

ANNA C. OLDFIELD

“Confusion in the Universe”: Conflict and Narrative in Qurratulain Hyder’s *River of Fire*

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

—QURRATULAIN HYDER
River of Fire (1998, 184)

SO MUSES TALAT of Qurratulain Hyder’s *River of Fire*, and the readers of this dynamic and original novel may find themselves asking the same questions. As the narrative passes through 2500 years of history—sometimes at the pace of a *beerbahuti* (the red velvet mite) crawling on a leaf, sometimes with a leap over several centuries—the frequent shifts of style, pacing, character, point of view, time, space, tone, device and genre send the reader on a ride fraught with whitewater and the occasional whirlpool. Some readers might prefer to jump off, but for those who hang on, *River of Fire* is a unique reading experience that expands the boundaries of narrative possibility in significant ways; for the mono-English-speaking reader, the work offers powerful challenges and unusual rewards.

The very existence of *River of Fire* has been fraught with debate, and the work lives a shadowy half-life in tandem with the original *Āg kā Daryā*. The attentive reader of *River of Fire* may notice on the title page that it has been “transcreated from the original Urdu by the author,” and the very attentive reader may notice the substantial time gap between the 1959 original and the 1998 “transcreation.” As M. Asaduddin has pointed out, the English version is so different from the original Urdu that it has become in a real sense a new “original” (2008, 248), and Kum-

kum Sangari maintains that in the ideal case of an Urdu-English bilingual reader “[t]he two novels have now to be read against each other and grasped together as part of a single configuration” (2005, 22). For the reader such as myself who can only read the English, *Āg kā Daryā* lurks in the novel as an active subconscious, erupting occasionally in a word, *ghazal*, or song.

While discussion of the politics and poetics of Hyder’s “transcreation” will go on, clearly *Āg kā Daryā* and *River of Fire* are two different novels, and each received very different receptions by their respective audiences. Sangari reports that “[w]hen it appeared in 1959, Qurratulain Hyder’s *Āg kā Daryā* created a sensation. It received a Sahitya Akademi Award and was translated into fourteen Indian languages within a decade” (*ibid.*, 21). *River of Fire*, in contrast, received a muted reception from mono-English-speaking readers and was “rendered invisible” by a number of factors including timing, and “labels of mistranslation” (*ibid.*, 22). And despite Aamer Hussein’s exuberant review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, which asserted that *River of Fire* “is to Urdu fiction what *A Hundred Years of Solitude* is to Hispanic literature” (1998), the novel has never achieved widespread readership in the West, nor has Hyder been incorporated into the world literature canon alongside Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Milan Kundera. Even in the Western academy, where the thirst for “postcolonial alternatives to imperialist discourses” has not abated, *River of Fire* is far under the radar, even among South Asianists.

The reasons for the marginalization of Urdu literature in the Western academy is a complex and urgent topic—suffice it to say here, as G. S. Sahota commented, “it is not uncommon for students of comparative or world literature . . . to emerge with PhDs having never heard of Urdu” (2009, 351). However, the “invisibility” of *River of Fire*, a path-breaking, experimental novel that took on Indian-British colonial intersubjectivity before the field was even invented, is especially puzzling. It is impossible to imagine that the “difficulty” of the novel would be a factor in an academy that embraces Woolf, Robbe-Grillet and Calvino, and the novel’s continued invisibility after J. M. G. Le Clézou’s citation in his Nobel Prize dedication is truly problematic.

Masood Ashraf Raja argues that *River of Fire* “defies the very logic of critical expectations of the postcolonial or the commonwealth novel” which has led to its marginalization: “A good postcolonial novel, especially for it to become part of the metropolitan counter-canon, must possess certain aspects privileged in the metropolitan academy” (2006, 49). Raja argues that Hyder’s powerful critique of Partition derails any

expected valorization of the emerging “nation,” pointing out that in the massive sweep of *River of Fire* the colonial period becomes only one of many cultural influences “that are assimilated and become a part of the larger India” (*ibid.*, 51). Liyanage Amarakeerthi makes a related point, noting that the character Cyril, who embodies the British colonial project, becomes insignificant when seen against the entire history of the Indian subcontinent, disempowering him as an “agent of history” and presenting him as just another “victim” (2003, 33). In short, Hyder acknowledges the colonial while removing it from the center of reference, as it must be in any postcolonial endeavor. To take these arguments to a possible conclusion, rather than being a postcolonial novel or even an anticolonial novel, Hyder’s work could be seen as a *non-colonial* novel, one that is expanding into a new and less familiar sort of territory.

However, the muted reception of *River of Fire* in the West might have something to do not only with expectations of postcolonialism, but also of narrative. In *Why We Read Fiction*, Lisa Zunshine argues that the cognitive and emotional response we have to (even experimental) fiction may depend on its ability to absorb and provide experiences, experiments, and excitement for our social-cognitive thought structures (2006, 162). In his review, Thomas Palakeel cites *River of Fire* for failing to sustain such narrative pleasures, writing that as the novel progresses it “feels limited in its emotional scale. Limited in terms of a central conflict, historical and personal” (1999, 294). And he is not alone—when teaching this novel I found that many students were disturbed by an inability to emotionally engage with characters who die and are recreated, found their interest waning as the plot multiplied in different directions, and were left unsatisfied by the lack of resolution to important themes (such as the romance of Gautam and Champa). While it may, to some extent, reflect literary taste (some students loved it), it is also possible that the absence of answers to Talat’s questions (“I don’t know which characters are more important. Where did this story start? What was the climax? Who was the heroine?) short circuited their expected experience of reading.

Palakeel reads this short circuit as a sign of a novel that has not lived up to its potential: “While her experiment in narration has enabled us to participate in 2500 years of imagined history, in fact, a more rigorous realism and narrative discipline could have made *River of Fire* a truly great Indian novel” (*ibid.*, 302). “Rigorous realism” and “narrative discipline” are surely not qualities of Hyder’s technique, which is expansive and digressive rather than tightly controlled. *River of Fire* is

uneven, shifting, fluid, and full of loose ends and unresolved issues, a novel of historically epic proportions that completely eschews the form of the historical novel. The narrative takes place over four periods that are themselves times of conflict, transition, and flux: the fourth century BCE and the rise of Chandragupta, the transition from the Lodi Dynasty to the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century, the consolidation of East India Company rule in the nineteenth century, and the decades surrounding Partition in the twentieth century. The sections merge into each other and are bridged by a recurring cast who bear the same or similar names and personalities. Not completely dissimilar to Kundera's "variations" in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Hyder's characters repeat their struggles with certain themes (including love, identity, war, and loyalty) against a background of historical and political occurrences with references to real world events. In contrast to Kundera's (rigorously disciplined!) novel, however, *River of Fire* sets its variations in different (yet overlapping) times and places, adding new elements while combining each variation with earlier ones so that each move through time adds to the complexity of the worlds in which the multiplying cast of characters is embedded.

Proceeding in episodes, mixing oral and written literary references, flowing off into odd tangents, and stopping occasionally for an emotion infused *ghazal*, *River of Fire* does not rest in any genre, plot or character. There is no attempt to balance the variations; the historical narratives are of unequal length, flowing briskly through the first three time periods in 175 pages, then branching slowly into a number of tributaries in the 250 pages of the final twentieth-century section. Not controlled by firm authorial banks, this restless river rises, falls, plunges over waterfalls, absorbs incoming streams, and sometimes overflows its banks. It could be easy for a well-trained reader to judge this unruly work as an overambitious experiment that does not completely fulfill what a novel should do.

On the other hand, however, the narrative excess of *River of Fire* could also be seen as a deliberate strategy to communicate that which the more controlled form of the novel cannot. Sangari makes a compelling case for *River of Fire* as a complex civilizational reflection, an act of "grasping together" the diversity and dense affiliations of a multi-religious subcontinent" (2005, 42). Sangari points out the very strong interconnections between form and function, describing a novel that is deliberately expansive, "a narrative that directs attention outward towards other narratives, genres, and reading communities" (*ibid.*, 40). Sangari's argument describes a highly sophisticated work that does not

hide the cracks, flaws and imperfections of the civilization it describes with such love, and expresses a deep “loyalty to the idea of a civilization that was wider, deeper, and more compelling than its division into separate nations” (*ibid.*, 42).

The originality of *River of Fire* also very much relates to its uniqueness of form, a uniqueness that both embodies and works independently of its status as a civilizational reflection. The work asserts a breathtaking independence from the expectations and conventions not only of the novel, but of the anti-novel as well. The anti-novel (Woolf, Robbe-Grillet, Calvino) must always look back (with defiance, jealousy, secret love) to the novel as its point of reference, just as the postcolonial must always look back to the colonial. *River of Fire* shows no concern with rejecting, redefining, or subverting the novel—the novel as genre exists as only one of the streams that flow into its narrative river, and not always the most important one. Deliberately risking the disorientation of her well-trained reader, Hyder disengages narrative from its purely novelistic obligations in order to serve very different purposes; not only non-colonial, but also, in some senses, non-novelistic.

That is not to say, however, that Hyder’s work is not grounded in literary models—they are, however, traditions that hail from alternate (often originally oral) sources. As Sangari points out, the genres that flow through *River of Fire*:

span much of the history of the Indian novel: a “researched” historical novel, a “mutiny” novel (an antidote to Raj fantasies), a regional novel in the *shabr-āshob* tradition (lamenting the repeated decline and destruction of Awadh), a political “discussion” novel (which evolved from the dialogues in reformist polemical treatises), a historical romance, an interracial romance (an ironic replay of Anglo-Indian fiction), a courtesan novel, an urban Lucknow-centered “college” story, a fictionalized female autobiography, a cosmopolitan novel (on émigrés and expatriates).

(*ibid.*, 22)

Sangari also points out the abundance of oral literary genres that are used in the work, including, but not restricted to, myth, legend, epic, song and especially *dāstān*, noting that in *River of Fire*:

[t]his reshuffling of narrative arrogates the familiar liberty of the *dāstān-go*: characters, situations, episodes can disappear, change or be reinvented, details can be dropped or added, some sequences abbreviated and others expanded depending on the mood and context of the narration.

(*ibid.*, 25)

Thinking of *River of Fire* as a work as much in the lineage of the *dāstān* as the novel re-centers discussion of its episodic structure, unruly excess, and unusual “transcreation”; why shouldn’t a *dāstān-gō* (story-teller) digress, expand, and recreate a narrative differently in a different time for a different audience in a different language? It is in fact the obligation of a *dāstān-gō* to do precisely that. Even more significantly, the work has deep affinities not just to the structure of the *dāstān*, but also to the *dāstān*’s relationship with its audience; a relationship that is interactive, demanding a heightening of interpretive imagination. Musharraf Ali Farooqi calls this “the reader narrative symbiosis,” noting that “[f]or the *dāstān* to be successful, the enchantment woven by the narrator’s fantasy needs the second layer of the reader’s own fantasy to sustain it” (2000, 142). While it is increasingly well understood that the reader is an active participant in the novel experience,¹ the collaboration between the *dāstān-gō* and the listener is especially powerful because the *dāstān* is not a fixed entity, but can change in relation to the desires of its audience. As Farooqi points out:

In the course of an oral narration, the mind continuously explores situations. Every time a detail is mentioned, it produces a host of possibilities. But the narrator can make only one choice, if he desires the narrative to proceed. As he moves on with the narrative, he leaves in his wake all the unexplored possibilities. Presently another narrator comes by, and happens upon one of them.

(*ibid.*, 133)

These “unexplored possibilities” remain potential in the *dāstān*, persisting as narrative ghosts, even in written versions of oral *dāstān*. Never conceived of as an “original,” but existing always in relation not only to earlier versions but to potential future ones, the *dāstān* is a moment in a vast intertextual experience. While guided by the *dāstān-gō*, the genre invites its listeners/readers to incorporate their own stories and histories, forming a host of digressions and interconnections that will occur uniquely in the mind of each individual. The unusually open

¹Linda Zunshine’s work, to which I referred earlier, is a recent contribution to the investigation of cognitive approaches to literature. While awareness of “reader response” has a very long history, a recent branch that incorporates psychology and linguistics has developed in part from Norman Holland’s 1968 *The Dynamics of Literary Response* and Reuven Tsur’s theories of “Cognitive Poetics.” To my knowledge there have not yet been studies of the comparative dynamics of response to oral literature, but it promises to be a fascinating inquiry.

structure of *River of Fire* can have the same effect: As Amaraakeerthi points out, the device of recurring characters provokes an especially active reader, noting that “*River of Fire* has four stories whose similarity is only known to its readers, not to the characters in the novel,” thereby creating a reader who not only is “more powerful” than usual, but is also responsible for bridging the episodes and finding the connections between them (2003, 31–32).

Examining the novel in this context, Talat’s questions become a guide to navigate the novel and its sea of possibilities:

“I don’t know which characters are more important. Where did this story start? What was the climax? Who was the heroine? How should she have ended up? And who was the hero? Who is the listener of this story, and who is the narrator?”

(1998, 184)²

While the questions create a certain sense of anxiety (I *don’t know* what this writer wants me to think, how to read this book, how to evaluate these characters), they also give an unusual degree of power (I can decide what is most important, who I will make the hero, how I will judge the events). While this freedom is always available to some extent, Hyder’s deliberate lack of guidance assures the possibilities of multiple versions that will depend very much on “who is the listener,” especially in the context of an English rendering. The question of “who is the narrator” further clues the reader that the same stories could be told by other storytellers with different results, asserting not only the non-finalizability of these episodes but also the lack of final authority of the text. Crisscrossed at every turn with other texts, *River of Fire* becomes one text in a river of intersecting narratives.

“It was revealed that there was more confusion in the universe than we had imagined,” laments Kamal at one point in the work (361). The confusion of texts (both oral and written) and the frequency with which characters invoke, reinterpret, and crash into them is one of the most productive areas of interaction and tension in *River of Fire*. From the very beginning, Gautam Nilambar of the Forest University of Shravasti is already in a world awash in narratives contending with a “vast kingdom of thought where sixty-two systems already flourished” (8). The Vedas and the Upanishads with their centuries of commentaries, oral and written texts of Buddhism, the *Panchatantra*, hymns, songs, poems, and constant references to texts in conversation and performance give a

²All references to *River of Fire* are from the 1998 edition.

density to Gautam's mental landscape. Looking to narratives for answers, definitions, and solace, he uses them to interact with the constantly shifting circumstances of life. The texts he leans on for assistance, however, are not stable, and shift in different directions, from solemn to comic to tragic and back. To cite one example, after Gautam invokes a hymn of Aryani the forest goddess to describe Champak, "[a]ll of a sudden the 'goddess' screamed and let go of the leafy branch. A number of red ants had crawled up her bare legs" (24). Every text that floats through the work is a mutable fragment, and yet they are crucial in defining characters and how they relate to each other.

Champak/Champa is particularly vulnerable to texts, and Hyder's treatment of gender is a canny observation of how women can be caught in webs of narratives that closely circumscribe their lives and affect how they are treated. Gautam turns to philosophy to define her when he first meets her, binding her in contradictions that will haunt her throughout the novel:

He thought of the sages' contradictory statements about women. Woman could never be pure, she was the root of all evil, she was shallow. Women of good families envied courtesans for their dresses and ornaments. Evil came into existence because of creation. Woman gave birth, so she was the origin of all sin. Woman was hungry for love, and therefore unreliable. And yet, despite her weaknesses, she could be immensely virtuous, faithful and self-sacrificing. She should be respected. She symbolised Shakti.

(21)

Champa will be forced into many of the roles described above throughout the novel, defined variously as "goddess" "princess," "matron," "courtesan," "beggar" "social climber," and "tramp." Unlike Gautam, Champa lacks the freedom to pick and choose from various narratives but is forced into them; forced into the romance novel (although she considers becoming a Buddhist nun), into the courtesan novel (though she would prefer to be married), forced to become the "hag" whose loss of beauty reveals the lying deceit of the world, forced to be the man stealing vamp hiding her low-class roots. While readers may be left unsatisfied when after two millennia of attraction Gautam and Champa simply drift away from each other in the end, Champa's final peace is dependent upon her escape from the complex of narratives which she had been expected to fulfill. Her self-destructive drive in the final section seems to rise from the will to be in a different story, to be anything but a middle-class girl from Moradabad. It is only when she accepts the

real and unromantic scenario in which she had been born that she escapes, telling Kamal that she has “found the magic key” (402). *Who was the heroine? How should she have ended up?* By disengaging from the limits of her fated outcomes (married/raised high or rejected/brought low), Champa surprises not only Kamal but also the reader, challenging both to rethink the types of texts they had wrapped around her.

The recurrence of texts, and a certain irony towards them and their mutability, is one of the hidden bridges that connects the time periods of the novel and helps them to flow into each other with a surprising degree of fluidity. Hyder does not mark the shifts of centuries by anything more than a normal chapter break, and the storyline moves effortlessly from one episode in progress to another episode in progress in a different time and place. The recurrence of texts binds characters as much as their names, and we find the twentieth-century Hari Shankar referring to the Vedanta “like a priest” near the end of the book, reinvoking his initial appearance as a young scholar in Shravasti in the very beginning. Hyder’s textual references serve a double function, making expansive connections to the outside at the same time as they are making cohesive connections within the work. To complicate matters, texts refuse to remain stable, moving from written to oral and back, reemerging in different forms as quote, dialog, conversation, journalism, history, gossip, and fiction.

The thickness and mutability of multiple intertexts is a feature that sets *River of Fire* apart from many other translations. It lacks the smoothness, the comforting feeling that “everything” has been translated, the drive to allow the English-speaking reader to slide into the book without hitting any odd corners of misunderstanding. Footnotes, introductions, appendixes, glossaries and now even websites exist to ease the transition into translated texts. *River of Fire*, with obvious deliberation, confronts the reader with the ghost of its original; Urdu words pop up untranslated, lines from songs and classical poetry are sometimes translated, sometimes not, unfamiliar places, personages, and events multiply, and the reader, like a visitor in a foreign land, has to contend with the existence of an entire cultural system with millennia of references. A possible hidden reason for this work’s marginalization in the Western academy is the sheer impossibility of explaining it all; it is a rare American student who is familiar with Chandragupta or the Lodi Dynasty, and one student even suggested that a course in Indian history, philosophy, and literature be built around the novel to explain it! Throwing out verbal obstacles such as “‘Natraj’ entered the mandap, rattling his damru” (34), Hyder emphasizes with rare candor that there

are areas the mono-English-speaking reader cannot access. Not everything, the work reminds us, is or should be pointed toward an English center of reference. Non-colonial, non-novel, non-translation.

When sailing on a boat back to India from Britain, the twentieth-century Kamal falls into a reverie on hearing a Mira song sung by a Maharashtrian woman, prompting an onlooker to comment:

“Every culture has its secret language,” said the British poet, “and Kamal and the Pandit share it. That is the whole point. If a westerner were to write a novel about India he probably wouldn’t understand why they’re both so carried away by that song.”

(368–69)

Hyder does not pretend that the “secret language” of culture is translatable, or even always learnable. Although the nineteenth-century Cyril Ashley spends years in India learning languages and translating classical texts, he dies no more knowing the “secret language” than when he had first arrived. The twentieth-century Cyril’s inability to win Champa for his wife and his return to India as an economic overlord accentuate his unchanging confusion of power with attraction.

Cyril’s inability to comprehend India stands in marked contrast to Kamal. Kamaluddin first appears as a sixteenth-century Iranian adventurer who, like Cyril, has come to India to make his fortune. But while Kamaluddin begins his journey as an outlander, writing “The Marvels and Strange Tales of Hindustan” for the people back home, by his death he has deeply assimilated:

This was his country, his children had been born here, his dear wife lay buried here. He had put all his energy into making these fields bloom, spent years beautifying the language these men were speaking. [...] No one had any right to call him an outsider or a traitor.

(102)

Cyril, in contrast, sleeps with Indian women but will not marry them, rejecting his child and importing an English wife to produce an heir, showing a strong adherence to colonial narratives of racial difference—narratives he cannot escape in the twentieth century despite his (fairly feeble) attempts. In contrast, the twentieth-century Kamal is a native speaker of the “secret language” of culture, so much so that his crisis in leaving India for Pakistan becomes the emotional centerpiece of the final section of the book. By contrasting Cyril’s experience with Kamal’s, Hyder sets British colonialism apart from other types of influence and marks the qualities of love/hate, fear/desire that give colonialism its pathological character in contrast to a healthy cultural merging.

It is no wonder then, that her translation of the work into English has an edge to it. Asaduddin observes that “in the ‘transcreation’ of *Āg kā Daryā* into *River of Fire* there is an overall change in tonality; the Urdu version sounds lyrical and philosophical, while the English version sounds more earthy and sinuous” (2008, 246). The English translation also has a strong dose of irony, and a narrator who is skeptical not only of the characters but of the reader. The English *River of Fire* presents itself as something of a dare.

“Who is the listener of this story, and who is the narrator?” Talat’s question becomes more central in light of the possible multiple reactions by different audiences—whether the reader is, in fact, heir to the secret language or an outsider. It is no wonder that Hyder controlled her rights over this work so closely, as no translator worth his salt would ever allow such a confusion of words, texts and references to weave through a work without a hefty dose of footnotes. The strong presence of the oral and literary genres that infuse the Urdu original will not be recognized by most English-speaking readers—they will only be felt in a jarring sort of way like walking through ghosts, much as the characters encounter the ghosts of Shravasti at various times in the novel. Even if felt only as ghosts, however, the awareness of the existence of these intertexts are significant. As Farooqi observes about the *dāstān*:

[...] referring to earlier texts also signified the narrator’s awareness that there is ever more to tell; something he could aim at, but not consummate. It suggests that what he is telling is a part of the whole, not the whole itself, and therefore what exists outside his version of the *dāstān*, and is not part of his own rendition, is also valid.

(2000, 133)

The incompleteness of *River of Fire*, with its sense of holding on tightly to its original, becomes a device by which to engage the mono-English-speaking reader in a growing web of productive discomfort, forcing the reader to recognize the limits of his or her own perception and to acknowledge the existence of the full and vital “secret culture” of the original. By the very act of “transcreation,” Hyder underscores the content of *River of Fire* with a metacommentary on the poetics and politics of translation and the uneven flow of languages between centers and peripheries. By leaving so much unfinalized, untranslated, and unexplained, Hyder opens her narrative to expansion in many directions, and tells us that, like any *dāstān*, there is still much more to tell.

“Before I knew it I had embarked upon the...shall I say...the dan-

gerous journey of thought, sailing on a sea of words” narrates Talat (361). Seeking to be a creator of narratives rather than a victim of them, Talat forges a way out that is an alternative to Champa’s resignation or Nirmala’s *Magic Mountain* death. That words are dangerous and tricky is presented to us at the very beginning of the novel, when Hari Shankar and Gautam argue their merits:

“Then I also realised that words created much confusion, they led to misunderstandings and bloodshed and wars. So I stopped believing in them.”

Gautam reflected for a few moments. “You are still using words. They connect. How can you reach pure thought unless you employ words? Meaning is the thing,” he countered vehemently. Now he had again become the college debater. “Therefore, word and non-word are two different Brahmas. By concentrating on the word you can reach the non-word...”

“I am that non-word,” responded Shankar smugly.

“Word is eternal!” Gautam persisted. “M will always have the sound of M and not of F. Sound is everlasting and we remember it long after having heard it. It exists simultaneously and cannot be annihilated.”

(12)

In this dialog (ironically framed as the polemic of a “college debate”) the double edge of words, narratives, and texts is exposed. Words are easily used for evil ends, the cause for endless confusion—and yet, they are everlasting, echoing through eternity and serving as bridges of thought, the only way to send ideas across time as living ghosts (even from the fourth century to the present). The tension between these contradictory functions of the word, repeated in variations as subsequent time periods run up against the same conflicts of narratives and texts, is perhaps the “central conflict” of this book that bridges all of its many digressions.

To turn again to Zunshine, it is useful to consider the “Theory of Mind,” which she defines as “a cluster of cognitive adaptations that allow us to navigate our social world and also structures that world” (2006, 162). Zunshine theorizes further that “intensely social species that we are, we thus read fiction because it engages, in a variety of particularly focused ways, our Theory of Mind” (*ibid.*). Following this idea, we can imagine that readers are accustomed to seeking that engagement in characters and plots that mirror our “social world.” We also, however, live in a world that is structured, influenced, and bounded by a constantly shifting and expanding set of narratives. Reading *River of Fire* tests our navigation of narratives and our way of living in the world of

words. For that reader who can escape from the drive to engage with the novel through character and plot, *River of Fire* can be an intensely engaging journey.

Because of the strong marking of time in *River of Fire*, the “river” has frequently been interpreted as being the River of Time (Hussein, 1998; Palakeel 1999; Amarakeerthi 2003, Raja 2006). Another possibility is to see the *River of Fire* as a *river of words*: an ever-widening stream that becomes larger, stronger and more fearsome as more and more narratives are poured into it. In the swift current, texts become disengaged from their foundations, flowing freely and intermingling, becoming a flood that no one can control. Together with the characters, the reader becomes like the *beerbahuti* set adrift on a leaf at the very opening of the book:

Gautam put it down and made a boat out of a bargad leaf. A brook of rainwater was rippling past the gnarled roots of the banyan where Gautam had been sitting. He let the beerbahuti slide into her barge and put it out to sea. For this minute creature the rivulet must seem like an ocean. “Farewell, Indra’s Bride,” Gautam said as the waves carried the leaf-boat away.

(i)

And together with the characters, the reader will be entranced and buffeted by the words that have conjoined to create this river. Sangari writes that *River of Fire* seeks to express “a cultural space larger than a nation” (2005, 35); if so, this cultural space is made of words, of the text of this work and the many other texts that it refers to, of the *dāstān*-like impossibility of telling the whole story of a river that has no beginning and, we hope, no end. □

Works Cited

- Amarakeerthi, Liyanage. 2003. “*River of Fire*: Critiquing the Ideology of History.” *Annual of Urdu Studies* 18:25–44.
- Asaduddin, M. 2008. “Lost/Found in Translation: Qurratulain Hyder as Self-Translator.” *Annual of Urdu Studies* 23:234–49.
- Farooqi, Musharraf. 2000. “The Simourgh-Feather Guide to the Poetics of *Dastan-e Amir Hamza Sabibqiran*.” *Annual of Urdu Studies* 15:119–67.
- Hussein, Aamer. 1998. “Chaos and Upheaval.” *Times Literary Supplement*. June 11.
- Hyder, Qurratulain. 1998. *River of Fire (Aag ka Darya)*. Transcreated from the original Urdu by the author. New York: New Directions.

- Kundera, Milan. 1978. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* [*Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*]. Translated from the French by Aaron Asher. New York: Perennial Classics, 1999.
- Palakeel, Thomas. 1999. "Experimental Novel and the Problems of Imagined History (A Review Article)." *Annual of Urdu Studies* 14:293–302.
- Raja, Masood Ashraf. 2006. "Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*: The Novel and the Politics of Writing Beyond the Nation-State." *Interactions* 15(2):49–60.
- Sangari, Kumkum. 2005. "The Configural Mode: *Āg kā Daryā*." In *A Wilderness of Possibilities: Urdu Studies in Transnational Perspective*. Edited by Kathryn Hansen and David Lelyveld. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sahota, G.S. 2009. "The Persistence of Identity." *Annual of Urdu Studies* 24:351–66.
- Zunshine, Lisa. 2006. *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.