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*Beyond Partition: turns of centuries in
Aag Ka Darya*

Time pursued me whichever way I went. I think time is very dangerous. Have you ever felt frightened of Time, Gautam?
Gautam, the expanse of life is very burdensome, save yourself from its spread.
Where does creation begin from? Where does it go? Why are we living?
And how? Where will we go?

– *Aag Ka Darya*

Qurratulain Hyder's novel *Aag Ka Darya* (*River of Fire* in English)¹ engages with the issue of composite culture in India against the backdrop of the Partition of the subcontinent. Published in the original Urdu in 1959, this novel was transcreated into English by the author herself over the turn of the century in 1998. In fact, it captures several centuries, both with historical linearity as well as with a sense of history that transcends chronology. The novel deals with the individual, and goes on to present a collective identity. Fiction captures the history of a single culture that slowly encompasses many others. It engages with the totality of existence by delineating individual lives appearing in various ages.

A novel that opens with such daunting questions and enfolds within itself the cultural history of a thousand years of this subcontinent, as also the perennial existential dilemmas of an individual, demands a critique that cannot be confined to what has come to be known as the 'separate spheres' critical paradigm. The binary category of gender establishes its relevance politically and it

has convincing historical determinants. However it has been evidenced how application of the metaphor of 'separate spheres' inevitably leads to reductive and sometime even seductive, categories such as the 'cult of domesticity', 'the cult of true womanhood', 'the female world of love and ritual'². *Aag ka Darya (The River of Fire)* enfolds within itself both the private and public space for men and women with a dual rather than a binary vision. It is written more in freedom from the prison of gender than from within it.

"The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous", Coleridge said more than a century ago, and to quote Virginia Woolf, "Everyone is partly their ancestors; just as everyone is partly man and partly woman." Qurratulain Hyder's creative vision in this novel interrogates many a divide, of gender, of time, of religion, of race through an intense probe of the specifics themselves. The metaphor of the river emphasizes the flow of both time and human consciousness. There are continuities despite ruptures, and compassion despite conflict.

The author picks the title of her novel from the verses of the famous Urdu poet Jigar:

*Yeh ishq nahin aasan
Itna to samajh lije
Ek aag ka darya hai
Aur doob ke jana hai.*

In English this reads:

*This love is not easy
Do understand this much
This is a river of fire
And you must drown in it, to go ahead.*

Gautam Nilambar, Champa, Kamaal, Hari Shankar and others are characters from the novel, in love with life. Love that involves suffering, pain, longings and probings. The fiery river of time subsumes them, revives them and grips them into its gushing waves. They flow along with the river, century after century, birth after birth, creating in the novel a breathtakingly vast canvas of an epic scale.

What made Qurratulain Hyder write such a novel? Ironically, this stupendous journey rests on an apparently simple and innocent question asked by the author's niece in Karachi "Amma, basant kya hota hai? (What is Basant, amma?)" In the December 1959 issue of the well-known Urdu journal "Naqoosh",³ Hyder records how she ended up writing a novel of over eight hundred pages in response to that question.

Her quest needed to rest on some specific point for, after all, as she says, no one person can undertake the exploration of the whole world, the whole of creation. Hyder is deeply concerned about the cultural amnesia evidenced in that simple question that comes from a girl who reads the life of Elvis Presley so intently. She sets out to bring alive streams of collective consciousness flowing through four special phases in the history of the Indian subcontinent: (1) Fourth Century B.C. (2) Late Fifteenth and early Sixteenth Century (3) End of Eighteenth and the whole of the Nineteenth Century, and the (4) Post-Partition era.

Gautam Nilambar is a student of Shravasti Gurukul in the 4th Century B.C.. In the second phase he serves the British government. While he is a teacher in a Brahmo Samaj school in the third era in our own times, he is an intellectual living in London and New York with the values of his race secure in his being. In Kamaal runs the vibrant stream of the history of Islamic presence in the subcontinent – the same Kamaal who in the 4th Century, had reached Tughlakabad through Central Asia and Kashmir. Abdul Mansur Kamaluddin comes to Jounpur, Kashi and Ayodhya and meets a very different brand of Muslims, the Sufis. With his contact also with the idol worshippers and the new land, the process of negotiation between his brand of Islam and the local culture begins. His very existence then dives into the River of Fire and when he re-emerges in later times in the 17th and 18th Centuries he comes through as a synthesis of Islamic and the local culture.

After some negotiation there is mutual assimilation; and, then history witnesses in India, the progress of the unique Indo-Islamic culture. While there were a lot of conflicts and differences, there was also a bonding and a striking of some concord. Kamaal, the outsider of the 4th century B.C. becomes a nationalist: "Are you a very staunch nationalist, Kamaal?" asks Champa, "Yes, every honest person should be a nationalist", is his answer. "How is it that all the Muslim intellectuals and scholars and theologians of India are nationalists?"⁴ When his father supports the demand for Pakistan and joins the Muslim League, he is upset and says, "You cannot discard your motherland like an old coat"⁵. By capturing the inner currents of the evolution of a dynamic culture, Qurratulain Hyder endeavours to clear the cobwebs on the process of, first, integration and later the disintegration of cultural harmony. The bonding that is evolved over centuries between the Hindus and the Muslims begins to crack through

the politics of Partition, generated deviously by the British rulers. While the novel is not history, it is nevertheless an imaginative reconstruction of a cultural process that has its foundations in history as perceived by the author.

Aag ka Darya was published in 1959, and was written in Pakistan where Hyder had migrated after the Partition. The personal anguish of the experience of uprootment and 'exile' – an exile that is geographical as well as psychic – brings her into an intimate closeness and understanding of all her characters. They are the weary generations of the well-known writer Abdullah Hussain (Ref. his Urdu novel *Udas Naslein*) and the victims of permanent homelessness gnawing at the core of some of Intezar Husain's characters (Ref. his novel *Basti*). Both Kamaal and Champa of *Aag ka Darya* require tremendous fortitude to survive the Partition. Kamaal is driven, against himself, to migrate to Pakistan. As for Champa, she becomes an 'exile' psychologically even when she stays on in India.

"Remember, how Abdul Mansur Kamaluddin had entered Hindustan and how he has gone out of it". This is not a simple statement from the novel, it carries within itself a large portion of the thematic content of *Aag ka Darya*. Once again, Kamaal becomes the 'other' but not the same 'other' of the 4th century B.C. Earlier he himself had perceived his presence in Hindustan as that of an alien but after a long history of negotiation, in the recent history, he is abruptly pushed into this role by political forces beyond his control. How can he detach himself from his ancestors whom he carries within himself? It is for this reason that Intezar Husain's Zakir is a professor of history in his novel *Basti*, to recapitulate and review some knots regarding Muslims in the subcontinent. The cultural heritage of the two communities, of intermingling and owning each other's customs, festivals, mythologies and languages and sharing the same geographical climate under the same sky for centuries could not simply be trashed or forgotten. This civilization had nurtured Sant Kabir or Kabir Mian and someone like Dara Shikho who translated the Upanishads into Persian. *Mushtarika Tahzeeb*, the culture of sharing got badly disrupted with the politics of extremes erupting in communal consciousness eventually. And as is well known, this was played up tactically by the British to finally lead to the Partition of the country. The River of Fire gushes forth, sweeping emotions and sensitivities, the past and the present simultaneously over rocks and crags and through inexplicable eddies.

Shifting locations, and severed from home, the post-Partition Kamaal becomes a wanderer in search of his origins forever. At the same time, for many, as for him, Pakistan could be viewed as the Promised Land which may indeed have the potential to reconstruct his own identity within the identity of his community. But as Sadaat Hasan Manto and many other sensitive writers perceived, the common song of the people could not be partitioned, and thus the sense of lostness and desperation on both the sides. Gautam tells Roshan Ara in *Aag ka Darya*, "In this divided world we can meet each other only on borders". After all, time is not mere blocks of historical events; and if perceived as it actually flows, the despair of the "disinherited mind" reduces markedly, re-establishing the psychological connections that cannot collapse abruptly merely through political action. The novel asserts the need to realise continuities if only to accommodate the new realities.

After having spent a few years in London, in 1961 Qurratulain Hyder decided to come back to India. One thinks of Champa Baji in *Aag ka Darya*, who chooses to live in Moradabad after several years of life in Europe soon after the Partition. She comes back 'as part of the crowd, accepting the comradeship of her fellow beings'. On his sentimental visit to India Kamaal understands that Champa was not really left behind, and that she had chosen to be with the veiled women and ragged urchins of her lane, and 'the under-nourished coolies with their push-carts'. She is a way fairer, sadder and wiser, the serene Champa of new India. Heroic in her decision to face the insecurities and uncertainties of her future in the backdrop of distressing economic problems and the impending war between India and Pakistan. The applicability of the metaphor of the separate spheres becomes immediately compelling in the face of the politics of the two nations. But this is not ultimately convincing since this metaphor does not explain the emotional and psychological ties when cultural memories get charted.

In the kaleidoscopic presentation of Champa Baji (of Lucknow, Paris, London, Cambridge and Moradabad), merge different images of Champak of Shravasti standing in the corridor of time, Champak as the Aryani (Goddess of the Woods), Champavati a Sufi allegory for Kamaal, as also Champajaan, the courtesan who enchants Cyril Ashley. Relishing her power over men, Champa comes galloping down the lanes of history demonstrating the courage of not only taking decisions but also acting upon them. She becomes the 'chowdharain' of Lucknow,

the head of the 'tawaifs' of Lucknow, a prestigious position and has access to the Royal Court. The author chooses all these Champa(s) who can operate outside the Purdah and create their own space for empowerment. The cultural alienation of these characters is rooted in the patriarchal politics of constriction, exclusion and dispossession. It is within those constraints that the Champa(s) of the past determine their destinies. But then the pressures of society and politics see Champajaan as a beggar at the end of her life. And, Champa Ahmed of the post-Partition India survives amidst the poverty stricken and backward Muslims left behind in India, while most of their relatives migrate to Pakistan for better prospects.

"But I saw the city chock full of Muslims", Kamaal argued. "Only the hoi-ploy", Bade Abba replied dismissively. "The gentry has more or less emigrated."⁶ Kamaal looks at the pomegranate tree swaying in the breeze and invokes the past as he shudders with the question "Does Spain still haunt the Muslim mind, specially in times of crisis?" While Kamaal projects the painful conflict between conviction and circumstance, Champa Ahmed's philosophic self collects and contains the anguish of Gautam, Harishankar and Kamaal along with the entire crisis of Indo-Islamic culture and the crumbling of the long-cherished values.

I am an ordinary girl. If I had been God's special person – somebody like Meera, Muktabai, Saint Sophia, one would have seen the marks of wounds on my body. My apparel would be bloody red with the murder of my purity. My hands would be pierced with nails. My head would be haloed. Bowls of poison and baskets of snakes would be sent to me. But I am merely Champa – Champa Ahmed. No one can see my wounds. Because my fellow beings too are wounded. They are weak mortals and have no vision.⁷

Champa Ahmed is the most vibrant and living character in the novel. Self-confessedly, she points out how, like an ant, she climbs the mountain of problems in front of her. She breaks the stereotype image of a woman through her power of articulation and self-awareness. Such a woman is not easily muted, invisibilised or marginalised. Not only do the readers of this novel get an insight into her personality but the delineation of this personality also offers a picture of her ancestors. A careful feminist reading of the novel could bring out all

the connectives and departures of the evolution of Champa's identity as a woman in this country over centuries.

Aag ka Darya came into its English avatar in 1998, nearly 40 years after the Urdu novel. The English version is a transcreation, not a translation, by the author herself. Re-writing the novel over the turn of the century after another half a century of the fiery history of the extended Indo-Pak conflict, *Aag ka Darya* acquires greater relevance today. Its vision invokes the awareness of legacies of the Hindus and Muslims lying on the other side of the border, producing a peculiar socio-politico-cultural mosaic in the Indian subcontinent. Denial of history and heritage can in no way establish a stable identity for a constructive future. The novel is beyond giving merely sentimental or even moralistic dictats. It presents a process of creative unraveling of a past that inevitably lives in the present just as the present finds its seed in the past. But, for such a realisation, an alertness about the essential flow of time rather than an amnesiac state of mind is required. A creatively selective memory animated through personal as well as collective consciousness explores the warp and the woof of the complex cultural weave of this region with its disruptive tears as well as knots.

The novel comes full circle when in the last chapter the reader finds herself, once again on the highway to Shravasti. Hari says "Kamaal has deserted us—together we could have challenged the galaxies", to which Gautam responds, "We have all betrayed one another. Can these western visitors to Shravasti understand the pain in our souls? In India's, in Kamaal'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: The novel ends with the same question with which it begins: "I...who the hell am I?" The river keeps flowing and the quest of the individual continues, the quest for identity and for the very purpose of one's existence. But then, nothing can be taken for granted, asserts the novel; for, who knows, even the river may not be eternal—"The river may dry up or change its course just as human beings disappear or change the direction of their journeys." ⁸

The novel knocks at the wall of silence in the universe and searches for the meaning of human existence in specific space and time through migrations and settlements, politics and cultures, calendar years and timelessness. All this, to finally merge into Absolute Silence. Perhaps getting ready for another Basant(?).

Note: For an exhaustive understanding of *Aag Ka Darya*, the Urdu, Hindi and English texts of the novel can be used for inter-textual study, for they essentially conform to the same vision despite some significant variations, specially found in the English transcreation. *River of Fire* is specially organised in chapters with titles, not given in the Hindi and Urdu texts, an attempt to perhaps simplify for the English mind the complex metaphor of cultural plurality evolved over centuries.

End Notes

1. *Aag Ka Darya (River of Fire)*, Qurratulain Hyder, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998.
2. Cathy N. Davidson's, *Preface to American Literature*, Vol. 70, No.3, September 1998.
3. *Naqoosh*, December 1959.
4. *Aag Ka Darya (River of Fire)*, Qurratulain Hyder, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998, p.254
5. *Aag Ka Darya (River of Fire)*, Qurratulain Hyder, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998, p.254
6. *Aag Ka Darya (River of Fire)*, Qurratulain Hyder, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998, p.400.
7. *Aag Ka Darya (River of Fire)*, the translation is mine.
8. *Aag Ka Darya (River of Fire)*, Qurratulain Hyder, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998, p.426