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Cultural Hybridity in Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*

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Abstract: Culture is reflected through literature since time immemorial. The term 'culture' can be understood as customs, rituals, traditions and ceremonies practiced while following certain beliefs in a social or ethnic system. It is perceptible to changes when certain other form of culture gets embedded in the thriving one. A new variant comes into existence. Cross-culturalism reinvents and revitalizes the existing culture. Hyder, in her magnum opus *River of Fire* exquisitely explicate and how the Indian culture in modern era came into existence. The Constitution of India declares India as a secular country, and indeed it is gloriously known for its diversity of people from different ethnic groups.

Cultural analysis of any literary text or social practice focuses on the unique quality of the subject with respect to spacio-temporal frame and the ideology affirmed by that group. Hyder, through characters like Champa, Gautam, Kamal, Nirmala, Hari and others transgresses temporal world of *River of Fire*. She refers to the migration of people from Kabul, China, British India, France; and delineates how different aspects of their culture has peeped and immersed into Indian culture. Cultural hybridity is the emergence of new cultural forms from multi-culturalism. Cultural interpretations of historical experience in *River of Fire* is vindicated aptly and has rightly fictionalized this cultural amenity.

Keywords: Cultural Hybridity, Qurratulain Hyder, *River of Fire*, Cultural Interaction.

Culture is reflected through literature since time immemorial. The word 'culture' refers to as the beliefs, rituals, and practices of a given social or ethnic group or nature. Culture can be understood as model of collective consciousness which deals with comprehension of shared social meanings. These cultural practices are symbolic in nature and attain social meanings in course of time when believed and practiced by the collective consciousness and one such tool that helps in delivering the shared social meanings in realm of collective consciousness is the use of language. It is perceptible to changes when certain other forms of culture gets embedded in the thriving one and a new variant comes into existence.



Cross- culturalism reinvents and revitalizes the existing culture. Qurratulain Hyder, a reputed Indian author, in her magnum opus *River of Fire* exquisitely explicates how the Indian culture in modern era came into existence. In fact, it is clearly noted that the Constitution of India declares India as a secular country, and indeed it is gloriously known for its diversity of people from different ethnic groups which would have not been possible if there were no cultural interactions.

Chris Barker, a cultural theorist says, “the study of culture has no origins, and to locate one is to exclude other possible starting points.” In reference to literature, it is noted that ‘texts’, as forms of representation, are polysemic in nature. Etymologically, ‘polysemic’ means, variant number of meanings. And the one that is widely accepted is under the ambit of collective consciousness aided by power and muscle. Thus, it brings into play certain specific meanings at forefront. Saleem Kidwai, a historian and a translator writes in his introduction to Qurratulain Hyder’s *Ship of Sorrows* about his observations how significantly Hyder uses “global cultural reference” and while translating her other works like *Chandni Begum* and recently released *Ship of Sorrows* “was an invaluable lesson in the cultural history of Awadh, a history not accessible through conventional sources or readings” (xii).

Culture exists in celluloid due to collective consciousness which follows certain maps of meanings. For example, every culture wraps arounds symbolic and semiotic meanings through clothes, here, I refer to clothes as cultural texts. In Kumaun region of Uttarakhand, Kumauni women wear a colourful ‘*pichhora*’ known as ‘*rangwali*’ or ‘*kusumia*’, which is an exclusive and imminent part of different ceremonies and customs in their existence.

Hybridity emanates through communication, creating ipso facto hybridized cultures. Hybridization is not a new cultural or historical phenomenon. It has been part of sundry civilisations in history. Summerians, Egyptians, Babylons, Greeks, Romans, Ancient China and Ancient India have shown signs of hybridization which helped these civilization to breathe life for over centuries; a few like Ancient China and Ancient India were able to survive as they absorbed newer practices with cultural interaction. Both ancient and modern civilizations have, through trade and conquests, borrowed foreign ideas, philosophies and sciences, thus producing hybrid cultures and societies. Cultural hybridity in India dates back hundreds of years ago. Almost fourteen hundred years ago, when Islam came to Iran, some hundreds or thousands of the followers of the old Zoroastrian faith migrated to India. They settled in the



new Asiatic coast and followed their tradition and customs amiably without interfering with the others who followed their own sets of rituals and practices. Parsis in India were able to settle in India amiably without tempering with any strand of the cultural mosaic which was part of settled existence. Even, today they form miniscule percentage of Indian population.

The twenty- first century is believed to belong to Asia and majorly India. Developed countries are marked under the post- truth age of the twentieth century looks at literary texts, graphic texts, oral narratives, advertising copies, journalistic texts forms the part of hybrid world of the cultural milieu. India whose rich history of miscellaneous confluence of different groups of people recorded already through oral narratives, art (like paintings, dances, narratives), architecture and sculptures from Indus Valley civilization is compared with that of Egyptian Mesopotamia Civilization. The Indians still celebrate the multi-cultural Indian society. The paper throws a light on the cultural history of Awadh manifesting cultural hybridity through Qurratulain Hyder's novel *River of Fire*.

Cultural hybridity can be explicated at three levels at large, i.e. linguistic traits, social traits and personal traits. Cultural hybridity leads to enhancement of linguistic traits and the culture of Indian domain is strongly shaped by this, as India is a multi-lingual country. Hyder emphasizes that every culture has a secret language. It is relational and represents a certain position within the system of linguistic differences, which results in circulation of variety of meanings to the text. For example, the mystic import of one's culture through *ghazal*, a form of music has represented culture of Awadh. In the novel, the *River of Fire*, both Kamal and Pandit (characters) share that secret language, as both of them are able to connect to the songs deeply because of its connotativeness of their culture.

Maiyya mori, main nahin makhan khayo,

Bhor bhai gayyan ke pachche Madhuban mohe

Pathayo, Maiyya mori...(Hyder, 205)

Whereas, the personal trait of cultural hybridity at extreme is depicted in "*Aag Ka Darya*" or *River of Fire*; where Abul Mansur Kamaluddin or simply Kamal Reza becomes stateless and marooned in a new cultural niche rendering him lonely and desolate. The partition of the country into two new nations left people with ambiguous questions of identity as new socio-political changes came into play.



Hyder does not offer the western notions of nation. She wants her readers to have a holistic understanding of it as a 'river', which is changing as it is flowing but it still, remains connected. The human lives and the culture practiced is subjected to perennial changes. 'The manifestations of syncretism' or 'the Ganga-Jamuni culture' as we see in the novel where a character named Champak becomes Champavati, the Brahmin girl; then Champa Jain the Courtesan in Oudh; and Champa Ahmad (qtd. in Jalil 178). Hyder takes the Sufi aspect of Islam which has a more assimilating tendency. It is observed that the Bhakti tradition also has the same assimilating power. This syncretism where people from different religious and geographical background shared their lives together unanimously was holding us together. The British who had confiscated India as one of its colonies exploited this dimension of 'unity in diversity' by employing the 'divide and rule policy' that ultimately resulted in the partition of country in 1947. And, the painful repercussions of this partition and its tremors again revisited Indian subcontinent with the partition of East Bengal as a new country named Bangladesh in 1971.

Homi K. Bhabha has vividly worked on the concept of 'hybridity'. It is one of his central ideas, which he took up from Edward Said's "Orientalism", there he describes the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism. There has been recurring debates on terms like 'culture' and 'hybridity' which are part of the perennial discourse about their exact characteristics. Both will always be in the process of formation or rather in particular, of evolution, thus, sharing cultural evolution with that of human evolution at physical, social, psychological and economical level. In *River of Fire*, Hyder covers two thousand years of cultural history of Awadh where 'change' is the only constant. Thus, affirming presence of cultural hybridity over a period.

There are few rhetorical questions that come into forefront when we see present contemporary Indian culture as distinct as well as composed of several diversified group. How can Indian culture be defined? Do cultures really play an important role in establishing one's identity? Do they give the sense of individualism and uniqueness similar to that of which we connote to the idea of home? The answers to these remain much debated but somehow, adhering to the concept of composite culture at the Indian soil leave trails of justifying answers to these question. It related to multiplicity of cultures practiced in



India which designates unique identity to the country, India. The idea of India in Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* is one such example.

It is observed that Diasporic writers are carriers of culture in the era of globalization. They participate in endorsing global influence as cultural creatives while living in foreign land. In India, we cannot deny the presence of popular culture which has become part of our life and identity at large. Like, Jean Paul Satre, the French Philosopher said, identity is always in the process of formation and never meets its end till the last breath, similarly cultural expressions and cultural utterances play an important role in this process of formation and contribute in evolution and changes at personal as well as societal level. The English transcreation of *Aag ka Dariya* as *River of Fire* opened the interpretation of cultural world of Awadh to the global readers.

Qurratulain Hyder is deeply concerned about the culture, communal consciousness, cultural amnesia, the "cultural changes" and the causes of their impact on people's life. Hyder's *River of Fire* (*Aag ka Darya*) ironically states, "Politics has always been mightier than culture" (Hyder, 369), but it can deciphered that it is the culture which is mightier than the politics. As geographical divisions can be made, but the psychological connections formed through shared culture and lifestyle cannot collapse abruptly merely due to political actions. In the novel, Champa, one of the protagonists of post-colonial era decides to live in a small town in Muradabaad, among her family and the land where she was born, now newly formed India, whereas Kamal chooses to stay in Pakistan. They share same cultural bonds but the physical geographies have changed.

The title of the novel *Aag ka Dariya* (*River of Fire*), is taken from a famous verse by Urdu poet Jigar, which reads as

Yeh ishq nahi aasan

Itna to samajh lije.

Ek aag ka darya hai

Aur doob ke jana hai.

The English translation reads as,

This love is not easy

Do understand this much



This is a river of fire

And you must drown in it, to go ahead.

It is not just history but it is through the strands of creativity that Hyder has recreated imaginative cultural process that has its roots in the history as perceived by the author herself. It is a blend of a peculiar socio-politico-cultural mosaic of the subcontinent through the characters like Champa, Gautam, Kamal, Nirmala, Hari Shankar and other characters who transgress temporal world of *River of Fire*. She sets out to bring to life the streams of collective consciousness flowing through four distinctive phases in the history of Indian subcontinent, commencing with the fourth century with the characters like Gautam Nilambar, Princess Champa, Princess Nirmala and Abdul Mansur Kamaluddin. The second phase in the novel covers late fifteen and early sixteen century. The third phase deals in the late eighteenth and entire nineteenth century and the final phase is set in the post-colonial era. It covers almost two millennia which reflects through cultural memories. When we talk about language under the microscope of cultural hybridity, the mystic Sant Kabir or Mian Kabir who wrote enchanting ‘dohas’ on Krishna’s *raasleela* and Dara Shikoh who translated the Upanishads into Persian are product of this very civilization. Mansur Kamaluddin in chapter twelve titled “Hussain Shah Nayak” writes *dohas* in Hindwi or the Hindustani language. (Hindwi or Hindvi is a polyglot language which had miscellaneous Persian, Prakrit, Turki and Arabic words and phrases; spoken in the Indo-Gangetic plain). Bharatvarsha, is rife with myths, legends, folklore and old wives tale. In another instance in the novel, Gautam Nilambar in chapter two, ‘The Greek Traveler’ ponders over mystery of language. He says,

“Look, our Sanskrit and their Persian have a common origin. Our Ramesh is their Ramish. Our “go” is there “gao”, and so on. And some languages are totally different.”

(Hyder, 12).

In chapter twenty two, “A Faery Tale Kingdom”, which has the background of nineteenth century India, the narrator recollects a song sung in different parts in Uttar Pradesh at childbirth and weddings, which is “*So ja rajdulare, so ja, Baba tera haft hazari, data subedar*” (Hyder, 130). This indigenous song echoes in lullaby sung in contemporary England: “*Rock-a-bye baby, thy mother is a lady, thy father a knight*”. Qurratulain Hyder tries to emphasize the intrinsic quality of language which we, the human beings make it intact through semblance in different cultures.



Kamal in the nineteenth century says, “Culture, culture everywhere, and not a drop to drink, “echoing S.T. Coleridge’s poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, where the mariner says, “Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.” Kamal equates the importance of culture with that of water. We cannot survive on earth without water; and similarly, life without culture which is ambivalent to human existence is equated to a void.

We are adapting culture as a tool to rediscover different aspects of truth. Writers like Qurratulain Hyder, Attia Hosain and Jawaharlal Nehru (to name a few) widen our artistic horizon and let their posterity see Contemporary India, which is product of thousands of years of its rich literary, social and economic communication emanated through various cultural interactions.

Naila Anjum in her essay “Questioning Partition Rationale: Qurratulain Hyder’s *My Temples, Too*” writes about the idea of India which Hyder creates in her works like *River of Fire* and *My Temples, Too*: “She thought civilisations were indivisible even though boundaries and borders changed” (139). It can be concluded, the context and the characters in Hyder’s *River of Fire* has an absorptive capacity which survived in history through its ability to interact across different cultures.

One needs to have a strong urge to observe, to act, to absorb and to share, when it comes to comprehend Indian culture.

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