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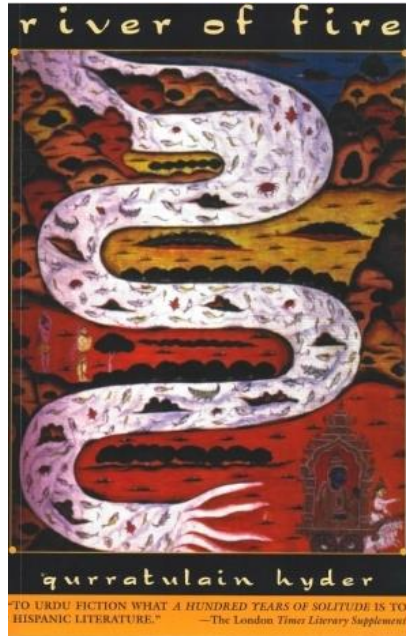
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Historic Perspective in *River Of Fire*

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Abstract

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Historic Perspective in *River Of Fire*

Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* is a unique blend of history and fiction. The depiction of history in her novel reflects the contemporary theories of known historians like Oswald Spengler and Toynbee who believed in the cyclical nature of growth and decline of civilizations. Hyder too projects in her novel the changing face of history and the collective consciousness of man. Spengler and Toynbee observed the eternal laws which guarantee flux and permanence. Hyder shows this pattern and its continual enactment in the way exploiters become victimizers and vice-versa. She seeks to bring clarity in an otherwise chaotic order by reinterpreting the past. The ravages of history do not seem to leave a lasting memory. The repetition of the cyclical nature of history brings forth Hyder's intense historic orientation.



Qurratulain Hyder (1928-2007)

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qurratulain_Hyder

Choice of Facts and History

This essay aims at exploring the theoretical perspectives of history woven in the narration of Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* and her choice of facts, their presentation and interpretation. In *River of Fire* the blend of history with fiction reflects Eliot's view of history as 'rediscovered consciousness'. Her view of the cyclical nature of time enables her to present the collective consciousness of man legitimizing her historic perception. The reader observes the eternal laws which guarantee order and permanence. Nietzsche and Spengler's belief that man's greatness lies in accepting the inevitable cycle of birth and death is reflected in Hyder's narration. The principle of cycles in Toynbee and Spengler is also seen in Hyder's work whose sense of history is bound up with a sense of humanism in which freedom is an intrinsic necessity.

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Collapse and Rejuvenation

Hyder's narration embraces both collapse and rejuvenation as a pattern of history. This phenomenon is especially prominent in the portrayal of the rise and decline of Lucknow before and during the period of British colonialism. The cyclical historic pattern is projected when Hyder shows how the right-minded people become exploiters when they gain power. In Hyder's novel the changing face of history is seen against the unchanging impulse to control vs. the desire to be free and the continuous enactment of this cycle. The exodus of Hindus and Muslims during the Partition is likened to the displacement of Jews and Palestinians. To bear the pain of exile, history is invoked for consolation. Benedict Anderson's explanation of history as an endless chain of cause and effect is felt in Hyder's personal experience and in her novel, *River of Fire*.

River of Fire

Hyder is a writer of the wider historical currents. The novel, *River of Fire*, spans some two and a half thousand years of the history of the Sub-Continent. Her characters are situated in various periods of history in this way she recreates history from several angles. Hayden White gives two principal features of narrative, discussed by historians and relevant to Hyder's writings as order and selection {White, 1973}. All narrative employs these concepts for all narrative involves interpretation and the filling in of gaps. This is interpretation at two levels. The author must choose which facts to include and which to leave out, which to stress and the reader must receive the information and make the necessary logical connections in order to comprehend the story the author is trying to tell. Each historian will include, omit and stress different information and present it in one of many possible manners, no two histories are ever identical, even if they cover the same event, using the same factual material. Thus the idea of an absolute truth in history becomes invalidated when faced with the infinite permutations and combinations the narrative allows.

In literature the realm of possibility is greater and the limitation of narrative is a result only of the authors' imaginative abilities. Of course the author must seek some logic and order guiding the narrative which should make sense to the reader. Like a historian, Hyder chooses the facts she needs to present from a pool of data and her interpretative action proceeds from her decision of how and in which order and tone she is going to present them.

She achieves this through various narrative strategies, such as, interior monologue, surrealism, argument, ideological implication, story-telling, and tropes.

Evolutionary Process

Hyder writes of the evolutionary process of belief, philosophy, war, history and social customs and records the massive political upheavals as well as the soul's resistance to evil, to complacency and to an unjust social and political order. Her view of history reflects a psychological, subjective and emotional approach. Though she asserts her faith in recorded history and believes it to be a civilizing process, she is aware also of its futility as the world of the living recedes into a shadowy past. Histories are made and the struggle for life continues beyond despair and disillusionment. She records this struggle for survival and social change. History may be a confusing and a deceptive process but it is also a material process determining the lives of people in society independently of the individual will. Though we are responsible for making our history we do so under definite assumptions and conditions. History is made out of the resultant conflict between individual wills. The consciousness of this process as embodied memory of the collective struggle of man provides a perspective and a context which enhances understanding of existing conditions and of possible actions in the future. Distance and objectivity helps us to arrive at a more rational and analytical position.

Selection and Infinite Possibilities

For, though literature is deemed as fiction or imagination, history is truth. Hyder achieves the difficult task of building a bridge between the two. Like history, literature involves a process of selection but it is more flexible in its infinite possibilities although, here, too, the writer has to confine himself within a temporal aspect. In history, as White points that the facts are unchangeable but the historian is autonomous in his decision about the sequence of their presentation and the most effective way of bringing them forth. The novelist, too, can choose to bend and manipulate chronological time by using the flash-back technique or the device of the stream of consciousness, the dream sequence, or hallucination to expose the innermost thinking of his characters. In history, these techniques are inapplicable as they are outside the realm of the real world. Hyder writes from the vantage point of the past which in relation to her story is the present.

Rewriting Historical Facts

Hyder's writing centers on rewriting historical facts therefore, in her work literature and history are strongly connected. More than one narrative voice exists in the text. The first to appear is Gautam Nilamber, who is pursuing knowledge and going through a rigorous training period to attain his status as a Brahmin, a high priest. The next voice is that of Abu Mansoor Kamaludin, the historian and linguist who comes to India in search of old manuscripts and then the voice of Cyril Ashley, the impoverished student venturing out to India for potentially lucrative opportunities. The change in tone is due to the many hundred years between the appearance of one character and the next. The device of different voices allows the leap of time to register in the mind of the reader. In the hierarchy of narrators, it is the third person omniscient that exists at the top occupying the greatest amount of time and space of the text. Yet at the beginning and at the end the voices of Gautam and Hari Shankar are significant when the story comes full circle. The thematic strand, the quest for meaning links the ancestors with the descendants. The variety of voices is indicative of the multitudinous possibilities and dimensions that exist within the world. The compression of history is not seen as a harmonious process. Individual identities are by turns enlarged and fragmented by the lives around them. They become repositories of a national memory. Balance is maintained in the public history of the Sub-Continent and the private histories of the characters. Both parts are inter-dependant; one cannot function without the other. As the characters narrate their tales, the transmuted material becomes at once history of the region as well as biography.

The Idea of History

History is the self-knowledge of the living mind. A historian talks of the past but he must make the past come alive in his writing, it must vibrate as the present. Eliot names this 'the constructive view of history' and history as 'rediscovered consciousness'. The function of the historian is to penetrate the confused interactions of the changing world, its bewildering complexities and peel the hard skins of accumulated and undifferentiated facts. To grasp the logic and the relevance of the underlying pattern of events, the writer must see himself as a part of history.

Through the Eyes of a Historian

Hyder shows us the historic dimension in *River of Fire* through the eyes of a fifteenth century historian and a lover of books, the librarian of Jaunpur, Syed Abu Mansoor Kamaluddin of Nishapur. Educated in Iraq by a student of Ibn-i- Khaldoun, history carried a great deal of fascination for Abu Mansoor. He wrote travelogues and was interested in linguistics. Having mastered Sanskrit, he was assigned the task of procuring ancient manuscripts on classical music by Sultan Hussain Shah Nayak who was a great patron of music. Hyder recognizes the role of some Sultans in the development of art and culture and presents the peaceful and gentle nature of Hussain Sharqi who was not just a warrior but also a lover of music and art. Kamaluddin journeys to the banks of Saryu to obtain valuable documents from the priests of Ayodhiya. As a historian, he believed that man had never escaped the ravages of history. He was reminded of the Tartars invasions, the Crusades, the fire-worshippers of Persia, the Jews of Undlas, the storms of Gobi Desert and how each event had ruined the sea of knowledge that man had accumulated over the centuries. The Damascus of Ummayyads, the Baghdad of Abbasids, the glory of Athens and Alexandria, all had turned to ashes. For Abu Mansoor the ruins of cities teach more to man than the philosophies of mystics. Hyder's perception is a strong reminder to Spengler's theory of the repetitive cycles in history.

Bringing Lucidity to Perplexity

Historians seek to bring lucidity to perplexity and they do so by sometimes reversing the events. Kamal in *River of Fire*, witnesses the 'Cavalcade' of history in a surreal moment. Hyder shows characters from as far back as three hundred years before Christ including historic figures and characters of ancient myth, Bharat Muni, Raja Bhoj, Kaalidasa and many others, all reminding Kamal of the powerful flow of time and history. "Like we did, you will go too..." (ROF 81) The configuration of the plot imposes the sense of the ending enabling the reader to see the entire plot as a single unified thought.

With countless universities and colleges and a musician king who patronized arts and learning, Jaunpur had become the centre of learning and excellence in the late fourteenth and in the fifteenth centuries. Hyder tells us about the reigns of Firoz Shah Tughlaq, Sultan Bahlol and Hussain Shah Sharqi. She talks of the glorious past when these rulers had put in the best systems of governance. There was prosperity and abundance and its fruits were shared among all classes. Traveler's inns, mosques, free kitchens for Muslims as well as

Hindus and baths for the public were found throughout the kingdom. Learning and arts, commerce and trade flourished. But even in those times, “The overriding passion was the acquisition of power and glory, however transient it would turn out to be” (ROF 65).

The Drama of Tragedy and Triumph

Kamal is conscious of the high drama of tragedy and triumph which abides behind the majestic walls of the grand palaces. He is appointed supervisor of the calligraphists and attached to the bureau of translations. As he ponders on the cyclical pattern in history, Kamaluddin learns of the defeat of Hussain Sharqi, his king. Ironically, the vanquished army encamps on the banks of The Rapti, the place where Buddha had once stayed and preached about the transitory nature of worldly glory. Kamal marvels at the resilience of human beings. In 1484, Hussain Shah was replaced by Bahlol Lodhi. Hyder gives us a quick resume of world history and we learn that the last half of the fifteenth century was the feudal age of warfare everywhere in the world. West Asia, Europe, Russia, China, Japan, everywhere there was bloodshed and massacre. In such a world where could a sensitive, learned man take refuge but in a Sufi's shrine? Kamal became a disciple of Kabir whose teachings of equality and brotherhood had stirred a whole population and created a spiritual fervor in the region.

The Attraction of Educational and Business Potential

Kamaluddin comes to India as a foreigner. Through his memoirs we get a world perspective. Hyder talks about the ascent of the Christians in the West, the impending loss of Spain for the Muslims and of the great riches and wealth of India at that point in history. Hyder skillfully conveys the business and educational potential of India which led the British and other Europeans to plan commerce and trade with this country. She points out the stagnation in intellectual pursuit in the Arab world and how since after Ibn-i-Khaldoom, Ibn-i-Tammaya, Roomi, Razi, Hafiz, and Al-Beruni, no notable scholar had taken up the pursuit of learning. Muslims had begun to talk about the past signifying a state of despair and sadness in the Muslim world. Vivid and convincing details make history become a version of reality. Crucial dimensions are explored to give us the sense of one world dying and a new order replacing it. The repetition of history highlights Hyder's vision, legitimizing a historical orientation within the study of literature. Every natural event offers many possibilities and every context has multiple referents. No event in *River of Fire* is altogether independent and

the thematic emphasis on repetition continues to focus attention on human limits in the face of natural calamities and political upheavals. Emphasis emerges through an underlying tone of nostalgia and vulnerability.

Techniques and Language Use

Repetition of symbols such as the river, fire and stone contribute to the philosophic tone. Human frustration and political destruction are inevitably tied together. The wars which lead to the victory of one faction throws the vanquished in an abyss of despair. Kamal becomes desolate after hearing the news of the defeat of his Sultan, Hussain Sharqi. Similarly, Gautam loses his fingers in a battle in which he never wanted to take part. The comprehensive treatment of these events highlights the belief in divine intervention and reinforces Hyder's belief that human beings are often led by forces beyond their control.

Historical time becomes the medium in which human life unfolds and fulfills itself. Its order is set by the causal relations constituting the history of man or nature, by things done and undone by time. History is raised to the status of a deity, beyond temporal change while the sets and players in the foreground continue to strut their hour upon the stage. In the background, permanent, fixed and eternal, the broad and majestic current of history in its totality seems to be the only lasting phenomenon within the chaotic changes of its temporal manifestations. History discovers the eternal, the universal law which guarantees a sense of order and permanence. The history of the world becomes also the world's court of justice. It is the march of reason through the world of man and it is inherently rational, not only as an object of science, but also as an agent of morality.

Principles of Cycles and the Law of Challenge and Response

The works of Spengler and Toynbee aroused popular imagination as they set out to attempt a universal, unified world history organized around a simple general principle- the Principle of Cycles in Spengler and the Principle of Cycles and the Law of Challenge and Response in Toynbee. Their works try to make an intelligible sense of structure, coherence and continuity in its totality. Hyder's vision seems to be analogous to these theories. Thus regardless of their objective validity, they also preserve a sense of significance which human beings can derive from an ambitious reconstruction of their past, even though they do not necessarily justify a belief in progress or a better world to come.

Hyder's Belief, Vision and Position

Hyder seems to concur with the cyclical theories of time advanced by Nietzsche and Spengler. Her literary expression and her language of myth serves to convey a sense of continuity, unity and identification with the history of mankind as a whole. She shows the repetition of the cycles of human situation and all time as eternally present in man's life. Nietzsche and Spengler believe that man's greatness and hope for transcendence may be seen to lie in his acceptance of the inevitable cycle of birth and death. This belief is shared by Hyder and may seem to be a pessimistic view but it redeems itself when it builds a detachment and a distance from becoming too immersed in the affairs of the present. It relieves one from the anxiety created by the meaningless repetition of events and engenders a continuity and unity between past, present and future, both historical and personal. Perhaps this is the most comforting and positive theory from a secular point of view.

Scenes shift from one city to another, from Behraich at one point in history when it was the centre of civilization to another time when it is destroyed by powerful Muslim conquerors and reduced to a small, dusty and dilapidated habitation. History saw the onslaught of Qutubudin Aibak who destroyed the idol-worshipping kings of Bengal and Magadh. Many priests fled towards Tibet and Nepal. Wars and victories also usher in new faiths and philosophies. Shakia Muni was replaced by Buddha and Muslim faith took over Buddha's philosophy. Bale Mian emerged as the great Sufi saint with many followers in the reign of Mehmud Ghazni.

Humanism as the Basis

Hyder's ideas about historical change are bound up with humanism----- a humanism which is a judicious combination of reason and imagination rooted in faith. Freedom of conscience is itself a touchstone of humanism (Bergson, 1935). She poses the question that if every man is to be the master of his own destiny then change should be directed by human beings and not dictated by divine forces. Institutional structures must be built to direct the process of history in the right direction. "History is a continuous process of development and hence is essentially unpredictable. But this does not mean that ... history... is the domain of arbitrariness and irresponsible caprice. History is at once freedom and necessity."¹ She

expresses her anxiety about social change while contemplating eternal issues and evaluating critically the direction of modern life.

In *River of Fire* she shows Sharavasti as the centre of intellectual debates and the spring for new ideas but was ruined by the ravages of time. History moves on and leaves none to decide between the victor and the vanquished. Ancient Brahmin literature was replete with tales of brave warriors, armoured soldiers on giant elephants, winning wars against enemies. In time, all this became remote history. Gautam often wondered about how things had been and, were now no more. Soon, he and his friends would be forgotten, unreal characters losing all significance in the eternal flow of time. The beggar Champa blesses the passers-by, “other than the sorrow of Hussain, may you see none.”(ROF 177) She seems to acquire a historicity connecting scores of years of history and the past making it alive in a manner that it acts as a uniting bridge for many.

END NOTES.

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