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Locating Culture/Articulating Marginality: Analyzing Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical engagement with the culture of India as represented in Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* (1998) which at the same time articulates a re-examination of marginalization within the discourses of nationalism. Hyder's 'transcreation' is a brilliant exposition to re-think the categorization of history, as well as exploring and rejecting the form and structure of bourgeois novel. In the paper, I will examine this refashioning of spatiality that critiques and interrogates the difference between the centre and the margins. The peripheral vision of history depicted in the novel by different modes of register will be read as a political statement, which refuses to be circumscribed by the so-called norms of novel writing.

KEYWORDS:

Discourse; Spatiality; Refashioning.

Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* published in English in 1998, evoked a critical acknowledgement by the critics and scholars as one of the masterpieces of 20th century literature. Termed as 'transcreation' by the novelist herself who translated it from the Urdu version *AagkaDariya* (pub. 1959), this novel has been categorized as the first Urdu novel in terms of its thematic and stylistic innovations.

This paper is a critical engagement with the culture of India as represented in this novel which at the same time articulates a re-examination of marginalization within the discourses of nationalism. Hyder's 'transcreation' is a brilliant exposition to re-think the categorization of history, as well as exploring and rejecting the form and structure of bourgeois novel. Like the eponymous 'river' of the title of the novel itself, this dazzling re-reading of what constitutes one's culture on which the present society rests is, of coming to terms with the trauma of Partition, the fragmentation of the composite culture of India, the memory of a pluralistic vision in terms of the Vedantic age or at the end of the Lodi dynasty, all registered as a need for a broader 'cultural space'. Hyder, as Kumkari Sangari has shown that 'civilizations were not divisible into nations, national boundaries came and went, civilizations endured' (2011: 214) also espoused the need to envisage a new spatiality, a liminal space which reconfigured the margins, to test the boundaries of the nation-state itself.

In the paper, I will examine this refashioning of spatiality that critiques and interrogates the difference between the centre and the margins. The peripheral vision of history depicted in the novel by different modes of register will be read as a political statement, which refuses to be circumscribed by the so-called norms of novel writing. I would develop my

argument by first looking at the trajectories of the connection between nation, structure and form of the novel with special emphasis being placed on the spatial dimensions of it. Secondly, I will read how culture is positioned through the different layers and textures of the novel.

Nation, Culture, and Form of the Novel

A novel is a form, borrowing from Victorian realist conventions, specifically geared towards the resolution of the dramatic conflict, a narrative of 'progress' and 'development', characters seemingly well-etched, with specific, demarcated roles - a form that became immensely popular to 'imagine' a community. Moreover, the Indian novel was representative of the various measures undertaken during the colonial encounter in the name of 'modernity'. Hyder's text circumvents these cultural signifiers of a postcolonial text ratified by metropolitan norms, and augments the novelistic genre with its intertextual readings as well as its circular temporal marker, to depict a culture which is in conflict with the discourse of nationality and evinces a need to look into those places which have hitherto gone unnoticed. What we understood as 'nationalism', with its traditional discourse was 're-shaped by modernising and anti-colonial movements- the preservation of texts, classicisation of history, archisation of language and sanitising of culture' (Blackburn 2003: 15) are wonderfully demonstrated in Hyder's *River of Fire*. But, even as what Vasudha Dalmia mentioned 'nationalization of tradition' (ibid), *River of Fire*, verbalizes a drive to examine this 'traditionalising of Indian society' through the postulation of characters and settings which reverberates and reiterates over its 2500 year history.

Imagining India

This novel is, in the words of RakshandaJalil, 'a classic instance of imagining India, an India from ancient times to the modern age… in the form of a ceaselessly flowing river' (2011: 176). Divided into four phases of India's 2500 year history, it locates the origins of the novel in not some earth-shattering event but after 150 years of Buddha's death, in a Forest University of Shravasti, with Gautam Nilambar as the main protagonist. This is significant because Gautam does not belong to the dominant order of Bhikshus or Buddhists, but is a Brahmin. The entry to the text foregrounds its peripheral location, demonstrating the disjunctions and conflicts apparent in the debate of 'rup and arup'. Hyder's polemical stance is evident in this introductory chapter, in the felt need to separate the spheres of art, philosophy and the macro-historical forces. 'I am not interested in King Nanda, Vishnu Sharma and Chandragupta. *Why must they drag me into their conflict*…? (emphasis added; Hyder 1998: 39).

Gautam's ethnic affliations and his discourse of discontent, is a manifestation of how 'nation' or dominant discourses is at complete odds with these cultural texts. To designate them merely as peripheral rantings is to negate these spaces of 'statelessness', one which refuses to be co-opted into the metanarrative of a nationalistic paradigm. Gautam and his failed relationship with Champak is a reminder that love, 'pacifists, and theorists' have no place in a world riven with violence and conflict. It is a world that even 'affinity in language does not keep people from fighting and hating one another (Hyder 1998: 88). This discourse of contestation seeks to envisage a space of incompatible modes of thought, a 'dislocatory presence' (Naficy 1993: 9), which violates the norms of nationalistic discourse and endorses a 'liminal' space which enables the examination of culture as a 'period of vast potential, capable of eradicating one set of codes and replacing them with different sets of syncretic inscriptions' (ibid). In the meeting of

Gautam and Hari in the grotto, in the wake of Hari's renunciation from imperial interests there emerges a constant strain to negotiate the murky waters of power and domination by recalling the words of Buddha, 'only that person is peaceful who is above victory and defeat and happiness' (Hyder 1998: 90). Hyder's choice of characters in terms of their religious, linguistic identifications interrogates the need to explain civilizational model of a country in terms of its micro-politics.

The novel keeps on asking: what do ordinary citizens have in common with the larger historical processes? What is the individual's role in the making of history? The cultural dynamics of the novel establishes a need to go against the teleological understanding of history. This reading from below shows the contours of possibilities which have not been taken into regard through a postulation of liminality. That all the characters seem to travel across time and across wide places of the earth to ratify and re-instate the logic of national, cultural politics is an endorsement of what Victor Turner considered the 'transitional figure' as a 'passenger' that is, 'to have left behind a former point or position in a structure to enter a new and familiar one' (qtd. in Kay et al., 2007: 7-8).

The next narrative thread jumps to 1500 years later, with the introduction of Abul Mansur Kamaluddin of Nishapur, who is born of a Iranian Shia mother and a Sunni Arab father. His entry to the academic centre of Jaunpur is during the turbulent phase of 1476, when India is being projected as the land of future and hence marked with violent struggles of gaining power. To this end, there are constant negotiations and strategic alliances being made and broken to extend their ownership of these hotly contested territories. These dynamic forces of macro-politics are revoked, modified, relativized to engage in a new permutation of identity. The intrusion of history into lives of ordinary men with their loves, trouble and petty engagements is an account of a life that posits a new dimension of nationhood which goes against the dominant explanations of history.

Kamalauddin's first-person travelogue, *The Marvels and Strange Tales of Hindustan*, is an interesting take on those historical incidents like Razia Sultana's tragic history, 'which the world knows little about' (Hyder 1998: 61-62). The space so created enables to articulate about stories of women who have been neglected within the dominant historiography. The incorporation of stories like Bibi Raji's sacrifice of her demonic son provides 'a more humane face to the often violent domain of statecraft' (Amarakeerthi 38). These stories gesture towards a utopia, beyond the existing state of things. What is more remarkable, is that Hyder shows the crossroads of the fall and rise of Empires seen through the eyes of an outsider, whether it be the Brahmin Gautam, or the Nishapur resident Kamalauddin, Cyril Ashley of the East India company or the vulnerable characters of the pre- and post-Partition era who are displaced to Britain rooted out of both their past and uprooted from one's home and country. It is at these junctures, that Hyder necessitates a further examination on how history is merely one story being accepted by the majority. And this is evocatively described in the novel:

> Everybody seemed to be a singer in Bengal. Storytellers chanted roop-kathas; ferrymen, snake-charmers and elephant-trappers sang their ballads. They sang of Allah, Mohammed or Radha-Krishna. Vaishnavism was flourishing. … Mosques and temples lay hidden in bamboo groves. (Hyder 1998: 99)

These ferrymen and snake-charmers open up the documented history to enumerate alternative possibilities, beyond politics in the realm of art, philosophy and music. The

margins are shown to be in a fluid state, repudiating the teleological claims of history as a narrative interlude in the act of storytelling. Kamal's unfinished love-story between him and Champavati mirrors the earlier failed relationship between Gautam and Champak. The various transitional states of history, are not only representative of conflict, war, unrest and violence but also demonstrates what Hazel Andrews and Les Roberts postulated as a 'transitional landscape' (2012: 1) flushed with possibilities. Every macro-political event registered in the novel is expressed through the medium of an engagement with the threshold characters who seek to arrive at the truth either through debates of 'rup and arup', or through love-affairs, writing travelogues and so forth. The stories are told and re-told as if there is no end to meaning and to possibly convey a syncretic and composite view of culture.

The characters re-incarnations in different eras not only point towards certain continuity but a dialectics of negotiation between the personal and the historical. Cyril Ashley, the Britisher who visits India as a colonial administrator, is a man who has some amount of agency over his own narrative but also works within the paradigmatic structural rules in place, of 'social norms' which allows a British resident to keep a concubine. These small narrative actions exhibit another trajectory of historical processes that is, the domination over subalterns and womenfolk. Sujata is a recurrent trope of marginalization whose only action seems to be dominated by either Cyril or to be rendered silent either in Gautam Nilambar's narrative or in Kamaluddin's domestic travails. This seems on the surface as if Hyder is also promulgating the Spivakean adage that the 'subaltern cannot speak'. But if observed closely these obfuscations are magnified to reveal the genealogical tracing of history.

History written, communicated, and surviving in archives have a tendency to follow a 'well-defined narrative form: established origins, turning points and climaxes, and an agreed chronology of significant events' (Kortennar 2004: 31). But in *River of Fire,* a self-scrutinizing and self-examining element is seen in the way the novel is structured as well as in the type of characters used and repeated. Sujata plays a vital role as an 'empty space' (ibid), whose function serves to articulate the need for a pluralistic understanding of history. This is reiterated in the third section of the novel, where Oudh's visualization substantiates Benedict Anderson's formulation of nation as an imaginary and 'discursive formation' (Vijayashree 2007: ix). In her delineation of Lucknow, a city with which she was intrinsically familiar, Hyder strove to reclaim and revisit a past that was submerged in the sands of memory but also dramatized the criss-crossings, intricate interweaving of traditions of 'cultural richness, communal harmony and a syncretic tradition' (Siddiqui 2011: 234). The 'brittle, externally determined contours of "current events"' (Breenan 1989: 84-85), are mentioned which in its intrusion into the lives of the commoners evokes a chain of questions that in its constant reiteration, shows the 'dynamic and dialectical relationship between the individual and history' (Amarakeerthi 2003: 31). Cyril Ashley dies a lonely death after innumerable affairs, his legacy being carried forward by his great-grandson Cyril Ashley who in Sylhet, East Pakistan carries the enterprise of ne-colonialism forward, with the recurrent symbol of exploiting the poor perpetuated in the tea-plantations.

In the fourth episode, starting as a college romance in the historic environs of Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, Hyder constructs another reworking of history and in turn constitutes a re-telling of India. The 'space' of I.T College and the diasporic environs of London which becomes the home away from home for Kamal, Gautam,

Talat (narratorial voice) and Champa encompasses a liminality of memory, imagination and an utopic vision of what should constitute a 'nation'. This dislocation and spatial exile also serves to reinforce the fractured understanding of national history. Kamaluddin of the fourth episode is rendered homeless and jobless on account of the catastrophic event of Partition. He is forced to evacuate his ancestral home and migrate to Pakistan in anticipation for a better future. But the cyclical rendition of the storytelling of *River of Fire* which ends in the same grotto of the first episode dramatized through the philosophical interlude between Gautam and Hari is reconstituted to evoke a sense of loss, a fullness that can only be imagined in a 'space' which is both romantic and mythical, space isolated from the teleological dimensions of history.

What this novel embodies is a shifting, a fluid rendition of history and time symbolically represented as the river which in spite of its various confluences and divergences, bearing different names metaphorically evokes a 'liminal', 'transitional' space where different religions, cultures and civilizations could simultaneously meet and connect with each other.

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