

A Historical Narrative of South Asian Time

Reading Qurratulain Hyder's River of Fire

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“There are many ways of telling a dastaan, she said. How shall I begin? I don't know which characters are more important. Where did the story start? What was the climax? Who was the heroine? And who was the hero? Who is the listener of this story and who is the narrator?”

Qurratulain Hyder, River of Fire (1999, p. 184)

Recounting her family saga to friends, Talat musings in the lines above reflect the kernel of Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*. Talat's ruminations are about (i) the sequence of events (*Where does the story start? What was the climax?*), and (ii) the structuring of the event (*How shall I begin? Who is the hero? Heroine? Listener, Narrator?*). On a careful reading, one notices that the only construct absent in these lines is of Time. Talat does not wonder - *when?* Is Time irrelevant to her story or does her story say something about Time itself? In Hyder's *River of Fire*, history remains a discourse on Time, which she builds across 2, 500 years that traverse the historiography of South Asia and present a narrative of South Asian Time.

Historians and literary critics have read *River of Fire* as a post-partition narrative, a critique of Hindu nationalism (Hanfi 2011, Kumar 2011, Nandi 2012), and a subaltern

narrative (Nandi, 2012). Through this paper I argue otherwise, namely that reading the text through the abovementioned themes means employing a notion of linear, chronological, and to use Ashis Nandy's words, "essentialist history" (Nandy 1995, p. 45). In my reading, it is not through the text that Hyder narrates her story. The text, *River of Fire* itself becomes a story of Time told through history and individual narratives. Personal trajectories of different characters embody the spectrum of human experience acting as the trope of history in the narrative of Time. Instead of South Asian History, or of South Asian characters in history, this paper proposes a reading of *River of Fire*, as a narrative of South Asian Time.

Histories of Reading River of Fire

River of Fire (1999) was published 40 years after its original *Aag ka Dariya* (1959) in Urdu, by Hyder. The English version is a transcreation, with "edited references and added sections" (Oldfield 2011, p. 29), considered a "new original" (Asaduddin 2008, p. 248). Kumkum Sangari (2005), making a case of English-Urdu bilingualism, writes, "the two novels have now to be read against one another and grasped together as a single configuration" (p. 22). However, this 'single configuration' received vastly different receptions---enormous praise in Urdu literary circles in India and Pakistan but a lukewarm reception in English.¹ Masood Ashraf Raja (2006) attributes this difference to the defining structure of the post-colonial novel, which is centered at colonial atrocity. In not

¹In 1999, when Qurratulain Hyder's Urdu novel *Aag ka Dariya*, was published, in English it received raving journalist reviews. Aamer Hussain, in a London Times Literary Supplement Review, called it a "work which is to Urdu fiction what a *Hundred Years in Solitude* is to Hispanic literature" (Raja 2006, p. 59). Raja elaborates how there has been a marked absence in engagement with *River of Fire* while there has been a marked interest in the work of other writers who write about South Asia namely Salman Rushdie and V S Naipaul.

adhering to this structure of the novel, *River of Fire* does not feature in the post-colonial diasporic literature and thereby loses out to the configurations of Third World Novel.²It succeeds in being read as a post partition narrative; one that challenges the dominant nationalist discourse by presenting a subaltern narrative of partition (Nandy 2012), and one that critiques the construction of nation state (Raja 2006) as it posits towards a common “shared history”(p. 59) between India and Pakistan.

Both Raja and Nandi stand correct in their articulation: *River of Fire* can be read as a post Partition narrative that echoes the syncretic past shared by Hindus and Muslims. However, this reading remains an interpretation on the part of the writer who analyses the text in pursuit of a predetermined theme. For Raja, what matters is politics of writing beyond the nation state while for Nandi, it is a question of “subaltern pasts” (Chakarbarty 2000, p. 112), which resist the monolith narrative of history in the name of nationalism. I do not undermine their reading or their analysis. But I do find their analysis superimposing upon the reading of the text. When Raja finds the centrality of characters constructed along religious lines and Nandi posits that they represent the subaltern, they both treat the text within the narrative of history. They read the history in which it was written and their analyses, reconstructs the text

²Raja uses Ajaiz Ahmed (1992) attributes of the Third World Novel. He quotes Ahmed, “The essential task of the Third World Novel, it is said, is to give appropriate form, to the nationalist experience. The range of questions that may be asked of the text which are currently in the process of being canonized within this categorical counter-cannon must predominantly refer then, in one way or another, to representations of colonialism, nationhood, post coloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, their corruptions, and so forth (p. 124). Diaspora becomes a category through which centrality of a novel is expressed in post colonial literature. Steering away from idioms of nationhood and nationalist experience *River of Fire* becomes a novel that is neither about the diaspora of Muslims in India after Partition nor elaborates on the insidious aftermath of colonialism.

'into' the history- a history of post partition India, a history of nationalism, and a history of the subaltern. However, such a reading of history belongs to the modern, Western world and does not augur well for non-modern world such as India.

Both conceptions of nationalism and that of India post Partition are premised on the conception of "post-colonial investigation of history" (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 308). Intertwined with European rationalist it speaks of nation state, national history where history is the European form of knowledge. In arguing *River of Fire* to be against this construction of narrating history, one still goes on to acknowledge that the novel registers this construction of a historical teleology and actively ruptures it. I am reading such an acknowledgement even in its resistance as yet a continuing narrative of European sentiment of history which is essentially for the modern world. While I personally and academically admire the relevance of subaltern history in the context of South Asia which is marred by a skewed national history epitomizing conflict of one community against the other, I hesitate to apply the theme of subaltern to *River of Fire*. Application of such a theme operates from some semblance of history, where as I am reading this text as a narrative of Time where the stories told aren't stories that stand in opposition to the national history (though they can be read like that, albeit it would be a parochial reading of sorts) of Hindus detesting Muslims or the vice versa. Instead the use of Hindu and Muslims for that matter even Christians in the novel connotes something more than two historical groups where Christian was the identified colonizer. Being a narrative of Time, the use of history becomes different than what it would be in a subaltern text. The paper will gradually develop this difference as well as explain it.

Nandy writes in *History's Forgotten Double* (1995), "History isn't the only way one thinks about the past. It's a western construction of history and works for the modern world. When it comes to the non-modern world it absolutizes

the past” (p. 44). For Nandy, “However odd this might sound to readers of a collection on world history, millions of people still live ‘outside history.’ They do have theories of the past; they do believe that the past is important and shapes the present and the future, but they also recognize, confront, and live with a past different from that constructed by historians and historical consciousness. They even have a different way of arriving at that past” (p. 45). For Nandy, not all ways of thinking about the past come under the dominant discourse of history. His problem with history is its emphasis on scientific consciousness, which it brings to the study of the non-West and relegates it to the realm of historical consciousness. Agreeing with Gyan Pandey on the need for such a consciousness for the documentation of history, which has been essentially political and hence necessarily akin to nation state for the West, Nandy finds its ‘essentializing’ problematic. His concerns are about history functioning as empirical science and rendering all those who fall outside its paradigm as “ahistorical” (p. 56). He protests, “Once exported to the modern world, historical consciousness has not only tended to absolutize the past in cultures that have lived with open ended concepts of pasts or depended upon myths, legends, and epics to define their cultural selves” (p. 45). What Raja and Nandi unwittingly do is posit the reading of *River of Fire* as narrative of history that centers on the creation of political nation state and its fragments or discontents. Reading Partition, as the crux of the text would be similar to a post-colonial reading of the text. Defining it through history perceived to be linear, one would absolutize it. Both the authors also read it through their own historical confines- Raja begins with the lack of reception of the novel in English and Nandi begins with the rise of Hindu nationalism post the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992.

However, Hyder's concerns are different than those of history. In an interview with Noor Zaheer she expresses, “My concerns are different from the Progressives. They are involved with changing and analyzing the present life, I am interested in life as a whole. Life, that is a process of finding a reason to live

and struggle, to survive in different eras and epochs” (2011, p. 19). I read caution in Hyder's words against reading themes 'in ' River of Fire. Instead, *River of Fire* with its uninterrupted continuity becomes a theme of Time itself.

River of Fire as a Historical Narrative of Time

“Come the rain and the Beerbhuti appeared all over the green. From where do they emerge, so perfect in shape and color, and where do they go? What a brief span of existence they have, but for them it is a lifetime. This was a solitary beerbhuti and it looked so alone in the expanse and depth of the forest. Right now, it sat cozily in its own silence across Gautam's palm. It could soon be crushed by an animal or passerby. He noticed another red beerbhuti on the lush green grass, slowly making progress from somewhere to nowhere. He could unwittingly trample these lovely helpless little things”. (River of Fire, p.1)

As Hyder opens her River of Fire with the above lines she aesthetically introduces the relation between her characters and the narrative of Time. All her characters like beerbhuti's will appear as they are destined to. They will live life fully in her text but won't be immortal or eternal. The trajectory of their lives will await its possibility of death. Pursuing their pre-ordained life, which is inane and quotidian in its existence (going somewhere to nowhere), they can meet their perfunctory end (can be trampled accidentally).

River of Fire becomes a narration of this pre-determined course of life where characters live their lives with its struggles in disappointments and successes and meet their end in solemn and usual ways.

The novel echoes, “*What could be more trite than the event of dying*” (p. 354).

In the fourth century Gautam, the philosophizing sanyasi drowns in Saryu wondering if his life had any meaning at all, “*I*

have been an ascetic, and a libertine, a thinker and an idiot, a beggar and a grandee. I have seen it all. Perhaps now in spite of myself, I have reached a stage of sanyas where one desires neither death nor life. Where is my final refuge” (p. 51)? In the fifteenth century Mansur Kamaluddin , the linguist from Persia who served the Sharqi dynasty and lived to compose numerous folk songs and ballads sung by people of Bengal for years to come, dies wondering how after spending his entire life in India he was called an outsider- *“He had spent all his energy in making these fields bloom, spent years in beautifying a language these men were speaking. He has written songs and collected stories. No one had any right to call him an outsider or traitor. He would be taken to the Gaur and gaoled. What had he done to be treated like this”* (p.102). In the end of eighteenth century and beginning of nineteenth century Cyril Ashley being awarded the Knighthood and spending four decades of extravagant and privileged comfort under the auspices of British Raj dies from a massive heart attack- *“Death came to Cyril Ashley in a lonely circuit house in a remote corner of Bihar. All of a sudden, he felt he was going to die. He stammered and could not call out -Koi Hai”* (p. 150). In the nineteenth century Nawab Kamaluddin Ali Reza Bahadur, an estate owner and a romantic poet from Matia Bhuj of the Kingdom of Awadh lives his luxurious and flamboyant life in Lucknow and finds the city in ruins after the mutiny of 1858. Unable to reconcile to the passing to its glory, he laments the destruction of his dear Lucknow by the British until he meets his death in sleep- *“In October '58 I returned to Lucknow from Europe and found that Lucknow changed. My house had been destroyed too”* (p. 157), *“The city as lying in ruins. I wandered in a daze looking for my next of kin. Now whenever I see an ancient banyan and its beards, I revert my eyes. They remind me of corpses dangling from roadside trees”*(p. 166). Champa Jan, the famous seductive courtesan from nineteenth century Lucknow meets her end as a addicted beggar with the advent of British administration- *“Some*

courtesans become queens some become mendicants. This is kismet” (p. 173-174).

In my reading, historical conditions function as kismet in *River of Fire*. While they determine the course of life for characters, in themselves they are determined by temporality. Liyange Amarakeerthi finds the historical condition as the defining feature in what is the ‘historical novel’ in, *River of Fire: Critiquing the Ideology of History* (2003). For him, Hyder challenges the existing modes of history writing and in doing so produces ‘a fictional history’ through her novel. He explains the problems of ‘real’ history to be akin to what Nandy posits as, “monologic, teleological, and often ideologically constructed” (Nandy p. 44). Fictional history writes Amarakeerthi, is “dialogic, less teleological, and challenges the ideologies that it is based on, if not actually presenting an entirely different worldview” (p. 44). He cautions against the reading of fictional history as real history lest we render it rigid. Despite a compelling argument, Amarakeerthi remains caught in the tautology of history. Even with his critique he ends up privileging the ‘real’ history as ‘the history,’ and Hyder’s historical account as the ‘alternate narrative.’ In doing so he remains unable to engage with *River of Fire* as an alternate to history for it use of historical events to punctuate the eternity of Time. But how does one employ the eternity of Time in the study of a historical narrative such as *River of Fire*, which is replete with characters and their cyclic appearance across 2, 500 years of historical epochs in the South Asian subcontinent?

Historical Condition of Temporality

In *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), Paul Ricoeur writes about the relationship between time and history and builds his argument on the ontology of historical condition, the epistemology of historical knowledge and the phenomenology of memory. He writes, “time/temporality constitutes the existential precondition for the reference of memory and the

of individual stories are testimony to the discursive narration of past. However, they are not just that. They become existential temporal conditions through which history functions. Each chapter of *River of Fire* opens with a movement in the individual story. Like history, in *River of Fire*, human experience becomes the existential condition of temporality.

In *Time and Narrative* (1984), Ricoeur writes that “Time becomes human time as it is organized in a narrative and the narrative in turn is meaningful to the extent it portrays features of temporal existence” (p. 68). The human experience in the individual lives of the characters in *River of Fire* demonstrates its temporality both in the lives they lived and, in the conditions, namely that of history that they lived it in. Ricoeur contends that between the activity of narrating a story and temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation. “It is not merely accidental, but it presents a transcultural form of necessity” (p. 77). This necessity is what I identify as the central feature of *River of Fire*. Neither is the text a history of South Asian subcontinent neither is it a novel of human experience set in South Asian subcontinent. It is a novel about Time, perhaps a narrative about Time in South Asia whose necessity becomes the correlation between history and human experience. History functions as an existential condition through human experience in *River of Fire*. In doing so, it is able to chronicle the inevitability of Time manifested through characters which will appear, live and die only to reappear and empires that will rise to be captured and will go on to find new identities yet again. Gautams, Kamals, Cyrils, Champas will continue to reappear just that Mauryas, Lodhis, Mughals and British in the South Asian subcontinent. In their reappearance they will continue to narrate a *daastaan* of Time, where the identity of the narrator or the author, identification of the central characters would be not just immaterial but irrelevant.

South Asian Time

This irrelevance of history as well as of individual trajectory is a peculiar reading of Time in South Asia. Nandy writes that South Asian construction of history is opposite to that of the West because it is premised on the centrality of Time and hence can't be read through neat, delineated categories called historical periods. He agrees with Commarawamy's articulation of time in South Asia as imitating eternity (1989, p. 71) and writes that "the construction of time in South Asia is neither linear nor uni directional" (p. 58). "The Indian attitude to time including sequencing of the past is not given or pre-formatted"(p. 63). Hyder in *River of Fire* echoes agreement to Nandy's reading. She writes,

"In India, history has no meaning, events are not important, reality, myth and tradition all get mixed up. Historical time does not exist, the moment is eternal, man remains nameless"(p. 416).

"They watched the river ripple past. Words were temporary and transitory. Languages fade away and are forced into oblivion by new tongues. Men also come and go, even the river and the jungle are not eternal. After fifty years a jungle of concrete may spring up here. The river may dry up or shrink or change course, just as human beings disappear or change the direction of their journeys"(p. 426).

For Ricoeur, the human time is a combination of both cosmological time (life to death) and phenomenological time (past, present and future). *River of Fire*, while concerning itself with cosmological time leaves a commentary on the phenomenology of time. Phenomenology for South Asia is configured differently. In South Asia, Nandy writes, there is no past, independent of the present, there is no future that is present here and now. The past shapes the present and the future but the future and the present also shape the past" (p. 62). Time, in South Asia becomes not just nonlinear, but cyclic.

The ambivalent Indian epic

As a narrative of time where history uses human experience as an existential condition for temporality what does *River of Fire* become in context of South Asia? It follows “a destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a reconfigured time through the mediation of a configured time” (Ricoeur 1995, p. 54) and in doing it becomes an *Indian epic*. An Indian epic describes Nandy “begins with a pre-history and end, not with a climactic victory or defeat but with an ambivalent passing of era. There is at their conclusion a certain tiredness and a sense of futility of it all” (1995, p. 63). *River of Fire* follows the destiny of Time in South Asia which is prefigured, every passing era of history reconfigures it and reappearance of every character is a mediation in this configuration. Ambivalence partners its resolve with futility in unfolding of history of Time. At one end, one is relieved of passing of an era, one is equally bitter of the condition of its end; Partition being the consequence of the end of Colonialism. This ambivalence remains embedded in the cycle of time where history in repeating itself, yet again, repeats the story of Time.

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