



## QURRATULAIN HYDER'S FICTION: A HISTORICAL APPROACH

**Irfan Ahmad Dar**

Research Scholar, Department of English  
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India

### ABSTRACT

*History is believed to be an unending dialogue between past and the present. Memoirs and other creative writings like novels and dramas too can, therefore, be a useful source of history writing. In this connection plays a million dollar role in voicing some bitter truths about the human existence. In other words it can be said that fiction has crossed all its limitations and is reckoned as the mirror of the socio-cultural realities. A fiction writer possesses the craft of creating character sketches and adorning them with some picturesque details and thereby addressing some vital concerns of their societies. Where the historians fail to reach, fiction writer through his microscopic vision reaches. Besides, he also incorporates in him wide accomplishments whereby he takes part in the future as well. This implies that a litterateur is able to give at least an imaginary reality, if not the actual factual realities. He at times indulges in mixing imagery with the factual details superseded by the collective memory. Thus, a fiction writer can be seen as a link between past, present and future. It is also believed that a case of working together of the fiction writers and the historians will ensure a better result for the mankind in general. But what if a fiction writer encompasses in him all the above mentioned features? The current paper embarks to explore one such fiction writer who through her prolific writing and outstanding standard addressed not only the happenings of the past but also had a great effect in guiding the barks of the generations towards better future. Qurratulain Hyder is one of the great literary figures of the Indian subcontinent who witnessed the great eras of turmoil of the subcontinent and in fact remained one of the victims of the times. Her fiction can thus remains more close to the*

---

heart. The paper attempts to explore her representation of the history in her fiction. It will make a study of her select novels that have been rated by the readers very enthusiastically.

**Keywords:** History, socio-cultural realities, fiction, prolific, subcontinent, representation.

History is another name of humanity's inability to learn its lessons. (Hyder 360).

Qurratulain Hyder remains one of the towering figures of the subcontinent who is supposed to have drawn heavily on history for the content of her fiction. Her mastery over converting historical details and accounts into creative fiction is unparalleled in the fiction of India. Hyder's fiction voices a million dollar notion that past is an inseparable part of the human existence and is closely linked with the future of the people at the same time. The way she takes the events from the history, and then bestows it with truthfulness through her great majestic style, lends a kind of verifiable quality to her narrative. Mohammad Sajjad quotes Shameem Hanafi observing about her characterization:

In the character sketches of Qurratulain Hyder we find an expanded horizon of moods and cultural norms which reveals that she is successfully capable of expressing the deep insights about different big civilizations in the context of contemporary situations of mankind. Study of individuals, in a way is also the study of various cultural and civilizational units. The existence of human and realities about their history are often not as divergent as they might appear to be. (131)

Hyder wrote some phenomenal novels that display her close understanding of the happenings of the past. Two novels *Fireflies in the Mist* (1979) and the *River of Fire* (1998) have been rated very well by the readers owing to their vast scope. Translated from their Urdu originals by the author herself, they gained wide recognition even in the West.

*Fireflies in the Mist* relates the troubled political scenario of the twice partitioned Bengal. The events span over the four decades from the early times of the World War Second, passing through the partition of the country and the eventual emergence of Bangladesh in 1973. The novel catches the times when the youth of the Bengal that included Hindus, Muslims and Christians were fired by the revolutionary zeal and the communist principle. They resorted to the terrorist activities to overthrow the British imperialism.

One of the important features of this novel lies in the way Hyder relates that time of the history when Bengal culture was syncretic culture. The people here lived the life of brotherhood and shared each other's happiness and grief. But once the events took turn the

---

friends became foes and even the families were brutally slaughtered without any distinction of age and sex. The primary victim of this outrage in the novel remains Muslim elites of Bengal. Hyder relates the mass slaughter in the following way:

[Deepali] “who . . . who . . . got killed?”

[Servant] “Everybody, Madam . . . The senior Nawab Saheb. His son, Nayyar Mian, his wife and children. Jehan Ara Bibi, her daughter-in-law and grandson. Everybody. At midnight. All gunned down right here inside the house. This hag saw them all being shot, one by one, and she was struck dumb and lost her reason.” (336)

The pathetic situation displays that how in history humans have changed colours once the events took turn. The society of the Dhaka erstwhile presented an example of a composite culture where everybody lived happily. The partition of the country into India and Pakistan followed by the emergence of Bangladesh pushed even the neighbour’s poles apart. More importantly such a rivalry in the subcontinent was born that since centuries it is aggravating and there are more chances of future turmoil. Hyder’s fiction tugs the helm’s of the leaders and even the masses for she knows that it is the masses who turn more hostile to each other and cross every level of savagery in inflicting the pains upon each other.

Her magnum opus *River of Fire*, has equally been praised and has been rendered into more than twelve languages. The book has been praised for the vast historic sweep of two and a half millennia unlocking the diverse links of human existence. The book is more promised given in the way it touches upon the brutal phase of subcontinent that is the partition of India into India and Pakistan who immediately turned rivals after the dissection. Not only this, Hyder has been praised throughout the country for her literature even takes us beyond the partition, thereby involves us into a reading through the partition in order to take a broader view. If Mohammad Hassan Askari and Mumtaz Shirin categorise the writings focussed on the riots and violence under the label of “*Fasadat Kay Afsanay*” or we can say “*Roit Literature*” then Aasif Farukhi is right in saying:

*Aag Ka Darya* can be regarded with Husain’s works as the epitome of *Fasadat Kay Afsanay* or partition literature, as they fulfil the demands of this category and transcend/break open this category by taking it beyond partition to a broader view of history of which partition is one component”(104).

Although she wrote extensively, her monumental novel *River of Fire* (1998) goes beyond the tradition and, therefore, marks an important phase of her career as it is the best illustration of her creativity when dealing with these issues of importance. Rather than allowing herself be subjugated by the events, she lets loose her imagination to create thereby surpassed the figure of authors who acted more like the Journalists.

The characters in her novels show an abiding by the light of love but once the shades of partition lurk in the yard a severe sense of identity crisis takes place in them. One such character is Champa from *River of Fire*, who faces a hardcore opposition from the Hindus who reckon her as an intruder and believe that she cannot lay claim to her ancestral land Banares. She says, “This is the country I belong to... where can I find myself another?”(399). Even the central character Kamal who comes back from Cambridge after getting degrees is shown door and is forced to migrate Pakistan. It is at the end of the novel that he turns back to India considering the fact that in spite of the wrongs he faced his heart lies in India, in its composite culture. In her other novel *Agle Janam*, poor Indian Muslim character Rashke Qamar is lured by the so-called sought-after land of opportunity, Pakistan but in Karachi, she feels alienated adding to her pile of miseries and more torment is reached due to her estrangement from her polio-stricken sister Jamilun.

Hyder’s narrative voices a staunch resistance against the dehumanising policies manufactured by those at command. Her novels are an epitome of protest from the past to the present. In *Safina-e-Gham-e-Dil* she relates the repercussions of the hasty decision of the authorities in a pathetic way:

All your dreams of *Inquilab* (revolution) have gone wrong somewhere. Now when we are here to say farewell to you close to your mafia shrubbery in Aish Bagh, perhaps you do not even know when we have been through and why we had to leave. There will be a distance of thousands of miles and solitude of hundreds of years between us and the soil in which you were born and buried. Now we are foreigners to each other because we are leaving our country, because we have proved utterly worthless. Our generation could not carry the burden which you, Abba Mian and your companions had handed to us. (qtd. in Hanfi 147)

*River of Fire* also voices the same dilemma through the character of Muslim poet Hamraz Fyzabadi who is actually from U.P. but is stuck between the nations. Voicing his concern he observes:

Every year when one goes to Fyzabad to meet one's old folk at home, one is shadowed by Indian C.I.D. Back in Pakistan, it is said that refugees from U.P. have descended upon a young and struggling country only to exploit the new opportunities. For the rest they still look upon Bharat as their real country. In short, one is neither here nor there. (318)

The traumatic conversation between daughter and the father in the first quote and between Hamraz and Kamal in the second one, is ample proof to the dejection and the calamity that snatched the daughters from their fathers, sisters from their brothers, and women from their men and ultimately one of his/her identity. The magnitude of the violence that was unleashed in the aftermath of the displacement and the dislocation left several hundred thousand people dead, an uncountable number of the women raped and millions uprooted and transformed into refugees. The impression left by this dehumanizing move forced some people to label themselves as the "people of partition" than the members of a nation. The partition as a scar has undoubtedly impinged into the minds of the people across the Radcliffe line and they repeatedly question the irrational decision of the authorities. The current warmongering between the two arch-rivals is the result of that fateful day that saw the humans acting as if they were insane.

## **Conclusion**

Hyder has traversed the line of the writers of the fiction of her time by catching the history of two thousand and five hundred years in a single sweep. What adds more charm to her fiction is the way she throws her lens at the gloomy drama of human. In the *River of Fire* other characters blame Kamal for betraying the group and believe that together they could have changed the course of time. And the apt reply is voiced by Gautam who says, "We have all betrayed one another" (426). His utterance crosses all the frontiers and needs to be universalized in order to have a proper comprehension of the history so that our future is enlightened and made to avert the peril. The statement by the Gautam is million dollar one and has been so far less addressed one. For at the end of the day masses themselves are equally accountable as they crossed all the peripheries of brutality and dehumanization. Thus, Qurratulain Hyder's vision is a remarkable one, that touches different nuances of the same issue and her presentation is equally praiseworthy.

## Works Cited

- Farrukhi, Asif. Once Upon a Time: Cultural Legacies, Fictional Worlds of the Partition and Beyond. Ed. *Qurratulain Hyder and The River of Fire*. Ed. Rakshinda Jalil. Delhi: Aakar Books, 2011. 97-110. Print.
- Hanfi, Shamim. Qurratulain Hyder and the partition Narrative. *Qurratulain Hyder and The River of Fire*. Ed. Rakshinda Jalil. Delhi: Aakar Books, 2011. 142-151. Print
- Hyder, Qurratulain. *River of Fire*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited. 2003. Print.
- -----, "Fireflies in the Mist". New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2008. Print
- Sajjad, Mohammad. History and Fiction: The Depiction of 1857 in Qurratulain Hyder's Fiction. *Qurratulain Hyder and The River of Fire*. Ed. Rakshinda Jalil. Delhi: Aakar Books, 2011.120-134. Print.