

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN A HOMELAND AND A NATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF QURRATULAIN HYDER'S RIVER OF FIRE

Abstract

The chapter examines Partition and its role in literature. It describes how the meaning of a country or a nation gets changed and impacts the lives of its country people. The chapter is the study of pre and post Partition trauma that had changed the destiny of the country and its people. It focuses on how common masses were dragged into the process of nation-building which had negative impacts on their lives. It also highlights how authors of *River of Fire* recount the psychological trauma through the characters in order to understand the event.

Key Terms: Partition, Trauma, Nation-building, Homeland, Marginalised

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Hyder's *River of Fire* covers four historical eras, viz.; the Mauryan Empire in the fifth century; the Mughal Empire in the fifteenth and sixteenth century; establishment of East India Company in the late eighteenth century; and the period from 1939 to 1950 that covers before and aftermath of Partition. There are few major characters such as Champa, Gautam, Kamal, Sujata, Hari, and Cyril who appear in each era but their roles and purposes differ. The novel travels through major periods of Indian history such as, the beginning of Buddhism, rise and fall of empires, colonialism and Partition. The last part of the novel deals with the pre and post- partition period which is the significant focus of the present chapter.

In *River of Fire*, the novelist raises a question, how Hindus and Muslims could be against each other when they had always been together for centuries. She writes: "The Muslim thread was present in every pattern of Indian tapestry. Was all this going to be erased by the demand for Pakistan?... So how India could be defined in general terms? Human allegiance is complex and unfathomable" (RF 233). The novelist projects her concerns upon the division of a country which was intensely assimilated. This question is explored by the people of Gulfishan group who belong to different communities, castes, and places. They wonder how people could be judged on basis of their religion instead of actions. One of them says: "Now this business of culture is being redefined as "pure Hindus" or "Pure Muslims" by the Mahasabha and Muslim league" (RF 232). Muslim League also adds fuel to the fire with its slogan "You have done the rounds with your begging bowls/ If you are a Muslim join the league" (RF 233). Despite being a Muslim, Kamal is against the demands of the Muslim League and desperately wants the freedom of his country but not Partition.

Champa shares her feeling of being treated as 'other' even in her own country. She says: "I was once told that I had no claim on Kashi because I didn't put the caste mark on my forehead and my mother said her prayers to Allah in Arabic instead of worshipping Shiva...So I could have said to myself, why not Pakistan...?... I used to sing Jana Gana Mana...and I often felt that I was considered an outsider under that flag" (RF 253). Through Champa, Hyder focuses on the experiences of the minority classes and highlights their plight, showing how they were being pushed to the margins while Hindus enjoyed the centre position. In *River of Fire*, Hyder mentions how Champa was forced to leave her country India.

Gyanendra Pandey also argues the same that minorities are always marginalized and considered as 'other', while the majority always enjoyed the position of being at the 'centre'. He opines: "National identity is constructed by the majority, while the minorities remain on the fringes of the nation as 'outsiders' even they are on the 'inside' (qtd in Nayar: 177). Therefore, Champa becomes the voice of millions of Muslims who supported the proposal of a separate country for Muslims. Qurratulain Hyder portrays the plight of Muslims in Lucknow whereas Yashpal depicts the situation of Hindus in Lahore who were targeted by Muslims.

In the book *Identity Theory*, Peter Burke defines identity, he writes:

An identity is the set of meanings that define when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person. Identity theory seeks to explain...how these identities relate to one another for any one person; how their identities influence their behaviour, thoughts, and feelings or emotions; and how their identities tie them in to society at large. (3)

According to Burke, people and society are the part of the same coin and impact each other. In the context of Partition, millions of Hindus and Muslims faced a similar situation when they began to be affected with the change that occurred in the society. Hindus were looked at with suspicion in Muslim majority areas and Muslims considered themselves as an 'other' in Hindu majority areas.

In *River of Fire*, Kamal hates the idea of Pakistan and he shouts at his friend Champa who favours Pakistan. He resents Champa for being the supporter of Partition as for him Partition is a great loss to his beloved country. He says: "You cannot discard your motherland like an old coat" (*RF* 253). For Kamal, country is not a pair of shoes and a coat which could be thrown out, but a motherland which could never be discarded. Kamal's love for his nation is influenced by the ideology of 'nation'. According to post-colonialists: "The 'nation' is a collective that exists primarily in acts of imaginative and thinking, a 'unity' that might be more fantasy than reality, but is powerful nevertheless" (Nayar 176). Thus, the country connects people emotionally and binds them together with a strong feeling of patriotism.

Partition had changed people's perspectives towards life and its horrendous impact had made people traumatic. Hyder traces the development of the story when Kamal and Harishankar decide to go to India and feel excited about serving their motherland. However, they are not aware that India is not the same country which they had left when they moved to England. After reaching India, Kamal thinks that he would be forced by his father to go to Pakistan but his father's reaction astonishes him. His father says: "That's all right Pakistan has come into being, well and good. In the circumstances there was no alternative. Muslims had long been exploited economically. That does not mean that I run away from my own country" (*RF* 371). Kamal's father suggests to him to get a recommendation from a notable person to acquire a good job. However, Kamal rejects his father's proposal as he has a firm belief in his education but his father reminds him about his religious identity and says: "You belong to the wrong community" (*RF* 371).

The remarks of Kamal's father show the plight of young educated Muslims who had to struggle for jobs despite being educated. Kamal continues to maintain contact with Talat and others through letters and suggests to them that "continue working in London, join the Indian diasporas, but don't go to Pakistan" (*RF* 371). Kamal is advised to move to Pakistan by many people including Amir Reza but he chooses to serve his country.

Qurratulain Hyder depicts a similar situation where her Muslim character Kamal faces difficulties in finding a job despite being educated from a renowned foreign university. Kamal is astonished when he is informed about the job of Harishankar. It reminds him of his identity as a Muslim and Champa's concern of being 'other' in a country of Hindu majority. After the news, his love for his country diminishes; therefore he decides to go to Pakistan. Amir Reza asks him to come to Pakistan where there are ample opportunities for educated young people. Finally, Kamal decides to leave India and his home is also evacuated by the Indian government as it belonged to Amir Reza who had gone to Pakistan.

The decision of Kamal shocks the readers but at the same time shows the plight of Indian Muslims who were disillusioned by the reality of independence. Was Kamal betrayed by his country or did he betray his nation? Was there no other alternative except migration? How did Kamal cope up with the guilt of leaving his nation when he was against Amir Reza's

decision of migrating to Pakistan? Like Kamal, many young Muslims left India and moved to Pakistan due to lack of opportunities for them.

Hyder also points out the problem of Indian Muslims in Pakistan where they were considered as '*muhajir*'. They belonged to neither India nor Pakistan, and were at a traumatic stage when they found themselves belonging to nowhere. Kamal remarks: "I am in Pakistan. I have come from India. Refugee. *Muhajir*. Displaced... Muslim from Uttar Pradesh... how terrifying... Refugee... displaced... homeless" (RF 419). Kamal went to Pakistan to escape a Hindu-dominated India where he would be the 'other' but there too he is called a '*muhajir*'.

Both the novels, *River of Fire* and *This is Not That Dawn* depict realistic details of pre and post Partition days and focus on the beauty of undivided India and the breach of unity of Hindu, Muslims, and Sikhs. Both the novels look at Partition through ordinary lens to portray a real picture of pre and post Partition India, project the repercussion of the event, and give a podium to everyone to speak about their experiences which could not find a space in the pages of official history.

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