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Experimental Novel and the Problems of Imagined History (A Review Article)

Qurratulain Hyder. *River if Fire.* Transcreated from the original Urdu by the author. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998. Also Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

My first encounter with Qurratulain Hyder's work was through the pages of *Illustrated Weekly of India* at a time when Khushwant Singh was its editor. As a high school student in rural Kerala seeking to reach out to the larger India and the world, I remember coming across Hyder's writings that left me frustrated and tantalized at the same time, but more importantly, I came away with a feeling that I was confronting the big themes that ought to be important for a young man who wished to grow up in the new India. Every piece I read seemed to be about an enormous search. Many things were not clear, but the search itself felt genuinely important. The many marriages between East and West felt important. The past seemed important. History appeared to be a source of great sorrow and longing. Later when I read an excerpt from *River of Fire,* in Penguin *New Writing in India,*[1] I came away marveling at the novelist's ability to encompass, even in a brief excerpt, the great historical narratives of our tradition: Buddhism, Hinduism; the coming of Islam, the age of the great Mughals, the arrival of the British, the 1857 War of Independence, the two World Wars, the horror of partition and so much that followed in the post-Independence India and Pakistan. Also evident in the piece was the unmistakable impact of the philosophical and cultural traditions of Western Civilization. My only regret was that I couldn't read the entire novel in the original Urdu.

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[1] Ed. Adil Jussawalla, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974.

Although *Āg kā Daryā* was first published in 1959, only now we have a complete English version. The author herself has "transcreated" this novel from the original Urdu. The term "transcreation"—I guess, coined by P. Lal—often signals to me an uneasy and helpless departure from the original. As a non-Urdu reader, I suspect this novel may have suffered in transcreation, primarily from the lack of consistent stylistic tightening. When I read the Penguin *New Writing in India* version of the chapter "Stateless"[2] so many years ago with such tremendous satisfaction, I felt the author hit the right note, both as author and translator, but for some reason, a somewhat clumsy version of "Stateless" has been included in the complete novel.

River of Fire is a big novel (424 pages), but not as big as I had expected, and certainly not as big as it should be. Penguin *New Writing in India* introduced this novel as a unique exploration of Time, a story that moves from fourth century B.C. to the post-Independence period in India and Pakistan, pausing at the many crucial epochs of our history. From a story of such historical sweep, one expects a strong emotional core and a greater sense of space and time and relentless drama, but the novel feels smaller as it progresses toward the present. It also feels limited in its emotional scale. Limited in terms of a central conflict, historical and personal. The recurring image of the river becomes more and more shallow as it widens, and its flow becomes less dynamic as the narrative empties itself into the twentieth century.

Indeed, this novel is about Time, about the pointless insistence of the flux of this fiery river of the novel's title. Focused on the lives and loves of a set of characters, this novel offers four main plots, although these plots are meant to be dissolved into one large plot in our mind as we meander through the novel toward modernity and into the battlefield of history as the Indian subcontinent prepares for the infamous "tryst with destiny." The plot runs like this: Gautam Nilambar, Hari Shankar, Champak, Nirmala, and a few of their friends come together as a wonderful "family" in their youth and they end up hanging out together. Not unlike the families we see on TV sitcoms like "Cheers" and "Friends." They are all handsome, intelligent, and good-hearted. In spite of their minor cultural and personal differences, they love each other and live for their idealistic

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[2] In *ibid.*, pp. 39–49.

passions. They expend their youthful days with such joyful abandon that when history breaks them apart and mercilessly leaves them floating like debris in the "river of fire," all that will survive is a sorrowful longing for the good old days. The family/friendship motif, first introduced rather charmingly in the historical context of the Mauryan India, is later repeated in the pre-Mughal and post-Mughal contexts, and finally, rather too insistently, in the context of the independence struggle and the perplexing geopolitical surgery that followed. In each segment of the novel the prevalent mood is often that of nostalgia for the previous age.

As the novel opens, we see Gautam Nilambar come out of the Forest University of Shravasti in the Fourth Century B.C. Very quickly Gautam emerges as the central character. The young man's artistic sensibility is self-evident. He gathers friends and lovers and admirers around him even as the Chanakyanian political forces trap everyone, but Gautam gets to be the last man standing, grieving for the dead. Literally, this thread runs unruptured throughout the novel, and the same story is repeated with a different setting and different historical context, not unlike a massive reincarnation story in which all the characters come back to life eager to start acting out the same drama from their previous lives and previous chapters. I think of this bold plot structure as the most remarkable achievement of this novel, and for obvious reasons, the element of fictional incarnations makes the novel uniquely Indian.

In the first episode, Gautam comes across two bathing beauties in the river and he feels love for one of them. Soon he meets Hari Shankar, a prince who yearns to be a monk, but he appears masqueraded as a Yavana. When Gautam mentions the bathing beauty, the Yavana's face turns red, for the beautiful one is actually the young pretender's sister, Princess Nirmala. Gautam also elicits the truth about the princess's friend, Champak, who turns out to be the chief-minister's daughter. The princeling is in town resolved to return their betrothal ring to Champa so that he could go on with his hermetic life. Had the prince appeared as an all-Indian youth, his parents would have forced him to marry Champa and continue the dynasty. It was to avoid waging wars that Hari Shankar was now taking up the saffron robe.

Gautam, sophomoric philosopher, artist, lover of beauty, is only too willing to take away Hari's burden and marry Champa. Next, we see Gautam at work in the studio, trying to dance, to paint. His desire is to create beauty and "to capture in clay and stone the mystery of human form." He names his creation "Sudarshan Yakshini—Tree Spirit, Good to Behold," but his dreams for life and art are to be rudely interrupted by an invasion of Shravasti by an upstart named Chandragupta Maurya. As Gautam remains in denial of the political forces that were about to wipe away his beloved kingdom, he asks his artist friends: "Why must they drag me into their conflict?."

Gautam's question is in fact the central question of this novel. "Why must they drag me into their conflict?" Throughout the novel we will hear echoes of this anguished cry of the innocent bystander, although in later episodes few have the clear understanding to ask the question. It is obvious that a young man who bears such a burdensome name as "Gautam" must now struggle with life and tradition, and of course, history. Gautam is doomed to fail. Gautam in the Magadhan episode fails along with his friends. The first romance that blossoms as he meets Champak remains unfulfilled, and in some ways, the sense of unfulfillment characterizes Gautam and Champak.

Many years after Chandragupta's invasion, Gautam, his fingers crushed in battle, no longer able to sculpt or paint, becomes a wandering performer who curses all those who make swords and arrows. Once, during a performance Gautam and Champa meet. The beauty who was the model and inspiration for his "Sudarshan Yakshini" had become a matronly old mistress of a minister after she was captured by the invading army. Princess Nirmala also met with a similar fate, but she became a Buddhist nun. If it weren't for the spiritual path he chose, Prince Hari himself would not have died in peace as Brother Hari Ananda of Jetvan Vihar.

This beautifully written first episode ends when Gautam swims across Saryu and in effect drowns. Truly, he becomes part of the great flux, emerging down river, nearly two millennia later, in the name of Syed Abdul Mansur Kamaluddin, a *vilayati*, a foreigner, from Persia. Not unlike Gautam, Kamaluddin is a thinker and a writer. The only difference is that he doesn't mess around with clay or stone. In fact, we read a sizable chunk of his personal memoirs that captures the nostalgic longing he was bringing with him to India from the heart of the Islamic culture. Kamaluddin finds employment and patronage and affection from princess Bano and love from Champavati who is fated to elude him. About Champa, he writes in his journal in a unique, highly cultured *vilayati* perspective:

> These infidel women have a charm of their own. They are faithful, shy, docile. They worship their husbands as demigods and touch their feet in obeisance every morning. They put the man on a pedestal and sing songs

> in his praise. That's how it ought to be. We developed this Cult of the Lady in Hispania and introduced the concept of romance and chivalry into the rest of Europe—gallant knights fighting in honor of their ladies and young poets singing lutes on moonlit nights while the lady sat on trellised balcony. Here the roles are reverse—man is the beloved, the woman pines for him and is forever waiting for him. (p. 76)

Against the backdrop of Kamaluddin's Indianization, the novelist cheerfully outlines the story of the rise of various Islamic rulers, particularly of Sikander Lodi whose rise to power in 1489 causes Kamaluddin's flight into a private life of loss and nostalgia, triggering deep within him a new search for meaning, an essential motif in the novel. He says, "I have seen the passing of a great and liberal civilization in my own lifetime, here in India" (p. 89).

In his private life, Kamaluddin marries a *shudra* woman who is renamed Amina Bibi, and they live happily bringing up their children until history catches up with Kamaluddin in the year 1525 when Babur defeats Ibrahim Lodi and establishes the Mughal Empire. Inevitably, Kamaluddin gets caught in the crossfire of this power struggle because his son happened to be working as an architect for the Mughal.

In spite of the many rewards of reading *River of Fire*, the omniscient narrator's insistence on the nostalgic mood gradually becomes an irritant and it clearly diminishes the larger emotional potential evoked early in the novel. Half way into the novel, on page 234, the omniscient narrator says, "Hari Shankar and I joined Canning College in 1939 as young hopefuls and admired the galaxy of brilliant young women at the University," and instantly, the reader expects a radical shift in the second half, but it never comes. As I progressed through the novel, I was increasingly convinced that if the novelist had allowed this sophisticated, cosmopolitan, history-obsessed narrator a little more room for participatory self-revelation in the story, *River of Fire* could have sustained the emotional strength the novel possesses in the first 100 pages. The uncontrolled omniscient narrator often sounds vacuous on account of the obsessions and concerns more justifiable in a first person narrator. The charm in the *vilayati*'s Indianization story that takes place in the first half of the novel lies in the fact that the author successfully resolves the point-of-view problem by filtering the narrative through Kamaluddin's elegant diary account whereas in the rest of the novel, the reader is not quite sure whose nostalgia is shaping the tone of the narrative. For instance, the complex, even frantic series of historical events in this penultimate segment of the novel which ends with the First War of Indian Independence, the narrator calls the event "Indian Mutiny," which I always thought was a term of derision used by the British. One can't expect that the novelist would share the British perspective. Besides, the crucial events in this segment are hastily told, with little effort to dramatize a phase of history that would have provided a stronger basis for the sense of loss and unfulfillment yet to come.

Right from the beginning of the third section of *River of Fire*, which comes after the two relatively brief and successful episodes dealing with ancient India and the new Islamic India, it is interesting to note that yet another foreigner, a *vilayati*, would be playing a key role. The novelist portrays Nawab Cyril Ashley very effectively. He is the only British character who appears entirely authentic. As a scholarly company man who emerges as a powerhouse in old Bengal at a time when the outposts of the Mughal Empire were starting to break free from the center, Nawab Cyril could have been allowed to play a much larger role in the novel, instead of truncating his character into a second, near farcical incarnation in twentieth-century England.

Soon after the first Nawab Cyril's story begins, interestingly, the narrator mentions the parable of the proud king Sulaiman who wished to summon all creatures in the world for a supper at his palace, but only one came, a whale, and it ate up all the food. A whale named Admiral Watson swallowed Siraj-ud-Daulah, the narrator adds, and quickly sets up the political context for this complex segment where the old personal stories will be re-enacted, or more precisely, reincarnated. Incidentally, a major strength of *River of Fire* is that the author has generously sprinkled the narrative with tidbits gathered from Sufi lore, Islamic hagiography, Indian folklore, world history, English nursery-rhymes, Urdu poetry, classical quotes, Eurasian jokes, and in some ways, the plenitude of such materials compensates for the weakness of the central drama.

As Nawab Cyril's story takes shape, we begin to expect Champa to show up, and indeed, she does, this time, as a courtesan in Oudh, where Nawab Cyril will start his secret rendezvous, evading his native Lady, Sujata Debi, who turns into a possessive and loveless mistress, but Champa, as in the previous episodes, is an alluring character, full of the promise of love, free-spirited, witty, and decadent. The third incarnation of Champa Jan comes to personify the story of Oudh and old Lucknow and the urban fantasies about high culture that become the source of much nostalgia in the rest of the novel.

Gautam Nilambar is here, too, as Gautam Nilambar Dutt, this time, a reader of Shakespeare and a shrewd player at the hands of Sujata Debi. He prepares for an opportunistic career rise along with the rise of the Raj, which would eventually make his descendants near equals or more equals to the white masters. Also on the scene are Hari Shankar, and yet another Kamal, a descendant of Kamaluddin. This is a section in the novel where the nostalgia begins to sound hollow. Loudly nostalgic passages like the following come up at the slightest hint of uncertainty:

> The Nawab Vazirs created a culture which combined the finest elements of the civilizations of Iran and India. It was a tension-free society of polite, fun-loving people. This chivalrous, feudal world was inhabited by scholars, poets, storytellers, musicians, scribes, knights and barons, actors, jugglers, chefs, calligraphers, embroiderers, champion swimmers, kite-fliers and cock-fighters. Extreme finesse and good taste in the minor arts became the hallmark of the craftsmen. The architecture of Lucknow reminded European visitors of Moscow, Dresden and Constantinople. (p. 131)

In spite of such celebrations of élite fantasies of a bygone era, *River of Fire* remains engaging work, primarily on account of the bizarre nature of the colonial dynamic involved at this stage. In January 1856, the English resident forced the Nawab of Oudh, Vajid Ali Shah, to abdicate. The fall of Oudh, and particularly the story of Queen Mother Malika Kishwar's journey—she and her entourage carried 500 trunks—to Europe to seek justice from Queen Victoria makes interesting reading. The Indian queen was ignored by the English queen, and Queen Mother died in France, heartbroken, in the middle of her futile journey, although the French honored her with a state funeral, primarily as an insulting gesture at England.

By the end of the First War of Indian Independence, Gautam Nilambar Dutt emerges as a *bhadralok* who believes that after the "Mutiny" the British actually ushered India into the modern age, but he also looks around and bemoans the sorrowful destinies of Muslim noble men like Kamal alias Kamaluddin Ali Reza Bahadur, and the inimitable Champa Jan, who ends up as an addict and a beggar, not unlike the terrible endings in her previous incarnations.

The story makes its final shift from the nineteenth to the twentieth century rather too abruptly, and again, we see for the last time, a whole new configuration of characters, as always united by leftist politics, intellectual kinship, art, music, poetry, theater, not to mention their feudal or upper class origins. Again, Gautam, Hari Shankar, Nirmala, and Champa come together as friends at college. Also on the scene are Kamal, Amir, Tehmina, and several other young Muslims and Hindus. The only one among this group who actually comes from a "congested mohalla in Benares" is Champa. In order to fit in Champa must reinvent herself constantly, just as she did in her previous versions, and it is her free spirit and her bold beauty that make her the center of attraction wherever she goes, whether it be Luknow, Calcutta, Paris, or London where they all meet as students and expatriates.

If art and love were the central concerns of the characters in the previous segments, leftist politics and nationalism are added to the mix. In fact, this is the least effective segment in the novel, primarily because of the novelist's inability to move the story off campus, where the characters seem eternally trapped in their armchair revolution and too much élite chitchat. As expected, once again, Champa emerges as a beautiful young woman ahead of her times. Gradually, the possibility of Partition becomes obvious. The narrator says, "There was yet another aspect of the new nationalist movement that was making its presence felt—some people had openly begun talking of Ancient Hindu Culture and the Glory-that-was Islam. How was Indian culture to be defined? Was it a ruse for Hindus to enslave the Muslims? Could 'real' Indians only be Hindus? Were Muslims unholy intruders who should be treated as such?" (p. 203)

The narrator occasionally speaks frankly about the forces at work. When Champa Ahmed rejects Amir Raza, the narrator says,

> She had also realized that all of them, despite being great leftists, were feudal at heart. They had all thought she was a social climber. She recollected with anger how Kamal had taunted her once for having fallen for Amir because he was upper class, and how Gautam had called her a status-seeker. (p.259)

But eventually, as we have come to expect of Champa, she rejects Amir Raza, triggering the events that will make him choose Pakistan instead of India at the time of Partition. Ironically, several of the anti-British leftist intellectuals migrate to England, deserting the toiling masses, not really facing the horrors of Partition. It must be mentioned that the toiling masses play precious little role in this novel, and that if a servant is mentioned, he is named Gunga Din.

The final segment in *River of Fire* which takes up more than half of the book is played out in three phases, covering the protagonists' education in India in the final years of the Raj, their sojourns in England, and lastly, ending with their careers in India and Pakistan. The real drama of the final days of independence struggle and partition are almost completely missing from this novel. The episodes in England at Cambridge and in London suffer immensely from the shift of the novel's setting, and one feels that it is quite unnecessary, although the "élite" class being written about in this segment, in fact, made a beeline for England. This segment is also full of frustrating cameo appearances of real life characters like Attia Hossain, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Mulk Raj Anand, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Begum Akhtar, Krishna Menon, Shankar Dayal Sharma.

Even in the few final chapters of the novel, which are as beautiful and touching as the Magadhan episode—partly on account of the scenes dealing with Nirmala's death in England—one can't help but notice that the Partition story is dramatized primarily as a feudal's loss of home upon his homecoming to India, where he had to report to the local police station. Of course, the court also declares his ancestral home evacuee property. For instance, when Kamal visits Champa at her home and speaks to Bare Abba about "chokfull of Muslims" (p. 400) he saw in the streets, the old man says dismissively, "Only the hoi-poloi … The gentry has more or less emigrated" (p. *ibid.*). That this dialogue occurs is not my complaint, but such occasions in the novel are not adequately critical or problematized. The absence of a level of irony in the narrative causes this novel to be misunderstood for a naïve, feudal apology, particularly in the last two segments.

The fact that Kamal Reza, very likely a descendant of Syed Abdul Mansur Kamaluddin of Persia and a *shudra* woman, turns out to be the most emotionally Indian of all characters makes the dilemma of Partition truly complex. The long letter Kamal writes from Karachi is a clear indication of his many sorrows. About the state of Urdu language he writes, "In the demand for Pakistan, Urdu was most thoughtlessly declared to be the language of a 'separate Muslim nation,' so now it is also paying the price for the creation of 'the homeland.'" (p.375)

So is the bewilderment Gautam and Hari have about the breakdown of their friendship with Kamal, which embodies the cultural ambivalence prevalent in the post-Partition Subcontinent.

At the very end, we are once again brought near "Sudarshan Yakshini," in the company of scholars from Europe and America. Gautam and Hari are also reunited after so many years of globe-trotting, but Kamal passes up the chance to meet with them. All Gautam and Hari can say about the rupture of such a great friendship is this:

> "Kamal was oversensitive, an incorrigible, fanatical idealist. He was let down by a relentless world. Something within him has died, otherwise he would not have avoided meeting you and me so scrupulously." (p. 426)

As I think through the four segments of *River of Fire*, I feel that all but the most important last segment have been quite remarkable given the fact that it came out in 1959, years before magical realism and other formal experiments reshaped the novel genre in the regional literatures of India. In some ways, I think the novelist has already addressed the weaknesses in the final segment of *River of Fire* in a recent work, *Ākhir-e Shab ke Ham-safar,* a novel published as *Fireflies in the Mist*[3] in which she focused on the left's struggles for India's independence. I also wish the novelist hadn't listened to Bill Craig, one of her minor characters who appears toward the end of the novel, who urges the new Indian writer to forget Mulk Raj Anand's realism and write novels about Raj nostalgia. While her experiment in narration has enabled us to participate in 2500 years of imagined history, in fact, a more rigorous realism and narrative discipline could have made *River of Fire* a truly great Indian novel. ❐

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[3] For a review of this novel, see Thomas Palakeel, *AUS #10* (1995), pp. 249–52.