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*River of Fire: Critiquing the
Ideology of History*
(Student Paper)

I

THE PAINFUL TENSION between the personal and the historical has always been a key theme attracting poets. However, Qurratulain Hyder, in her “historical novel” *River of Fire*, takes up this relatively common theme in such a way that her treatment of it produces a strong critique of the received notion of history. In other words, the author of *River of Fire* depicts the, at once, tragic and comic drama which takes place between the historical and the personal. Hyder’s artistic representation of that drama epistemologically questions what is known as history. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which this novel works *against, parallel to* and as a *supplement to* history. I use the term “history” here with two distinct meanings. Sudipta Kaviraj defines history as firstly meaning “the course of happenings in time, the seamless web of experiences of a people,” and secondly as meaning “the stories in which what had happened are recovered and explained.”¹ In this discussion I will read *River of Fire* against both of these definitions. However, for greater clarity, I will use the term “history” to convey the first meaning and “historiography” to convey the second.

II

In the world of this novel, princes leave their thrones and their beautiful

¹Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness* (Delhi: Oxford University Pr., 1995), p. 107.

women, preferring intellectual pursuits over ruling countries and waging wars. Despite dwelling under trees and only eating meager foods, students live happy lives reflecting on the cosmos and ultimate truths. They're looking for a fine line to walk in a world where every question has six correct answers. In this world, one finds renouncers, intellectuals, men of letters, painters and traders. *River of Fire* opens this spectacular world before our eyes. Apart from the wonderful men, and perhaps more importantly, the women of this world bear their sorrows in beautiful ways. They busy themselves with all kinds of mundane pleasures and beautiful things while living lonely lives waiting for their beloveds to return from their "larger than life" pursuits. The story of *River of Fire* is in fact about the heartening struggle of this ideal world and these ideal men to continue being ideal regardless of the conflicting forces of history.

In this world, which in many ways resembles ours, a young man named Gautam Nilambar is caught between two opposing "images" on the same day. One is beautiful Princess Champak and the other is her fiancé who has renounced his throne in favor of the Truth. The Buddha has died more than a century ago but his Dharma and his way of life still complicate and deepen the mundane existence of Magadhian humans. During the night of that same day, Nilambar's mind struggles with these two images and latches onto the eternal problem of students, of seekers of truth. He spends his entire life, in a way, trying to answer this relatively simple question: whether to pursue a scholar's solitary life or a life of domestic bliss with the woman he loves? Before he can formulate an answer and obtain his beloved, the forces of history barge into his life, separating the lovers forever, even before they can express their inner thoughts to one another. The young couple becomes aware that history lurks perpetually in the background, watching for a moment to intrude in their lives. As in the case of this couple, history often seizes the very moment considered most precious to individual human beings. This narrative introduces the novel's central concern—the eternal and unavoidable tension, conflict and sometimes harmony between the personal and the historical.

At the beginning of the novel Hyder depicts the average person's desire to live free from the dominance and influence of the historical process. This historical process typically thwarts that desire. In the novel, for example, a group of artists is engaged in a debate about *rup* (form) and *arup* (non-form). Their lives are already immersed in art and philosophy. They desire an enlightened human existence. Then a war breaks out, i.e., history happens. Gautam Nilambar, a young artist and

scholar, says to his friends, “I am not interested in King Nanda, Vishnu Sharma and Chandragupta. *Why must they drag me into their conflict...?*”² Gautam’s question draws our attention to one of the key themes of the novel. Hyder may have had the very same question in her mind when she wrote. Moreover, Gautam’s question is a signal that directs the reader along the path of the novel’s central theme: the individual versus history. Hyder has carefully planted this sentence in her prose to be seen clearly by her readers. *River of Fire* has numerous episodes where “macro-political” events, such as invasions and changes of power, break into the “micro” lives of the members of the society. What I call “macro-political events” might be viewed as the forces of history or as history expressing itself. This novel, apparently a novel about Time, at its thematic level depicts and questions the function of history. Therefore, Gautam’s individualistic and humanist question regarding what he has to do with the historical process, with this politics of the kings, becomes the central question of the novel. In fact, this is the central question of all ordinary, peace-loving individuals on the Indian subcontinent, people who have suffered endlessly under a process of history shaped by a brutal colonial era which split both the outer landscape of the Subcontinent and the inner landscape of its inhabitants. For that very reason *River of Fire* must be read against the grain of teleological history.³

The history in this novel and the historical nature of this novel are quite different from what we normally recognize as historical fiction.

²Qurratulain Hyder, *River of Fire (Aag ka Darya)* (New York: New Directions, 1998), p. 39. Emphasis added. Hereafter all references to the novel appear in the text.

³What I mean by teleological history has to be explained since I am to come back to it throughout this paper. In his book *Imagining India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), Ronald Inden draws our attention to this issue:

The consequences for agency of this essentialism have been immense. [Vincent A.] Smith and his colleagues have assumed essences such as caste and rationality to be fixed premises for action and not the result of acts in changing circumstances. Placing them before history rather than at its shifting frontier, they have transformed those essences—‘God’, ‘reason’, ‘liberty’, ‘modernity’, the ‘free market’, or, on the left, ‘equality’, ‘democracy’, the ‘welfare state’, or the ‘revolution’—into agents. They have treated one or the other of them as the true subject of history, who used the people and institutions of some nation-state or the other as instruments. *So history has not been a tale of the contingent. It has been teleological...*” (p. 17, emphasis added)

River of Fire is an historical novel in the sense that its story runs parallel to Indian history. However, it is very different from the kind of epic novel which normally represents the historical novel.⁴ Hyder's novel is episodic. It depicts selected historical periods of Indian history, jumping over centuries-long "time-slots." For example, the first fifty pages of the novel take place in fourth century B.C.E. Then the narrative jumps (over the river Saryu) to the fifteenth century, just prior to the rise of Mughal India.

This episodic nature of *River of Fire* is important in terms of the novel's questioning of historiography, i.e., of history as a narrative of what has happened in the past. A history is often a large macro narrative. It tells the story of how things happened in a certain community or place. The historian constructing his "story" according to the laws of causality and of cause and effect rationality has been the guiding principle for writing history.⁵ As such, a history usually clarifies gloomy events that occurred in a community, and making sense out of seemingly unconnected events is one goal that a history seeks to achieve. In explaining the close affinity between fiction and history, Lionel Gossman makes a point worth quoting in full:

Those historians who have been most willing to recognize the role of imagination in the writing of history or the proximity of history and fiction have also, understandably, been most concerned to distinguish between the two, and to establish the specificity of history. Though there appears to be a certain longing to found the difference in the historical narrative's continued dependency on the real world, the specificity of history can probably be more easily defined in terms of its own rules, its own system, than in terms of a direct relation of dependency upon the real world. R. G. Collingwood, for instance, proposes three rules or conditions for history—that the historian, unlike the novelist, must localize his story in time and place; that all *history must be consistent with itself*, since there is only one historical world, whereas fictional universes, being autonomous, need not agree, and cannot clash; and that the *historical imagination is not*

⁴George Lukacs' classic work, *The Historical Novel*, gives the impression that the classical historical novel is an epic, a complete account of a given historic era. Hyder's novel, it could be argued, represents an entirely different genre of historical novel and it deserves much more serious study.

⁵E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 114-5.

*completely free but is bound to work from “evidence.”*⁶

Here, Gossman explains the relative freedom of fiction compared to historiography. What is perhaps more important to us at this point is to see that the world of historiography is not “autonomous” and “bound to work from ‘evidence.’” In other words, historical imagination cannot go beyond our mundane sense of verisimilitude and our everyday understanding of plausibility. Therefore, a history is coherent, consistent and complete. With its episodic nature, *River of Fire* intentionally ignores all these fundamental qualities of historiography while still using Indian history as one of the novel’s loci of meanings or referents. While traditional historiography attempts to create unity and coherence in the story it narrates, Hyder’s novel depicts disconnectedness, fragmentation and discontinuity.

The implied connection between the episodes in *River of Fire* is more mythical than historical. For example, the novel does not have a single story that unfolds, it has four similar stories that take place on the Subcontinent during different historical periods. In pre-Islamic India, it is the story of Gautam Nilambar’s life with Hari Shankar, Champak, Nirmala, Sujata and others. During the Islamic era, Kamaluddin is the central character of the story, and Bano, a Muslim, and Champavati, a Hindu, are the women around him. During the colonial period, the story revolves around Cyril Ashley who is connected to Sujata Debi, Champa Jan and Maria Teresa. The late-colonial and postcolonial episode tells the story of Champa Ahmad, Gautam Nilambar, another Cyril Ashley, Kamaluddin, Nirmala and so on. These four stories are not linked together except for some marginal connections between the colonial and postcolonial episodes. The only apparent, and merely implied connection between them is the repetition of the names of characters. Names such as Gautam Nilambar, Champa, Sujata, and Hari Shankar recur throughout the two millennia time frame of the novel. One could argue that this repetition of names implies an almost mythical connection between the episodes, and mythical elements are not the “evidence” used for history writing.⁷

⁶Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Pr., 1990), p. 248. Emphasis added.

⁷By “mythical” I mean the religious, karmic connotations, such as rebirth, that recurring names evoke in a South Asian mind. For example, at one level of connotation the name “Gautam” recurring throughout two millennia of time suggests the reincarnation or *avatar* of the same person.

These recurring names also suggest a circular sense of time and history.⁸ Epistemologically, this view of history is significant and important in producing a critique of what I would call “regular history.” In the novel’s four hundred twenty-eight pages Hyder creates a text that has a circular development. To be specific, the opening episode of the novel ends with Gautam Nilambar jumping into the river Saryu. This is fourth century B.C.E., one hundred fifty years after the Buddha’s death. Then, in the closing episode, another Gautam Nilambar is watching the river Sarju flowing. This is twenty-five hundred years after the Buddha’s birth.⁹ These two Nilambers are quite similar in terms of the suffering and the happiness they are experiencing in their lives, despite the fact that they are separated from one another by at least two millennia. It is obvious that the river Saryu and the river Sarju are the same.¹⁰ Two thousand years of evolution in the language has slightly changed the name of the river, but not its function.

This circular sense of time is further established by the fact that the stories from the four periods are quite similar. In fact, this novel essentially has one story which happens four times with slight differences. It is a relatively simple story about the separation of lovers, loneliness, and relations between men and women.¹¹ Being similar, these stories suggest a

⁸The handling of the names of characters in *River of Fire* is similar to that found in Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* where the names of the original members of the Jose Arcadio Buendia family are given to members of later generations of the same family. By doing this Marquez, among other things, gives a sense of circularity to the one hundred years of history in Macondo. It is interesting to note that Hyder uses this technique nearly ten years before Marquez. One might argue that Hyder’s use of names, beginning with their use to hold two millennia of human history together, is much more complex and epistemologically crucial to her novel than Marquez’s use of names in his novel.

⁹Hyder’s choice of this time frame also has significance. It is said that Gautama Buddha’s *Sasana* is to last five thousand years before the next Buddha appears. Hyder inserts her novel into this Buddhist conception of time which is itself circular. I think this also helps readers imagine an alternative Time that is different from the secular sense of time in historical discourse.

¹⁰The river Saryu may recall Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. Although this does not add much to the meaning of *River of Fire*, it does enhance the novel’s timelessness which in turn deepens its mythical dimension.

¹¹This story’s being too simple could be cited as one flaw of the novel. Apparently, this novel rejects characterization and the telling of a story.

certain sense of the universality of human suffering and the circular nature of time. However, only the readers have an opportunity to see that similarity. Nilambar of the twentieth century is unaware that Nilambar of the fourth century B.C.E. has also experienced the same kind of human pain he is experiencing.

This fact implies another aspect of the nature of the historical process: history makes the individual life an insignificant dot of color in the fabric of history, which has multiple colors and layers of colors. In a sense, what a novel like *River of Fire* does is enlarge those small dots to reveal the inner landscape of the individual lives. *River of Fire* does this so wonderfully that it doesn't alienate those individual lives from the river of time and history, but rather depicts the dynamic and dialectical relationship between the individual and history. Here we see the river of history flowing through individual lives, but it is never allowed to flow over the individual and create a single, monolithic meaning for human life. The novel achieves this simply by being different from history—i.e., different from history as a narrative of what happened.

The novel's model reader and her specific relationship to the novel also suggest a remarkable non-linearity in the temporal dimension of *River of Fire*. I borrow the term "model reader" from Umberto Eco to mean the ideal reader the novel expects.¹² I have mentioned earlier that *River of Fire* has four stories whose similarity is only known to its readers, not to the characters in the novel. These stories have been arranged on a rotating stage as the scenes of a play. The model reader, who is like a spectator, is able to see each scene as the stage rotates. The reader is expected to recognize the similarities between the four stories and to see the thematic connections between them. Since there are no causal connections between these stories, the reader is forced to look at the mythical or irrational connections. This model reader is given a chance to experience a circular flow of time. Therefore, the reader has the richest and fullest experience of time, not the characters in the novel. The position of the model reader is made even stronger by the fact that the novel does not have a "hero" around whose life the story is centered. In the epic-like historicist novel, the hero is the master of time and he dominates the temporal dimension of the novel. With her unique way of orienting her reader

¹²*Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). The model reader is "a sort of ideal type whom the text not only foresees as a collaborator but also tries to create" (p. 9).

towards the temporal dimension, Hyder creates a model reader who is hermeneutically more powerful than an average reader of history or the epic novel.

One can see a subtle irony built into this specific way of handling the temporal dimension. I have pointed out that the novel does not have a hero who dominates time. Even the government officer and Orientalist scholar Cyril Ashley is only a “petty hero” in the colonial segment of the story. Cyril Ashley, an agent of colonialism, is supposed to be an agent of history as well. Europeans came to India to rescue her from her own historical backwardness. Only Europeans could do that because they saw themselves as historically more advanced than India. In that sense, Cyril Ashley is an agent of history and time. But in the novel, Cyril Ashley is no more powerful than any of the other central characters. In fact, this colonial master of time meets with a sad lonely death. Against the stream of time, he is as insignificant as other human beings in spite of his colonial claims to be the master of history:

Death came to Cyril Ashley in a *lonely* circuit house *in a remote corner* of Bihar. He had returned on horseback after inspecting his indigo plantations. His orderly had taken off his riding boots, he had bathed and changed for dinner and was awaiting his usual sundowner in the drawing room when, all of a sudden, he felt he was going to die.

He stammered and *could not call out, Koi Hai*—he had had a massive stroke, and died *quietly in his armchair*.

Sir Cyril Ashley was buried in a *small* European cemetery in the nearby district headquarters. (p. 150, emphasis added)

Here Hyder depicts this agent of history dying as an insignificant, average man. His lonely death becomes even more ironic when it is compared with the attitudes and ideologies he had inherited when he first came to India. After completing his education at Cambridge, Cyril Ashley, an aspiring poet, is looking for a job:

Therefore, after going down from Cambridge, Cyril Ashley joined the Middle Temple in the City of London. Here, in neighbouring Fleet Street, journalists and wits assembled in coffee houses to discuss international affairs, foreign wars, the Turks, the Russians and India. The world was opening up. There was a lot [of] traffic—people were going to the New World and to the East. Both offered enormous opportunities to get rich quick—especially the East which was backward and politically in a shambles. (p. 105)

Cyril Ashley's friends persuade him to come to India where the situation "has become enormously beneficial" to them (p. 106). In other words, British colonialism is gaining strength in India and therefore Cyril and his fellow Englishmen are the agents of history. It is true that Cyril becomes extremely rich in India but, as Hyder depicts him, he is hardly the agent of a universal history which is committed to propelling India out of its backwardness. More importantly, Hyder seems to suggest that Cyril himself is a victim of the colonial ideology of history.

In order to show that Cyril is insignificant when seen against the entire history of the Indian subcontinent, Hyder stretches the temporal dimension of her novel out to two millennia, giving the impression that her story seeks to set Time against Eternity. In this way Cyril becomes master only of colonial Time, not of Eternity. In that sense, he is no different from Gautam Nilambar, Kamaluddin, and others who do not claim to be agents of history. Can there be any stronger way to critique the colonial ideology of history than to show that those who are supposed to be the agents of history are also its victims? If history is concerned with Time, this novel is concerned with Eternity. Hyder puts both Cyril and the history over which he claims mastery into her novel's eternity-like temporality.

III

A history about what happened in the past privileges the present over the past. Since it is written in the present, it is necessarily the present's view of the past. As Kaviraj says, "the past [is] an image created in the interest of the present."¹³ More often than not, historiography uses the past to justify the present. For Kaviraj, this putting the past at the service of the present in historiography has a lot to do with the narrative mode of historiography itself.¹⁴ To put Kaviraj's argument in simple terms: In 1889 a male child was born to Motilal Nehru. In 1947 this child became the prime minister of India. When nationalist histories were written after 1947, that child who was born in 1889 was not just Motilal Nehru's son, he was the father of the nation. In historical retrospect, his birth was the

¹³Kaviraj, *Unhappy*, p. 108.

¹⁴Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India," in *Subaltern Studies*, vol. 7, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Pr. 1992), p. 19.

birth of the father of the nation. Hyder attempts to break free from such a linear, rational organization of events in her novel.

One can achieve several goals by representing history as non-linear. In part, Qurratulain Hyder wants to transcend the various nationalist claims to Indian history. These nationalist claims, regardless of which side they come from, often postulate homogeneous and monolithic histories. The author here seems to be working out a much “larger” concept of history where diverse ethnic groups all have equal space to watch history happening. The stream of human life in the novel is a wonderful mix of different cultures. Even in fourth century B.C.E., the crown prince Hari Shankar disguises himself as a Greek, and Champak talks “matters of intellect with visiting Chinese scholars” (p. 4). From that point on, India becomes increasingly multiethnic, multicultural and cosmopolitan. This depiction of India challenges both homogeneous nationalist histories and colonial histories of the “backwardness” of India.

By making room for what regular history usually ignores, Hyder transcends some of the crucial limits of history. Historical discourse does not have any space for irrationality. Broadly speaking, irrationality is everything that does not make rational or mundane sense. It could be poetry, myth, dream, ghost or God Himself. Historians generally leave out elements that don't fit into the cause-and-effect sensibility of historiography. Hyder, in contrast, brings many irrational or supernatural incidents into her narrative in such a way that, in some instances, she implies that that irrationality itself determines the course of history. She juxtaposes history, fiction and parable when fictionalizing the beginning of the European presence in India. She intermingles multiple narratives with multiple epistemologies:

Bengal has become one great bazaar of European traders. This Sultanate was annexed by Akbar and his Empire extended across the land-mass of Hindustan. When years later, the decline began, the Mughal subadars or viceroys of Bengal, called Nawab-Nazims, declared their autonomy. Prophet Sulaiman had been granted sway over land and sea by Allah. He was also the king of djinns, paris and demons, and birds and animals. He could converse with them. He was also the richest man on earth. Once he said to God, “O Allah! I wish to invite all Thy creatures to dinner at my place.” God said, “Go ahead!” So an enormous feast was prepared. One fish came out of the sea and finished off the banquet. God said, “O Sulaiman! Only I can feed all my creatures.” Now, this parable does not imply that Siraj-ud-Daulah, Nawab-Nazim of Bengal, had ever claimed to

be like King Solomon. It transpired however, that the Law of Taxila's Chanakya began to operate once again. A whale called Admiral Watson came out of the sea. Siraj-ud-Daulah proved to be a small fish because Mir Jaffer, a crab, turned traitor. So Watson and Clive swallowed poor Siraj without even saying "Thank you." (p. 103)

This paragraph begins with historical facts: Europeans are present in India and King Akbar's Empire is expanding. Nawab-Nazims declare their independence—a decision that causes the Empire to collapse. With this factual history, the writer interweaves the mythical story—a parable. The parable is about a king who, carried away by his extreme prowess, transgresses the limits of mundane power. By doing so, the king unconsciously attempts to go beyond the power of God. Power too has its limits. One big fish completely finishes off the food that King Solomon has arranged for all the creatures. The King comes to the painful awareness that his power does not extend over all beings. An earthly king, regardless of his supremacy, is still a human and cannot take care of all beings. In a way the parable is about the limits of human power. Adjoining the parable, Hyder brings in history again: The Chanakya dynasty is rising—a threat to the Nawab-Nazims. Then European invaders come in. The historical moment becomes chaotic and complicated. Admiral Watson's intervention in Indian politics is told as a semi-mythical or semi-historical narrative. The whale named Admiral Watson is juxtaposed with the big fish in the parable. Watson does exactly what the big fish did at the banquet. In a separate paragraph, Hyder, who knows her craft well, writes: "Now the magnificent waterways of Bengal are crowded with Englishmen's trading vessels. They are the new overlords" (p. 103).

With just these two paragraphs, the author depicts the transition of power from the Mughals to the British. Real history definitely has more to say about this event. Nevertheless, Hyder's narrative is much richer in meaning for it allows the irrational in. Some sort of intervention by God is implied in the narrative. One other important thing that happens here is that the two epistemologically divergent narratives embrace each other. These two narratives are history and parable and they are epistemologically different because history is "factual truth" and parable is "fabulous truth." Also, when this parable is joined with history, it suggests the local people's "ahistorical" understanding of the political change which was to come about with the arrival of the white man in the Indian Ocean. Yet, in rational historiography, those fabulous truths and invisible ancestors have no place. Dipesh Chakrabarty is right in saying, "Gods, spirits, and

other ‘supernatural’ forces can claim no agency in our [historical] narratives.”¹⁵ By bringing such elements into her narrative Hyder challenges regular history. But Hyder, who seems to be in favor of literary realism, does not use this kind of multi-layered narrative device as much as she could have. Partly this has to do with the fact that when she wrote her novel in the 1950s, the limits-of-realism debate in the literary world had yet to become a worldwide phenomenon.

At one point in human history, historical narrative had a place for supernatural powers. In fact, those supernatural powers had agency to decide and direct the process of history. In his *Nation and Its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee provides a good illustration of how, at one time, “myth, history and contemporary—all [became] part of the same chronological sequence. One [was] not distinguished from another.”¹⁶ Chatterjee’s claim is related to what he calls the “Puranic history” that came out of Fort William College in Calcutta. A Sanskrit teacher at that college, Mrityunjay Vidyalankar, wrote the first printed history book of India in the Bengali language (*Rājābali*, 1808). When he wrote it, he didn’t do any research to find factual evidence, rather he simply wrote down the “accounts” that were circulating among Bengali Brahmins.¹⁷ Understandably, this history of India is full of supernatural beings and events. The “account” of the fall of the king of Delhi, Pritviraj Chouhan, to the Muslim king, Shihabudin Muhammad Ghuri, ending the “Hindu dynasties,” is worth discussing here as an example. Vidyalankar records that when the Muslim king was approaching Delhi, King Prithviraj summoned a number of Vedic scholars and asked them to arrange a sacrifice to send away the intruder. The scholars did so. But they were unable to lay the sacrificial block at the correct auspicious time. Isvara, the god, did not wish to have that sacrifice take place and therefore it wasn’t successful, the Delhi throne went to the Muslim king.¹⁸ This narrative, in essence, is a mixture of myth and history. More importantly, since the god’s wishes determine the political, material details regarding the fall of Pritviraj are of no concern to Vidyalankar in his history. Chatterjee states

¹⁵Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Pr., 2000), p. 73.

¹⁶Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Pr., 1993), p. 80.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 77–8.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 81.

that this was the form of historical memory prevalent among Bengali literati at the time.¹⁹

With British rule and modernization, history entered in its modern form, and it was no longer a “play of divine will” but merely a “struggle for power.”²⁰ Chatterjee argues that modern “scientific” history expelled supernatural power from historical narrative. With that, I think, historical narrative lost an important form of social memory. When Dipesh Chakrabarty laments the fact that supernatural forces have no agency in our history, he is alluding to the importance of this mythical social memory. Mythical stories, in spite of their irrationality, have to be taken into account when exploring the cultural episteme of a community. I would suggest that mythical story is a supplement to history and it gives history something that history itself cannot preserve. At least to a degree, *River of Fire* enriches itself with such nonrational elements.

IV

The portrayal of women in *River of Fire* is also connected to the novel’s questioning of the received notion of history. Women in this novel, in addition to their committed support of the pursuits of their men and their endurance of pain, are significant in terms of the theme of the novel. We have seen here that creating a narrative space related to history but much more fluid is one central theme of this novel. Hyder brings her female characters into the foreground of her narrative in such a way that their very presence enhances the meanings of the novel in a remarkable way. As usual, men are the real agents and subjects of the history in the story. This history is made up of what I have called the macro-events of human life. Those events are things like war, bringing kings into power, creating kingdoms, discovering ultimate truths, and so on. These things are basically the affairs of men. When history invites men, they are bound to go. Women are usually the victims and observers of this male history. However, while depicting this reality, Hyder also underscores what women add to history—an addition which often goes unheard and unrecorded. She makes a conscious attempt to read the history of the Indian subcontinent through its women.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

First, she brings up memories and stories of heroic women who were players in the dominant, male landscape of history. For example, one important story that goes into Kamaluddin's travelogue tells about Razia, a female Muslim monarch who wanted to abolish the tax paid by Hindus in lieu of military service. She is eventually assassinated and people believe that it was politically motivated (pp. 61–2). Kamaluddin comments in his book:

I marvelled at this woman who knew how to rule over a vast empire and a people who belonged to a very different religion and were generally hostile to the Turks. She belonged to the Turko-Iranian tradition of able female monarchs, though the *world knows little about them*. (pp. 61–2, emphasis added)

Kamaluddin's note suggests one of the goals Hyder wants to achieve by bringing women into the landscape of the novel: to tell stories of women about whom the world knows little. Razia's "enlightened policies" were not approved of by the ministers of her cabinet, the real agents of history. When she was murdered the official record said that robbers killed her. This story of Razia signifies a woman's place in the politics of men and her place in the history of men. In that context, one other important piece of information about her is that she referred to herself as Sultan, not Sultana. This also shows the fact that the real loci of history, such as politics, are such that a woman must present herself as "manly" in order to fit in. But, even in doing that, when a woman enters the political domain and acts as a man, a certain sense of humaneness appears in the political domain. That humaneness is the only crime Sultan Razia commits.

Kamaluddin records the story of another queen, Bibi Raji, who removes her beloved son from the throne because of his inhumane deeds and his despotism. She brings her younger son, a musician, to power in his place. When the first son begins to wage war against his younger brother, the Queen herself plays a role in the slaying of her violent son (pp. 64–5). Her womanly intervention in political affairs gives a more humane face to the often violent domain of statecraft. When women and music enter the domain of politics they can even soften the swords and men that often determine the course of history. And the women in *River of Fire* alter the nature of the realm where *real history* takes place.

Moreover, the women in *River of Fire*, even when they don't have any significant say in political matters, challenge male-centered history by standing for alternative views and sensibilities. Bano, a young woman and

a cousin of the musician-king, whom Kamaluddin comes to know, is unhappy that the king has to spend half his time waging war instead of composing music. She is just one of the women we find in this novel who prefer music, art and aesthetic pursuits to war, statecraft and the like. Things such as music have little or nothing to do with the real interests of history. History, the state being its playing field, considers politics to be its theme, subject and activity. Art and scholarly pursuits are the innocent neighbors of real history. Interestingly, more often than not women populate that adjacent realm, not only Bano, but also other women throughout the two millennia period of this novel. Champak, Nirmala, Champavati, Sujata, and many others represent this alternative domain. Of course, even in that domain women are more often victims than victors. Hyder illustrates, however, that women's ideas are otherworldly ideas about worldly matters.

The women in *River of Fire* also stand in the way of the dominant history in a different, and extremely important, sense as well. That is, when they challenge the Orientalist history of India and Indian women. Here history takes on the second meaning I have adopted in this discussion, history in the sense of historiography. In that sense, I think, Hyder's female characters produce a strong postcolonial critique of the condition of women in pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial India. These three historic eras have their own ideologies and material conditions with regard to women. In the pre-colonial India of the novel, contrary to common Orientalist belief, the women enjoy a relatively prestigious status. Champak, Nirmala and their servant, the first women we encounter in the novel, are from the fourth century B.C.E. They appear to be very intelligent and to be knowledgeable about matters outside their homes. The subject of their first conversation is a final year student who happens to cross the river in which they are bathing. The women—of course they're princesses—freely enjoy their lives in the outside world. We hear them giggle. They talk among themselves sympathetically about the student. They are aware of the nature of scholarly and ascetic lives. The pressure of the scholarly pursuits of their men is directly on them. The crown prince of the provincial kingdom has left home to study at Taxila University. Champak, the crown prince's fiancée and "leader" of the giggling women, has been waiting for him for eight years. During those painful years she has also been "discuss[ing] matters of intellect with visiting Chinese scholars" (p. 4). Then the women develop a friendship with the poor, white-robed, poet-painter and student, Gautam Nilambar. This is a world where sixty-three systems of thought exist, Buddhism being the

latest addition just one hundred and fifty years ago (p. 8). In this world, women are also educated, not marginalized. It's true, their men have not included them in their own worldly pursuits, nevertheless the women of this world are neither illiterate nor ignorant.

Women of course do suffer as a result of the politics and worldly affairs of their men. However, women understand and, in some cases, respect what their men are doing. At one level, these women are aware of the fact that their men are engaged in matters which historical conditions, political developments, and fate itself have forced them to be involved in. That awareness signifies the fact that these women are not excluded from what is happening. Nothing happens behind their backs. Having a space of their own does not mean they are left out of what men are doing. The relationship between Champavati, the second Champa of the novel, and Kamaluddin, the Persian traveler, illustrates the relatively equal social and intellectual positions of women and men. In his travelogue, Kamaluddin describes Champavati as a highly intelligent and beautiful young woman. More importantly, as a fellow student of Kamaluddin she engages in erudite conversations with him and freely befriends other men (pp. 75-9). This is fifteenth-century India. One can see that the nature of men's relationships with women has not much changed from the first Champa of the novel, i.e., in the fourth century B.C.E. Of course, Kamaluddin also happens to leave Champavati behind, but with genuine hopes and promises to come back. Later in his life, he regrets this separation.

The nature of relationships between men and women undergoes a dramatic shift when the British colonialists arrive in India. It is Cyril Ashley, the colonial "hero" of the novel, who seduces a woman as soon as he steps into India and then leaves her behind. Cyril comes to India with a full set of ideological baggage about Indian women. Deceiving women with beautiful words happens in this novel only after the coming of European colonialism. It is Cyril Ashley who does this for the first time. Readers are provided with an opportunity to compare the lives of women in the pre-colonial and colonial eras. The carryover of the names of the main characters, among other things, invites such a comparison. "Champak" is the name of a princess of the pre-Islamic episode. Then, we meet Champavati in Islamic India, Champa Jan in colonial India and Champa in postcolonial India. In many ways, all of these Champas suffer in a male-dominated world over the course of two millennia. Women's suffering is universal. Within that universal reality of women, Hyder suggests that it is from the colonial time that men began to intentionally "play" with women's lives. Hindu-Buddhist Gautam Nilambar, or Mus-

lim Kamaluddin do not intentionally deceive their respective Champas, rather the historical conditions and political developments cruelly separate the lovers. During the pre-colonial period, both men and women are depicted as merely victims, observers, and participants in history. During the colonial time, in contrast, a person like Cyril Ashley, being a colonial officer, has some agency over history. He is a director of the colonial drama of history. Therefore, his deceiving the Indian girl Maria Teresa cannot be blamed on history. Hyder makes clear that the ideological apparatus is at work when the English gentleman deludes the girl by telling us that Cyril has been advised not to marry a “black girl.” Cyril’s approach to native people is already tainted with colonial and Orientalist concepts of Indians. Later, this same Cyril Ashley keeps Sujata Debi, the pretty, young daughter of a local scholar, as his mistress and he makes a separate zenana for her in his mansion. This Sujata Debi is the younger sister of a woman whom Cyril had rescued from being burned alive, i.e., from the rite of sati. Cyril has appointed her brother, Prafulla, a minor officer under himself. Therefore, Prafulla could not resist when Cyril suggested that he send his sister to Cyril’s house to be the Englishman’s mistress:

In accordance with the *social norms of the time* you could take a *native woman as a concubine* or common law wife. She was given the *respectable Indian title of bibi, lady*. Therefore, Cyril approached his young employee with, “I say, would your sister like to reside in my bungalow as my bibi?”

Prafulla Kumar was much too obliged to Cyril Saheb to decline the offer. (p. 124, emphasis added)

This quote illustrates that the colonial ideology has created “social norms” and those norms have been backed by the colonial administrative structure. In other words, both those norms and Cyril’s social power are colonial constructions. His power to rescue one sister from sati and to make the other his mistress comes from the colonial ideology and power structure. By showing what happens to the second sister, Hyder reveals what was lying behind Cyril’s liberal humanist mask when he rescued the first sister: dominance over natives and their women.

Thus, the relationship between men and women has taken on a new shape. This “new shape” continues to exist in postcolonial times and even Indian men utilize the “Cyril Ashleyan approach” with women. Here, Hyder juxtaposes the colonial attitude toward India itself and Cyril Ashley’s attitude toward Indian women. Cyril Ashley does, of course, rescue

one young woman who was going to be killed according to the traditional custom of sati (p. 114–7), yet the ideological apparatus that he and colonialism bring lead, in the end, to the marginalization of Indian women. Hyder's depiction of the limits of European liberal humanism, and the irony that that depiction produces, dismantles the colonial universal history into which the colonialists had tried to put India and its women. The Champa of the postcolonial segment, to return to the novel, is a victim of Cyril Ashleyan ideas of sexuality. In many ways, pre-colonial women enjoyed a much higher position in their relationships with men than colonial and postcolonial women do. This again defies the well-known colonial historicist claims that it was European colonialism that saved Indian women from Indian savagery. *River of Fire* provides a nuanced depiction of pre-colonial Indian women and juxtaposes it with an equally nuanced portrayal of colonial Indian women such that the novel becomes a powerful text resisting colonial history and its ideology.

V

Not only women but also other characters that Hyder brings in are from the margins of society. They are on the margins both politically and intellectually. In the official history, the heroes are the kings and queens and other similar individuals, because history is written around them. In *River of Fire*, the lives of ordinary people, their worldviews and their priorities in life are given a voice by Hyder. In many cases, her heroes are wandering scholars, poets, painters and life-long students. They live on the margins of the society. Even in the cases where poet-kings have political authority, the voice of the poet in them often goes unheard. Political thinking is the core of history and history is written around the state. Poetic thinking is among the first things that historical reasoning seeks to get away from when it constructs the narrative of history. Hyder is acutely aware of this fact and therefore her history-like fiction is a narrative of those unheard voices. She looks into the lives on the periphery of the social fabric, where only poets and women struggle to remain truthful and humane.

This novel is indeed about Time.²¹ But it's not about abstract Time, it's about historicized time. It is mediated time, discursively organized time. *River of Fire* shows that human beings on the Indian subcontinent increasingly historicize Time in both meanings of "history." For example, early in the novel, cultural or religious differences and macro politics are clearly separated from people's everyday lives. Those differences don't penetrate into micro life, into the emotional relationships between members of society. But by the twentieth century, nationalism and communalism (in other words, historical events) make these differences a part of people's personal lives. Early in the novel, i.e., early in time, religious and ethnic differences don't affect personal relationships as they do later in the novel during the postcolonial era. For example, in the second segment of the novel, Kamaluddin asks his Hindu "lover" Champavati to marry him. She says, "If I was married to you in my previous janams, I'll marry you now, too." She also says, "If my karma and sanskaras are such, I'll become a Muslim and be your spouse" (p. 78). Champavati's thoughts regarding marrying a Muslim are determined by mundane historicism. Her thinking shows no particular concern for religion or ethnicity per se. It derives from a worldview that is larger than history, for karma or *sanskaras* have nothing do with mundane events. History is there, but people's thinking has not been shaped by it. However, when it comes to the colonial and postcolonial segments of the novel, Champavati's transcendental framework of thinking has disappeared and all thinking emerges from mundane history. Hyder, in a way, implies this crucial change, when she says, "For [Cyril Ashley] the bank of England had long been more important than the Church of England" (p. 147). She seems to suggest here that he does not have a framework for thought that goes beyond the historicist colonial ideology which justifies his seducing Indian women and keeping them around to fulfill his sexual desires. This increasing historization of Indian life is expressed through new ethnic relations. In the colonial segment Professor Bannerjee says that "Hindu-Muslim riots were unknown before the arrival of the English" (p. 253). This is still colonial India and one can easily see Indian life being historicized. The political culmination of this historicizing is, of course, the partition of India. Yet, its most tragic effects are seen elsewhere. For example, Champa Ahmad loses her lover Amir, even though he is of the

²¹Thomas Palakeel, "Experimental Novel and the Problems of Imagined History," *Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 14 (1999), p. 300.

same religion, because history has given him new interests in life: “a brand new country, promotions, greater opportunities and challenges” (p. 266). This couple does not have a framework for thinking, which is “outside of history”—as Champavati had had about five centuries earlier. This twentieth-century Champa is entrapped by history, and a historicist approach is the only way for her to live. The young idealistic group of friends is “partitioned” by the Partition. The Kamal of the twentieth century ridicules Champa Ahmad by saying, “Champa Baji, congratulations! Your Pakistan has come into being, after all.” The narrator explains the intensity of his words: “Intense bitterness, irony and heartbreak lent an edge to his voice” (p. 264). Here the reader is invited to compare this Kamal with the Kamal of the fifteenth century. Figuratively, Kamal has, over the course of time, positioned himself completely within the discourse of history. In the end Champa Ahmad lives alone in India. This novel is about Time and the historicizing of Time in the sense that it shows history’s gradual invasion of the mind and that partitioning within the mind is only a matter of Time.

River of Fire illustrates how history, both as a process of events happening and as a narrative of what has happened, gradually draws Indian life into a larger narrative and thus produces a strong critique of that process. It does so by standing for the antithesis of history at one level and by being a supplement to history at another. History-like-fiction invites fiction-like reading. Any work of fiction, unlike a work of history, can be read in multiple ways. This is one of the great qualities of literature. Yet, a work like *River of Fire* should be read in the way the work itself invites us to read it. The last thing Hyder would want her readers to do is approach this novel as if they were reading history. This is fictional history. She has consciously and meticulously created it as such. Fictional history is epistemologically different from what we generally call “history.” Real history is monologic, teleological and often ideologically constructed. Fictional history, on the other hand, is dialogic, less teleological, and challenges the ideologies that it is based on, if not actually presenting an entirely different worldview. In history, one meaning or interpretation comes from the author and travels in a unidirectional trajectory. In fictional history, multiple meanings arise from different zones of the text and travel everywhere along multiple trajectories. However, the implication is that we readers should be careful not to draw fictional history back into “real” history and make it rigid in the way that history is. Fictional history is fluid and we must read it fluidly. *River of Fire* yields eminently to such a fluid reading.

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