of 20th-century Urdu literature. An amazing, sui generis book, River of Fire spans two and a half millennia. Set during four Indian epochs (the classical, the medieval, the colonial, and the modern post-national), the novel is a meditation on history and human nature, tracing four souls through time. Each section is linked by characters who bear, in every period, the same names: Gautam, Champa, Kamal, and Cyril. Gautam (appearing first as a student of mysticism at the Forest University of Shravasti in the 4th century B.C.E.) and Champa (throughout embodying the enigmatic experience of Indian women) begin and end the novel; Muslim Kamal appears mid-way through, as the Muslims did, and loses himself in the Indian landscape; and Cyril, the Englishman, appears later still. In different eras, different relations from among the four -- romance and war, possession and dispossession. Yet together the characters reflect the oneness of human nature: amidst the nationalist and religious upheavals of Indian history, Hyder argues for a culture that is inclusive. If the undivided India was not partitioned into two parts, still, Lucknow's Qurratul'ain Hyder would have faced no difficulty in writing her novel, Aag ka Darya. I don't consider it right to insist that the blow of partition was so hard and penetrating that the author was forced to write such a voluminous novel because the underlying structure of the author's foundational thought process compel us to think in this way.

The tradition of writing novel in Urdu has not been very strong. This time-period has mostly been eighty to hundred years. All the while a good number of novelists came on the stage, however, there are two prominent names in Urdu who established the tradition of writing novel: first, Mirza Hadi Ruswa; and the second, Munshi Premchand. No other novel of Urdu could match the well-organised plot of Ruswa's Umrao Jaan Ada. But, Ruswa's whole gamut of thought and action, unlike Premchand, was limited, whereas dominion of the latter was the whole of India—the hustle and bustle of Indian villages, its culture, and its social and economic transactions. One finds a continuous evolution in Premchand's thought process from 1907 till Godaan. Interweaving parables, legends, dreams, diaries, and letters, Hyder's prose is lyrical and witty. There is really no book like River of Fire. Qurratulain Hyder was awarded the Bharatiya Gnanpith, India's highest literary award, in 1989, and here is her masterpiece, her broadest canvas and her finest art

Key words: Aag ka darya, Pakistan, Qurratulain Hyder, India, Urdu

Introduction

Aag Ka Darya (Urdu: دریا کا آگ; River of Fire) is a landmark historical novel written by Qurratulain Hyder providing context to the traumatic partition of the Indian subcontinent into two nation-states. It has been described as "one of the Indian Subcontinent's best known novels". The novel timelines spanned more than two thousand years, starting from the time of Chandargupta Maurya in the fourth century BC to the post-Independence period in India and Pakistan. It was published in Urdu in 1959 and translated by the author into English in 1998 as *River of Fire*. In 2012, it was reprinted by New Directions Publishing. Born in Aligarh in 1927, Hyder migrated to Pakistan in 1947. But just a few years later, after *Aag Ka Darya* was published, Hyder returned to India, where she was welcomed with open arms by none other than Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad. Her debut novel, *Mere Bhi Sanam Khaane* (My Temples), examined the causes of Hindu-Muslim violence that led to the partition of India.

Ainee Apa – as she was endearingly referred to by her readers – dealt with the aftermath of such communal discord in her next novel *Safina-e-Gham-e-Dil* (Boat of Sorrow). When the military and religious fundamentalists tightened their grip on Pakistan, in 1958, Ainee Apa gifted her third novel, *Aag Ka Darya*, to the Urdu literary world. This was at a time when the Pakistani establishment was systematically cleansing the country's ethos of any traces of Hindu (thereby Indian) traditions, which earlier existed alongside the Islamic ones.

Aag Ka Darya transcended revisionism by blending the mammoth task of chronicling the Indian subcontinent's history with witty and fictional prose. The novel spanned historical periods from the Mauryan Empire, the end of the Lodhi dynasty, the start of the Mughal rule, the British Raj to the partition of India. It contains recurring characters with similar names and cyclical occurrences that establish continuity.

It exudes the same cadence through which Marquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude* reimagined Colombia's history through the repetition of core dramatis personae and watershed events. Each of the epochs constitutes the backdrops that shape these characters' actions, their interactions with each other, and their individual trajectories.

Abul Kalam, professor of Urdu at Maulana Azad National Urdu University and an acquaintance of Hyder, considered the book to be the third part of a trilogy. "She saw how the violence played out in 1947. Therefore, Apa's first two masterpieces were her ways of purging herself of the partition memories that weighed heavily on her," he said. Unlike the first two parts of this unofficial trilogy, *Aag Ka Darya* did not delve too much into the circumstances that destroyed the Hindu-Muslim unity. Kalam elaborated and said, "Aag Ka Darya chronicles how the cultures of Hindus and Muslims amalgamated to form the syncretic ethos of a land called 'Hind'".

Today, with the majority and minority populations being polarised through their religious identities and national registers deciding whether someone is truly Indian or not, the theme of belonging to a nation hits close to home. Ironically, present-day Muslims are conflated with certain Muslim rulers and their excesses on the "native" Hindu. A memorable character that symbolises this nuanced view about the Muslim rulers' contributions to India is a half-Middle Eastern, half-Persian man named Kamal. Before being supplanted by the Lodhi regime, the Jaunpur Sultanate tasks Kamal with translating Hindu spiritual texts into Persian. To do so, he first learns Sanskrit. Even after Kamal's Jaunpur Sultanate masters are ousted by the Lodhis, he further naturalises himself into his adopted land by marrying a lower-caste Hindu and learning other indigenous languages like Bengali and Awadhi.

With the end of colonial rule, in the land that was once a fertile ground for syncretism, the colonially implanted ideas of a Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan have materialised. Even when a totally ‘Hinduised’ country did not seem like a possibility in 1947 to some, Kamal was loyal to India despite the pro-Pakistan Muslim League influences around him. Yet, it were those seeds of hatred that rendered him unemployable as a Muslim despite his superb qualifications.

Juxtaposed against another recurring British character, Cyril, Kamal is anything but an exploitative coloniser. During the British era, Cyril is the quintessential ‘civiliser’ of the natives. He undertakes multiple affairs with many native women whom he views as exotic and lures with false promises of marriage. Another one of his incarnations, in the post-independence epoch, can’t even stay loyal to his wife. Commenting on her nuance, Kalaam states, “Throughout her repertoire, she never excessively extolled the pleasant or unsavoury aspects of any historical period of the subcontinent.”

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze The most important novel of twentieth-century Urdu fiction. **First published in 1959, Aag ka Darya by Qurratulain Hyder** encompasses the fates of four recurring characters over two and a half millennia: Gautam, Champa, Kamal, and Cyril—Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian.

Aag Ka Darya Background and plot summary

Set across "four Indian epochs (the classical, the medieval, the colonial, and the modern post-national)", Hyder traces the fates of four souls through time: Gautam, Champa, Kamal, and Cyril. "Gautam (appearing first as a student of mysticism at the Forest University of Shravasti in the fourth century B.C.E.) and Champa (throughout embodying the enigmatic experience of Indian women) begin and end the novel; Muslim Kamal appears mid-way through, as the Muslims did, and loses himself in the Indian landscape; and Cyril, the Englishman, appears later still." Their stories crisscross "over different eras, forming and reforming their relationships in romance and war, in possession and dispossession."

Aag Ka Darya was about the centuries-old history that leads to the forming of a pluralistic ethos of a territory called “Hind.”

The historical eras covered are:

- The Expansion of the Mauryan Empire under Chandragupta in the 4th century BC,
- The end of the Lodhi dynasty and the beginning of Mughal rule in the late 15th and early 16th centuries,
- The late 18th century beginnings of the East India Company rule until its consolidation in the 1870s and
- The two decades leading up to the 1950s that encompassed nationalist struggle, partition, and independence.

Each era for the most part contains the same characters with slightly different names like the personages in 100 Years of Solitude. Despite the differences of each of the eras, each era includes upheaval of sorts with a new power coming in affecting the lives of people. Starting from the Vedic age to the partition, its characters experience upheaval.

This novel shows how different linguistic, religious, and cultural traditions coalesced into the multicultural and diverse that island that is India. The syncretic genius of India that founding fathers like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the country’s

first Education Minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad sought to upload even after the contributed experience the partition violence.

This syncretic genius is very much at the heart of the novel, especially in today's times.

With the advent of rewriting history to suit current political agendas gaining more steam than before, "River of Fire" is a book that reminds people of the traditions embedded in the country's constitution. In the vein of "100 Years of Solitude", the characters in each period are very similar to each other by name and the trajectories they take.

This classic is also not the most breezy read. That too, considering the prose woven with intricate and glossed-over aspects of the sub-continent's history. The subtitles and symbolism, which Hyder has mastered throughout her repertoire, may take more than one readings to grasp.

Major themes

Together the characters reflect the oneness of human nature amidst the nationalist and religious upheavals of Indian history, Hyder argues for a culture that is inclusive.

Shortly before Partition, Kamal wonders: "The Indo-Muslim life-style is made up of the Persian-Turki-Mughal and regional Rajput Hindu cultures. So, what is this Indianness which the Muslim League has started questioning? Could there be an alternate India? Why?"

"For postcolonial scholars, Hyder's history has long been a purposeful rebuke to the purist Hindutva and Islamist ideologue."

Style

Pankaj Mishra in The New York Review of Books wrote: "(River of Fire) has a magisterial ambition and technical resourcefulness rarely seen before in Urdu fiction. (...) Hyder employs diverse genres – letters, chronicles, parables, journals – to present her melancholy vision of the corruptions of time."

Aamer Hussein described the style thus: "Lyrical and witty, occasionally idiosyncratic, it is always alluring and allusive: Flora Annie Steel and E. M. Forster encounter classical Urdu poets; Eliot and Virginia Woolf meet Faiz Ahmed Faiz".

The author, therefore, has made a good deal of effort in justifying her pain—so much so that she has made efforts at associating her pain with that of Gautam Buddha's; the humanitarian philosophy has been put forth, and the Hindu-Muslim unity, too, has been displayed ostentatiously with glossy ideological lacework. In this way a complete jargon has been created.

So, when Qurratul'ain Hyder feared that her social order was slipping out of her hand, and it was destined to be destroyed, then, in order to justify that social order and her position in it, she declared time to be *Aag ka Darya* (River of Fire). And she hypothesised that the human life keeps burning in this fire, and societies, civilisations and cultures turn to ashes after getting burned in it; moreover, one is faced with only fire all around, and this is the only fate of human life, the only outcome of life—hopelessness, emptiness, and non-usefulness.

The novel begins with the narrative of social life thousands of years back. Gautam Neelambar emerges as the representative of life and philosophy of that time, and is always in a state of journeying. In this excursion he meets Hari Shankar and gets involved in a great deal of philosophical debate and discussion with him. The second part begins with the arrival of Kamaal indicating the coming of Muslims in India, and with that begins the narrative of the impact and problems of the acceptance and non-acceptance of the Muslims. The third part deals with the British period and the situations that were produced with the arrival of British. Besides, culture, social life, style of living of Awadh, and the conditions of nabobs have been passionately narrated, which, put together, form a very important part of the novel. In the last part, the partition of India and its impact on the characters of the novel have been explained.

The canvass of the novel is, indeed, very vast. The discussion on civilisation, culture and philosophies of ancient India; the coming of Muslims, their culture and social milieu; and the arrival of Britishers and subsequent social and political changes that the Indian sub-continent underwent have been described in detail. Despite all these happenings, however, the author's foundational thought runs through the novel, that is to say, the process of change and transformation is continuously taking place, still, there is no possibility of change in human pain. In other words, the emotional relationship and predicament of people have remained the same since ages. And people have every right to cherish the fond memories of past, and also to wallow in that past—head banging has been projected a natural part of the human behaviour. Thus, according to the author, the world would see many transformations but people's emotional experiences would still remain unchanged implying that emotions are stable and eternal.

Reception

Aamer Hussein in The Times Literary Supplement wrote that River of Fire is to Urdu fiction what One Hundred Years of Solitude is to Hispanic literature. In 2009 Wasafiri magazine placed the novel on its list of 25 Most Influential Books published in the previous quarter-century.

In a review for a 2012 reprint by New Directions Publishing, Aditi Sriram wrote in The New York Times that the novel "is as relevant in 2012 as it was when she first wrote it in 1959."

Kamil Ahsan opines:

"The magnum opus of possibly the most acclaimed Urdu novelist of all time...River of Fire tells a completist and syncretistic version of 2,500 years of history in modern-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—beginning with the Nanda Dynasty on the brink of defeat by the founder of the Mauryan Empire (323 to 185 BCE), and ending in post-Partition despair. But the novel, barreling through the ages, leads up to 1947 with great purpose, the deep past used to understand the suddenness and chaos of Partition. ... In Hyder's telling, the moral anguish of Partition is pointedly not a culmination of everything from 300 BCE onward. Instead, it can be understood as a lament for the loss of all that history, the history that created identities 'so intermingled that it was impossible to separate the warp and woof of the rich fabric'."

Most of the great novels that appeared in the wake of Independence were results of a sudden emotional jolt that the partition of India had produced, and *Aag ka Darya*, too, reflected the tumultuous condition and commotion caused by this emotional setback. But, Qurratul‘ain Hyder’s novel is not restricted only to this particular historical event, rather the primary stimulus behind the creation of her work is something else. Put differently, it is not right to think that the calamitous event of the partition of India and the consequent destruction of civilizational and humanitarian values were so deep that the author was forced to pen the novel. For Qurratul‘ain Hyder’s stream of thought originated from a deep sympathy with the feudal culture, and it was this foundational stream of her thought which was the primary motivation that made her write the novel. Her deep sympathy with the feudal system and its culture is writ large in the novel, and an all-out effort has also been made to instil sympathy in the readers’ mind for that feudal structure.

Qurratul‘ain Hyder’s pain that one encounters in the novel has got very limited reach. It is restricted to the vested interest of a small Ashraafiya (noble) class. The pain and agony have also been presented as intrinsic part of the novel’s characters, too, which otherwise have nothing to do with the realities of the characters’ lives, instead, such sufferings represent the mental make-up of the people born and brought up in a specific social class. The victims of the exploitative forces, for instance, grieving at the downfall of jagirdars and nawaabs (nabobs); incessantly shedding tears at the ruination of kings of Awadh, and continually chanting *jise na de Maula, usey de Asaf-ud-Daula* (he who doesn’t get from God certainly receives from Asaf-ud-Daula).

Conclusion

Qurratulain Hyder’s magnum opus *Aag ka Darya*, has frequently been compared to the oeuvre of Gabriel Garcia Marquez for its innovative narrative structure and its emplotment of serially incarnating characters across time; however it is perhaps her act of self-translation that is the most original feature of her work. *River of Fire*, her translation, or transcreation as she calls it, transcends a textual transfer of words; the two texts create a metatext which demand to be read as a quest for wholeness.

Hyder’s novel, first written in the direct aftermath of Partition in Urdu, chronicles the various ages of a composite, syncretic India; the communalism that led to fracturing of the country provokes a similar dislocation in Hyder—not only does she suffer the loss of home, but also of language. Andre Lefevre, Susan Bassnett and Lawrence Venuti have highlighted the codependency of culture and language, but the works of other bilingual writers such as Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov have prompted scholars to consider a deeper connection of language with the self. A close reading of both texts, the Urdu and the English, points to a pattern of variances; these dissimilarities, far from being mistranslations when seen within conventional translation studies, actually create a ‘third space,’ allowing for a resolution of identity. As in the case of other bilinguals, Urdu and English represent not two linguistic and semiotic codes, but, instead, offer Hyder an enhanced medium better suited to tell the story of an absorptive India ‘stereoscopically,’ in some ways preempting Salman Rushdie’s creation of a ‘new English’—the language of the translated self. Unfortunately, such balanced retellings of ancient times are being stifled. Hence, “Who controls the past controls the future” is not just an Orwellian warning. Rather, it seems like a revisionist tactic from the playbook of the powers that be. “Be it the Vedic or Mughal timelines in *Aag Ka Darya*, while acknowledging the negative, readers are attuned of the positive aspects of both phases,” Kalaam says. At a time when the country’s history and constitution are

being rewritten, *Aag Ka Darya* remains a potent reminder of the epochs that have shaped and shattered India since the fourth century BC.

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