

Qurratulain Hyder and the Crosscurrents of Culture, Class and Gender in her Fictional works

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Abstract

Qurratulain Hyder's literary oeuvre ranges from being the most significant and powerful novelist and short-story writer, an academic and a journalist. Her novels are a rich source of the cultural history of the subcontinent. She lived through the partition of India and like other significant writers of this phase, she was also moved by its traumatic history. Hyder's personal experiences in both India and Pakistan, helped her in reflecting upon this phase in history with honesty and veracity, and she continued to uphold the values of the syncretic Indo-Muslim cultural heritage of the subcontinent. Critics have often accused her of nostalgically dwelling upon the travails of the upper classes of the society, but some of her most memorable characters come from the lower strata or margins of communities, like Rashke Qamar and Jamilan in '*Agle Janam MoheBityana Kijo*', Peroja Dastoor in '*Nazara Darmiyani Hai*' and Gulnar and Gulzar Bai in '*Dilruba*'. She along with the major writers of her time, i.e., Rashid Jahan and Ismat Chughtai, questioned the prescribed gender roles, and challenged the stereotypical representation of women in South Asia, and provided her readers with an insight into life behind the veil, and we often encounter strong female protagonists in her novels. Hyder's works display her marvellous knowledge and experience, and her deep perception and understanding of human nature, her eclecticism and her humanism.

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*Keywords:*Qurratulain Hyder; Dilruba; Rashke Qamar; Jamila; Gulnar, River Font

Qurratulain Hyder's literary oeuvre ranges from being the most significant and powerful novelist and short-story writer, an academic and a journalist. She began to write at an early age and her literary works include some twelve novels and novellas and four collections of short-stories. She initially became well-acclaimed for her magnum opus '*Aag ka Dariya*', a novel published in Urdu in 1959 and she later translated or rather trans created and published in English on her own. Aamer Hussain in the Times literary Supplement said that '*The River of Fire*' is to Urdu Fiction what '*One Hundred Years of Solitude*' is to Hispanic Literature. Amitav Ghosh considers her as one of the most important voices of the 20th century. Gopi Chand Narang in a moving tribute on her death said "If anyone can be called a phenomenon in modern Urdu Fiction, it is Qurratulain Hyder.....As long as Indian literature prevails, Hyder's name will live on". (Narang, Pg 10-14)

Hyder has to her credit a number of significant awards for her contribution to Urdu literature, prominent amongst them are the Sahitya Academy award, Jnanpith award and Padma Bhushan and Padma Sri. Professor Asaduddin while highlighting the significance of Qurratulain Hyder as a novelist points out: "Qurratulain Hyder began writing at a time when Urdu novel was yet to establish itself as a serious genre in the poetry-oriented world of Urdu literature. In fiction her immediate predecessors were Saadat Hasan Manto and Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander and Ismat Chughtai, all of whom were writers of outstanding merit. They divested Urdu literature from its obsession with the world of fantasy and romance and gave it the hard and convincing texture of realism." (Pg 83)

Her novels are a rich source of the cultural history of the subcontinent. She lived through the partition of India and like other significant writers of this phase, she was also

moved by its traumatic history. Hyder's personal experiences in both India and Pakistan, helped her in reflecting upon this phase in history with honesty and veracity, and she continued to uphold the values of the syncretic Indo-Muslim cultural heritage of the subcontinent. Critics have often accused her of nostalgically dwelling upon the travails of the upper classes of the society, but some of her most memorable characters come from the lower strata or margins of communities, like Rashke Qamar and Jamilan in '*Agle Janam MoheBitiyana Kijo*' (1965), Peroja Dastoor in '*Nazara Darmiyan Hai*' and Gulnar and Guzar Bai in '*Dilruba*' (1965).

She along with the major writers of her time, i.e., Rashid Jahan and Ismat Chughtai, questioned the prescribed gender roles, and challenged the stereotypical representation of women in South Asia, and provided her readers with an insight into life behind the veil. Being a student of European art and literature also helped in enriching her fiction, and at the same time she developed a distinctive literary style of her own. Her narratives employ magic realism, parody, myths and stream of consciousness modes, reportage, imagination, and the epistolary forms. Professor Asaduddin further emphasises that "her superiority over fellow writers in Urdu lies in the fact that besides her comprehensive understanding of Indian and European history, she absorbed and internalised the four great religions of the world, namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam and the cultural ethos emanating from them. (Pg 84)

Hyder has been translated into a number of languages, and she has herself translated prominent English novels like '*A Portrait of Lady*' by Henry James into Urdu. She has also translated her own works in Urdu into English. Through her works she challenges the stereotypical representation of women in South Asia, and we often encounter strong female protagonists in her novels. Her novel '*Aag ka Dariya*' (1998) has received immense critical acclaim on account of its epic historical sweep and experimental narrative conception. Her four novelettes- '*Dilruba*', '*Sita Haran*', '*Chai Ke Bagh*', '*Agle Janam MoheBitiyanaKijio*', depict women who are perennially exploited and persecuted, and grappling with restrictive social norms and their desire to achieve selfhood. This novel was trans created into English by Hyder with the title of '*Street Singers of Lucknow*'. Hyder's works display her marvellous knowledge and experience, and her deep perception and understanding of human nature, her eclecticism and her humanism.

The novel *Agle Janam MoheBitiya Na Kijio* (*Don't Make me a daughter in my next birth*) shows the struggle of the two destitute and orphaned sisters, Rashke Qamar and Jamila, who is crippled in legs and the sisters are looked after by their aunt and uncle (Khala and Khalu) after the death of their parents and all four of them together along with their family are seen struggling to sustain themselves.

The novel opens with their Khalu who is a jester giving a performance at the fair outside the dargah of Hande Shah. The narrative illustrates how Rashke Qamar starts singing for the sake of survival on their way to Nainital on a train, when her Khalu loses all the money in gambling on board of the train, her Khala pushes the harmonium in front of her, she starts singing for survival and the passer-by throw money at them.

The first part of the novel depicts the landlord {a married man with a grown-up son), of Furquan Manzil expressing his wish to marry Rashke Qamar who lives in a single room apartment rented out by him. In turn, the owners' wife in rage, drives away Rashke Qamar and her family from their lodging. Rashke Qamar's beauty captivates not only the lewd father but also his son, Agha Farhad, who is in love with Rashke Qamar.

Agha Farhad is so impressed with the singing skills of Rashke Qamar and Jamila, that he now promises to chart out a career for them. He introduces them to Verma Saheb, a rich aristocrat, who dispenses some of his riches for his love for music and his passion for arts and aesthetics. Verma Saheb runs a *Song Birds Club*, that he manages with the help of a girl called Sadaf, a folk singer whom he trains in the art of singing ghazals. We find that these destitute women in need of money cannot escape being exploited sexually by Verma Saheb and Agha Farhad who are their employers. Both Sadaf and Rashke Qamar dream of settling down in marriage with Verma Saheb and Agha Farhad, but their relationship can be summed up in this conversation between Verma Saheb and Sadaf:

"I know you too will do exactly the same, whichever holy virgin Rajkumari, Saubhagya Lakshmi Devi your Mataji selects for you, you'll go round the sacred fire with her."
(Sadaf's accusation is met with Verma Saheb's anger)

"Sadaf, don't rattle me. Go to Sleep. Don't forget you were a rustic tramp who danced and sang at village fairs.

I made you what you are today. The celebrated songstress Sadaf Ara Begum. Even now you are not satisfied." (Hyder, *Street Singers of Lucknow* Pg-26)

Verma Saheb is eager to put her in place and not heed to her request that he should marry her, similarly, Agha Farhad too exploits his position as a benefactor of Rashke Qamar, and of motivating her poetic and singing skills by introducing her to his elitist circle of poets and singers. He refuses to marry her even when she is pregnant with his child, and at the same

time accuses her of using this as an excuse to help her in rising up in her class that she can't do otherwise. Similarly, Verma Saheb, reminds Sadaf of her position and status in the society, and in turn Sadaf uses expressions like blessed, youthful, Virgin and Rajkumari, for the dream princess, that Verma Saheb or his mother would eventually want him to settle down in marriage with, when they overcome their youthful passion for Sadaf or Rashke Qamar. The child of Rashke Qamar and Agha Farhad does not survive long and dies as a small baby, and she has another son later in life who also deserts her to join a sinister gang.

Agha Farhad deserts Rashke Qamar, and in the later part of the novel we find that she falls in love with Agha Hamdani. At this time Jamila reminds Rashke Qamar of the class difference between her and Agha Hamdani and cautions her that he would eventually betray her and is merely exploiting her. Jamila's fears come true, for Agha Hamdani deserts Rashke Qamar, and she later gives birth to his daughter Mahapara. Sadaf and Jamila support her during this difficult time and she continues to write letters to Agha Hamdani who never responds to them. She persists in her hope of meeting and winning him, and while visiting all sorts of faith healers, she squanders all her savings. *The Song and Birds Club* shuts down after Verma Saheb's marries a wealthy girl, and this also puts an end to Jamila's and Sadaf's meagre income of Rupees fifty. Sadaf ultimately marries a wealthy American and migrates to America, Jamila and her aunt are left to fend for themselves. Ultimately in order to secure a good future for her teenaged daughter Mahapara, Rashke Qamar undertakes an arduous journey to Karachi intending to meet Agha Hamdani.

The letters that Jamila and Rashke Qamar write to each other during her stay in Karachi are not delivered to them. Jamila self-esteem makes it difficult for her to accept any money from Sadaf or Agha Farhad, whom she despises since the day he had refused to accept the child born to Rashke Qamar as his own, and had in turn charged Rashke Qamar of blackmailing him in order to rise up in her class. Even though she is lame, she continues to sing for the radio to earn her living and later when she is bed-ridden she does Lakhnachikan embroidery work to feed herself and her khala. The Rickshaw puller who lives in her compound recalls her as a saintly person. He informs Rashke Qamar that whenever he offered her food, she would take a bite or two, and then retire saying that she was suffering from indigestion. She told him not to starve his wife and children for her sake. She used to fall asleep while doing chikan work at night in the light of the lantern, and she could survive only till the time that she could sustain herself, and eventually she starves herself to death.

Jamila continues to remain a conscientious person who continues to strive to support herself against all the odds, and also resists any exploitation by men. Her initial success in life and the popularity that she achieves as a singer does not spoil her. When Verma Saheb is trying to hide the true identity of the destitute sisters, while publishing about them in his magazine, *Gohar-e-Shab-Chirag*, then she insists and tells Verma Saheb that her true and not a fake identity should be published by the magazine. Jamila never pleads for anything in life or lets herself be a burden upon anyone, poverty never deprives her of her pride.

Rashke Qamar on reaching Karachi takes up a humble job of a housekeeper to support herself and keeps searching for Agha Hamdani. Her daughter on the other hand is enticed by the desire for riches and a world of glamour, and she takes up modelling and starts keeping the company of rich foreigners. Rashke Qamar's refuses to compromise with her values in life or give up her humble profession, and this in turn alienates her from her daughter Mahapara. Mahapara falls into bad company and Rashke Qamar is unable to protect her. She is summoned to the police station to identify Mahapara's body when she is murdered. She finally realizes that she has lost her daughter too, in course of looking for Agha Hamdani who was never true to her. Rashke Qamar returns back to India to find solace in the company of Jamila, but learns that Jamila has passed away while waiting for her. Her old-time admirers from the circle of ghazal singers and poets refuse to recognise her. The fashionable circle of Mushairas has no place for a woman who has lost everything in life. The only means of sustaining herself is to take up the backbreaking chikan work as she drifts into abject poverty. The last scene shows Rashke Qamar breaking down over the chikan work that she is engaged with.

In *Dilruba* Hyder has created two strong women characters in Gulnar and Gulzar Bai who defy gender and the class constraints to rise in terms of class and social status. While Rashke Qamar and Jamila could not get over the gender constraints and the class disparity that they confronted in life. In the characters of Gulnar and Gulzar Bai, we have two women who can challenge patriarchal and class differences and make a mark for themselves in a male dominated society. In this novel Hyder again returns to the pre-partition Lucknow, and demonstrates how the aristocracy created the courtesan class for their entertainment and distraction, and how some of these women with their excellence in music, dance and play-acting managed to chart out a professional career for themselves and excel in life.

The novel opens with the young boys from aristocratic families, wearing burqas to conceal their identity from their acquaintances and family members to watch the theatrical extravaganza put up by the New Alfred Theatre company, a well-known Parsi theatre company. The Urdu Parsi stage had just started becoming popular with the elites of Lucknow. These young boys too have read the plays that Agha Hasan Kashmiri, who had adapted

Shakespearean drama for the Parsi stage. Besides the regular Urdu and Gujarati plays that were enacted, the Sanskrit and English plays too were adapted for this stage. Gulnar Bai felt that Lucknow and Lucknavites with all their Charm, also seems to gel with the dramatic scenes that Agha Hasan Kashmiri recreated upon this stage. Gulnar contemplates how Urdu-Parsi is free from the boundaries of the language and culture. Urdu-Parsi theatre adapted for its purpose the tunes popular in Victorian Music Hall. They also borrowed from the plots and poetics of the ancient Sanskrit plays, at the same time they also exploited and adapted themes, music and ideas from the village nautanki and adapted them to the Urdu-Parsi stage. Hyder points out how 'Urdu- Parsi drama' is also indebted to the glamour associated with the epics from Iran or Turkey, and it boasts of the most stylish actors and their stylised acting. This theatre is the most spectacular pastime of Indian public in colonial Hindustan. Later Urdu-Parsi theatre also influenced the Indian film industry that came into existence fifty years later.

Hyder commenting upon the courtesan class that Gulnar Bai or Gulzar Bai come from, describes them as "an exponent of feudal extravaganza and lavishness". Gulzar Bai, Gulnar Bai's mother besides being a courtesan, was also a famous actress who performed at the Victoria theatrical Company (another well-known Parsi theatre company of its time). At the same time the theatre had started becoming popular with men and women from good families as well. Hafiz Abdullah, Gulnar points out, entered the profession of theatre after memorizing the Quran. Gulzar Bai recalls her grandmother, who was a well-known singer of her time, had told her how the camps of the courtesans in yesteryears moved along with the military cantonments of the Nawabs. Gulzar Bai was also a famous Kathak dancer, and Mirza Gurguree recalls that he has heard praises of her from the famous Kathak masters Nanwa and Bachwa.

When Syed Rifaqat Hussain returns to learn that his nephew has rented out the Tote Wala bungalow to a courtesan and a group of theatre artists for ten days, he immediately orders his employers to tell them to vacate his bungalow. Both Gulnar and Gulzar Bai take this to be a huge insult to them and their profession. Gulzar Bai while hurling abuses at the Barrister Saheb and his employers does not refrain from reminding them that they were invited by great Rajas, Britishers, and Zamindars to entertain them, and they squandered all their wealth upon them for their beauty and artistic skills.

The latter part of the novel depicts Gulnar Bai making a mark for herself in theatre, she rises in terms of social status, and becomes a proclaimed actor of the Pari stage. After a short stint in the film industry, she is shown living with a wealthy Hindu Raja, who dotes upon her. He himself seems to be a theatre enthusiast for when the scene opens, he is seen mourning the

death of Agha Hasan Kashmiri, along with Gulnar and Gulzar Bai. Gulnar is looking regale in a blue silk saree; she is wearing a leopard skin coat upon her shoulder and is looking very attractive. A very expensive, blue colour diamond from the Maharaja's ancestral treasure trove is glittering on her ring. She has a daughter from some Marwari admirer of hers, but she can't recall the face of her daughter Gulroh's father properly. Her daughter is dark and not as good looking as Gulnar herself, but she has the most fascinating voice, and Gulnar is hopeful that she can make a place for herself in the film industry on the basis of her golden voice.

Hyder in this book uses parallel plots to demonstrate the rising fortunes of Gulnar Bai, and the declining opportunities and wealth for aristocratic families like that of Barrister saheb, with the partition of India and the end of Zamindari system. In the year 1939, just before partition, Gulnar is back in Lucknow to train her daughter in music from a famous musician, Ustad Madan Khan Saheb. Syed Shafahat Hussain, son of Barristor Syed Rifaqat Hussain, too has returned back home to Lucknow from England where he is receiving his education. He also joins the classical recital of Gulnar's daughter Gulroh Bano. The next part the novel displays the post-partition scenario. The parallel plots demonstrate the declining fortunes of the aristocracy, at the Clyde-road bungalow Syed Rifaqat Hussain and his son Shafahat Hussain are slowly selling their estates to make the ends meet for their large family. The last part of the novel shows the lavish Tote Wala bungalow, which had given refuge to Gulnar and Gulzar Bai is sold to sustain the family. Shafahat Hussain who cannot return to England when the British rule ends in India is now confined to Lucknow, and is living a dull and compromising life. The parallel plot in the novel on the other hand demonstrates Gulnar bai rising in social status and fortune.

Gulnar Bai, the popular theatre and film heroine of yester years, is now a well-known figure of the Bombay film industry. People are eager to have a glimpse into the glamorous lifestyle of this hugely famous heroine who is now into the business of film making. The editor of a well-known magazine, Siyah, thinks himself to be extremely fortunate to get an opportunity to interview Gulnar, he knows that this interview would ensure the popularity of his magazine. She occupies a lavish bungalow at the heart of Mumbai. Even though she has aged, she appears to be in the pink of her health, she says that she regularly goes and spends time at the health spas in Europe. She has dyed her hair blue, after watching the glamorous 'Marlene Dietrich' (she was a German and American actress and singer whose career spanned from the 1910s to 1980's and she performed on the stage and in silent films) show in Europe. She is now making a film that is being directed by her grandson, who has received training in film direction in Hollywood. She has now hired Syed Rifaqat Hussain Barrister's granddaughter, to play the lead role in her film, and she is launching this new face in her

upcoming film. It also shows how the growing film industry attracted the talent of young men and women from elite families who were attracted to this world of glamour and money. Besides theatre artists, dancers, performers, it also attracted the glamour struck youths from conservative families, like Hameeda, who has been given the screen name of Dilruba. She conveys to the interviewer, that it was her yearning to serve arts that has made her enter the film industry. Her very conservative family has completely distanced themselves from her, she is not allowed to return home to see her grandfather who has had a paralytic attack or her father who has had a heart attack on learning that their daughter is now a part of the film industry. It seems that Gulnar Bai has settled her score with Syed Razaqat Hussain for insulting her, while bashing their pride in their moral values and class privileges. She has taken away from them, their most precious possession, that is, their granddaughter, who now stands at an equal pedestal with her. By rising in class and status she also challenges the patriarchal assumptions that motivate the interpretation of honour or moral values in the society.

The exceptionally talented and good-looking character Peroja Dastoor in Hyder's short story *Nazara Darmiya Hai*, too is a victim of the class constraints. Hyder shows how a rich heiress, Almas begam fools Khurshid Alam into believing that Peroja is in love with an American, and he deserts Peroja to marry Almas. He is completely blinded by his ambition to rise in life, and in turn abandons a girl who had genuinely loved him.

Hyder first novel *Mere Bhi Sanam Khane* (1949) was written while she was in Pakistan, and was directly impacted by the mayhem and chaos of the partition. She chose to migrate, but later returned back to India where her soul dwelled. In *Mere Bhi Sanam Khane*, she describes a group of optimistic, elite young men and women who are confronted with the pain and trauma of partition. This novel is set in Lucknow of 1940s and shows how the youthful idealism of young men and women crumbles amidst the violence of partition. The 1930's and 1940's were also the most intellectually stimulating years for the youths of Lucknow, who were influenced by National movement led by Gandhi and Nehru. In this novel Hyder also dwells upon the rise of the progressive writers' movement and how it intellectually aroused the youths of its day to debates and discussions, and theatrical activities through forums like IPTA. They are depicted writing prose, plays and poems, performing plays and dance for communal harmony. They adore liberal values, regularly socialize within their intellectual groups and organize literary gatherings and have discussions on politics and philosophy. They also engage in charity work, bring out a magazine called *The New Era*. *The New Era* publishes articles promoting the values of liberalism, Hindu-Muslim unity and social reform, often quoting

Gandhi and Nehru. They also work for the rehabilitation of victims when communal riots break out. They are sure that sanity would ultimately prevail and India will remain united, but sadly the country slowly drifts towards civil war and partition on communal lines.

The novel *Aag Ka Dariya* (1998), opens with the questions and philosophical notions enfolded in the cultural history of the Indo Gangetic subcontinent, and the perennial existential dilemmas that have confronted individuals. Qurratulain Hyder's creative vision in this novel interrogates the historical and cultural dynamics at play in different historical epochs as diverse cultures, races and languages blend and interact during different periods in the cultural history. Hyder's creative vision enables us to participate in 2500 years of imagined history. The metaphor of the river emphasises the flow of both time and human consciousness, where love and yearning acquire metaphysical and spiritual significance. The broad narrative sweep, gives a panoramic account of Indian history ranging from 4th century B.C to 1950's.

The central characters who control the narrative consciousness include- Gautam Nilambar in (ancient period), Kamaluddin (medieval period), Cyril Ashley, Nawab Kamman, Gautam Nilambar Dutt (British period), Kamal Raza in the modern period. The use of diverse social settings is emblematic of India's composite culture and heritage. The author picks the title of her novel from the couplet of a famous Urdu poet Jigar Moradabadi:

“Yeh Ishq Nahin Aasaan
Itna to Samajhlije
Ek Aag ka dariyahi
Aur doob kejanahi” (Hyder, *River of Fire* Pg 1)

In English this can be interpreted as follows:

“This love is not easy
Do realize this
This is a river of fire
And you must submerge in it, to move forward” (Hyder, *River of Fire* Pg 1)

The novel opens with Gautam Nilambar, a very bright final year student of Forest University of Sharavasti, who is intrigued by the perennial questions that have haunted people in all the ages. He too delves into the mysteries of the soul and the spirit that moves this universe, while sitting at the banks of river Sarayu. He loves to dance and paint and to make terracotta figurines, he travelled on foot to Kashi to learn Shiva nritya, and at the same time longs for this beautiful damsel champak. However, love here acquires broader significance as he broods over questions of self-love and spiritual and divine love. He deciphers the Rig Veda and the Upanishads and he happens to meet a young traveller Hari shanker, who explains to him that

Sanskrit and Persian have similar origins, how Ramesh in Sanskrit and Ramish in Persian mean the same and also familiarises him with Iranian and Turanian epics heroes, 'Sohrab' and 'Rustam'. Gautam Nilambar also reflects over the Buddhist wisdom of self and soul. He is intrigued by deeper philosophical questions, like the agony of his heart as he strives to seek his self. Philosophy teaches him that he should have no concern with pain or happiness, for he who has conquered all the griefs of his heart has no concern with good or evil. Love here is not just Gautam's love for Champa but it is rather the passion of his heart seeking nirvana. This part of the novel comes to an end when Gautam Nilambar drowns in river Sarayu while swimming against the current.

Abdul Masur Kalamuddin, an Arab apothecary, emerges out of the same Sarayu River, where Gautam Nilambar had drowned and it seems that he has reincarnated again. He excels in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Classical Greek, and while in India, he devotes his time to the study of Sanskrit, Hyder dwells upon the hybridity of our language traditions. Kamal recalls his mystic friends at Jaunpur, who talked of the Chishti way of love. He is familiar with the Sufi tradition and while in India he is acquainted with the Bhakti and Vaishnava traditions. Kamaluddin also visits Bengal, where Vaishnavism is flourishing. He comes across Vaishnava women singing from Jaidev's poem on Krishna:

"Beautiful Radha all the springtime waited by the woods for Krishna. Krishna the all-forgetful. I know where Krishna tarries in these early days of spring. When every wind from sandal woods brings fragrance on its wings, brings fragrance stolen from thickets of cloves. In jungles where the bees hum and the koel (nightingale) flutes her love."
(Hyder, *River of Fire*, Pg 97)

Radha to him epitomised the ecstasy of soul, that has found true meaning of love, of which the Iranian scholar Ruzbehan had written- "Radha was the human soul yearning to be one with the divine", (Hyder, *River of Fire* Pg 97) what the Sufi's called "Fana-fi-Allah" (Pg 97), or the Sufi concept of spiritual love where the soul merges with the divine.

Kamal stays in Kashi with the followers of Bhakti poet Kabir, whose syncretic outlook reminded Kamal of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi who lived in Turkey two hundred years ago. Kamal feels that the message of Kabir and Rumi was similar, but he feels that it did not help, for people fail to understand both of them. The book also records the birth of Guru Nanak, who was influenced by Kabir in the Sikandar Lodhi's regime. In the next epoch we meet Caryl Ashley, of Sydney Sussex college, he is a scholar of Sanskrit, Persian and Urdu. He is now an emissary of the British government in India. Here in India, he is presented with prince Dara

Shikoh,'s Persian translations of Upanishad's and also with '*Majma-ul-Bahrain*' or '*The confluence of Ocean's*' in which Dara Shikoh compiled the precepts of Vedanta and Islamic mysticism. He has an Indian mistress named Sujata, and he finds solace in the company of the courtesan of Lucknow, Champa Jan, who sings for him his favourite Urdu and Persian ghazal's.

The narrative of *Aag Ka Dariya* again pauses to record the abdication of the tenth ruler of Avadh, Akhtar Pia, who was a legend in his lifetime. He composed thumris and dadra, and perfected the dance style of kathak, and he invested on the ballet of Ras Lila, or Rahas, in which he danced as Krishna. In the annual jogiana mela at Qaiser Bagh everybody wore yellow, signifying the colour of mustard. She also dwells upon the arduous journey that Queen Mallika Kishwar had undertaken in order to meet Queen Victoria. She describes the bloodshed of the mutiny when thousands of people were sent to the gallows in Cawnpore, Allahabad and other places. She also describes the golden age of drama in the nineteenth century India, when *Indar Sabha* was played under the patronage of Vajid Ali Shah.

She again pauses at the point of India's national freedom movement for independence and the Hindu-Muslim divide before the partition. She also records the publishing of '*Angare*', and the rise of the progressive writers' movement. The narrative details the Indo-Muslim lifestyle, the Rajput and Hindu cultures along with the Persian, Turkish and Mughal cultures, the chronicle of this incredible India, is replete with tales of Hindu-Muslim unity and friendship. The book ends with the dawn of Jawaharlal Nehru and Gandhi to the Indian independence scene, partition, and the widening of the Hindu-Muslim divide during the time of partition.

The novel *Fireflies in the Mist* (1979), is the transcreation of Hyder's own Urdu novel titled as *Akhiri-Shab-ke Humsafar* and was translated by the author herself. The novel recollects the history of East Bengal from the time of the nationalist movement against the British, to the creation of East Pakistan and finally Bangladesh. The novel centers around the life of a young activist Deepali Sarkar, who is drawn towards the left wing of the National movement. Bengali cultural elements abound in the novel: songs, poetry, theatre, *addas*, architecture, sculpture, clothes and craftsmanship (a chapter is devoted to "weavers" and Baluchari saris), painting, like the Mughal miniature, etc. *Fireflies in the Mist* covers four decades of Bengal's history from 1939 to the late 1970s. Some chapters go back in history to discuss events that transformed Bengal's social, political and cultural composition: the 1757 Battle of Plassey, when the British overthrew the last Muslim Nawab of Bengal, the 1857 Mutiny, the 1905-1911 partition of Bengal and Hindu and Muslim Renaissance movements.

Hyder is remarkable in presenting with a keen sensitivity and vision, her idea of a syncretic Indian culture. She persists in her sense of hopefulness in Indian cultural ethos and values while narrating her novels even through the turbulent phase of India's partition when our hybrid cultural fabric suffered a serious setback. Her works celebrate India's cultural pluralism and unity, and her novels powerfully blend the narrative with chronicling and philosophy. The sense of time in her novels is circular, while she presents the historical amalgamation of different cultures and philosophical ideas. This helps her in encompassing with ease, the two hundred years of Indian civilizational history in her novel *River of Fire*. Her characters are from all the different walks of life and embody, different classes and cultures. Her novels cannot be overlooked while understanding South Asian history and culture, they are truly representative of South Asian women's lived experiences.

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