

De-colonising Language: A Critique of Hyder's *River of Fire*

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Language, as we all are made to believe, is an innocent medium of instruction and an effective means of communication. But we are too innocent if we take this proposition at its face value and do not question the destructive and disabling potential of language which, of late, has been precariously used by hegemonic powers, both at local and global levels. It is now an established fact, convincingly argued the theoretical framework of 'theory' and 'discourse', that language determines our thoughts and thoughts determine the use of our language. The potential of language has been systematically tapped by the privileged groups to subjugate and dominate the unprivileged group. Now language becomes not only the medium through which a hierarchal structure of power is created but also becomes a destructive tool to create a new paradigm and a new discourse which falsifies the notions of 'truth', 'reality' and 'order'. It tends to denigrate and vulgarise the culture, language, literature, history and the way of life of the men and nations that are on the receiving end. The world has witnessed the rise and fall of the grand project of the European imperialism in 19th and 20th century and language played a key role in perpetuating that kind of colonialism which, to use Ashish Nandy's words, "colonizes minds in additions to bodies"(Nandy vii). The third world or what we call 'oriental' cultures suffered the most grievous impact of this macabre design in the recent past. Unfortunately it has now been accepted as a standard practice for all hegemonic powers operating at various levels from local village panchayat to corporate globalization for winning the 'consent' of the weak and vulnerable groups. Analyse the speech and idiom of any powerful nation, group or political party or political leader, the language is used not to communicate but to veil the truth, to silence the victims and to hide the real and urgent issues from the view of the people. Intriguingly today it has become a tool in the hands of our politicians who attempt to disrobe us of our "freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other(Roy, 221)."

In the light of the above thesis, the present paper seeks to analyse and interpret Hyder's *River of Fire* from a postcolonial perspective. Hyder's approach to language and her treatment of history in *River of Fire* enables us to understand the emancipatory potential of language. As a writer Hyder not only attempts to decolonize English language but also question the culture, history and language whose strength and superiority has been systematically robbed of due to prolonged and protracted colonial subjugation.

It is a matter of common knowledge that there is an intimate connection between language, literature and culture of a group or a society. In literature, one can notice the presence of 'structures of feelings' which offers to the sensitive reader the literary version of social reality. Today the power groups at local and global levels recognize the vast potential of the use and misuse of language, and with it they manipulate their political and commercial targets very easily. The impact of political discourse on the masses is a well known fact. Now language makes and mars public opinions on serious social, political and ecological issues. One who controls language, controls the opinions and finally controls the leavers of power in the society. The use of language is most evident during wars and

elections. The war of words after Kargil operation and 26/11 was spectacular one. It has not yet faded from our collective memory. It is most vociferously used when some multinational company is making heavy investment in the country for creating infrastructures like dam, nuclear plants or some thermal or hydro-electric projects. The scam after scam reveals the ugly and unpalatable fact that crores of rupees exchange hands for winning these contracts from the Govt. Language makes the task easier for the beneficiaries. Fake opinion polls are telecast, fake survey reports of the uses of dams and nuclear plants are printed and propagated, and misleading figures of new jobs opportunities for the unemployed youth are released to mislead the people. This is the 'use' of language at local level. This is how the public imagination is arrested and colonized. Arundhati Roy aptly remarks:

India does not live in her villages. India dies in her villages. India get kicked around in her villages India lives in her cities....The state is a giant poverty-producing machine, masterful in its methods of pitting the poor against the very poor, of flinging crumbs to the wretched so that they dissipate their energies fighting each other, while peace reigns in the Master's Lodge.... Democracy (our version of it)will continue to be the benevolent mask behind which a pestilence flourishes unchallenged (Roy 71).

The *River of Fire* is very unconventional as far as its language is concerned. The language she uses conveys the sense and sensibility of Indian people from the classical age to the present post colonial times. She consciously avoids the use of 'pure' English or English man's English which carries the cultural baggage of colonial power. In *River of Fire* Hyder describes four epochs of Indian history: first, the Mauryan empire under Chandragupta in the fourth century BC; second, the end of the Lodi dynasty and the beginning of Mugal rule in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries; third, the beginning of East India Company rule and its consolidation in the 1870s; and fourth, the period of nationalist struggle, Partition, and Independence .The characters-- women, men, scholars, travelers, artists, students etc-- appear, disappear and then reappear, but they speak the uncontaminated and uncorrupted language. Hyder writes thus in *River of Fire*:

Since people are constantly going on long journeys the souks are full of travel goods. That is why I was surprised when I first came to India and learnt that the Hindus do not go abroad for fear of losing caste—whatever they mean by that. Although I have read that the ancient Hindus and Buddhists travelled far and wide, carrying their learning with them wherever they went(58).

The above illustration from the text explodes two popular myths about India, one, that Indians are uncivilized and uncivil people who need to be civilized , second, that Indian people feared travelling for fear of losing caste or religion. But Hyder reiterates the fact that India has been the centre of knowledge and civilization since time immemorial. A temporary dark phase of Indian history cannot undo what Indian has achieved during the long journey of civilization. Hyder records this fact:

After the Phoenician left one of the Andalusians said ruefully, “Do you know, Brother Kamal, a qasi of Toledo once wrote that the Indians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs and Iranians had cultivated knowledge while the people of northern Europe were uncouth barbarians. A time may come when those barbarians will rule the world (58).

The prophecy came true with the rising of the tide of European imperialism, from 17th century to later half of 20th century, which colonized and dehumanized both men and nations. This phenomenon of imperialism changed the course of human history and the causes and consequences hardly need any elaboration.

The novel *River of Fire* can be interpreted at various levels-- metaphysical, philosophical, historical and cultural. But the shade, structure and sense of words used by the novelist is one of notable features of the novel that deserves our critical attention. Interestingly the originality of *Aag ka Darya* (1959) is very artistically transcreated into *River of Fire* (1998). It is not an act of translation where there is encounter of two languages, two cultures and two paradigms of mind, rather it is a transcreation of Indian sensibility into an artistic form. It is unique as it has been rendered in Indian English which automatically solves the problems arising out of the very act of translation. Culture is one, creator is one and the problem of medium is sorted out by appropriating English in Indian context. Like Raja Rao she knows how to “convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.” Her method of expression is as colourful and distinctive as the Irish or the American. She not only thinks and writes postcolonially but also enriches Indian English literary tradition. An illustration from the text:

“Yes, tell me—what’s the matter?” Cyril commanded the young man.

“My name is Prafulla Kumar, sir, I am the only son of Bakshi Radhey Charan Mazumdar. We are very poor. We are exceptionally luckless family. My eldest sister was visited by the goddess Sitala Debi...”

“Visited by whom?” Cyril asked, even more puzzled. This was indeed a world full of unfathomable mysteries (115).

The above illustration from the text makes sense to only to those who are familiar with Indian culture, ethos or Indian way of life

As a writer Hyder is acutely conscious of the constraints of time of the period of high colonialism and writes in such a way that the suppressed voices are heard more attentively melodiously than the expressed ones. The women in her narrative assert both their beauty and brain. There four Champas in the novel, each in every four stories, Champak as a princess in the Pre-Islamic episode, Champvati during Islamic period, Champa Jan in the colonial period and Champa in postcolonial India. Champa Jan in the third story entertains the Nabobs and other high class people but history and time, as if in collusion with each other, reduce her to a poor and hapless hog. “Where does Beauty go after it slides off the face of a lovely woman? (178-79).

Champa in the fourth story is educated woman who can not be taken for granted. Each character is shaped by the twin forces of history and time. History thus recorded is a subversion of history already written by the colonial agents.

Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall apart* subverts the European notion of African history by writing an alternative history which highlight the beauty of African culture. Likewise Hyder alters the contours of the received history and portrays the life of her characters with authenticity and sensitivity.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o aptly remarks that "language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and carrier of culture. Take English. It is spoken in Britain and Sweden and Denmark. Both for Swedish and Danish people English is only a means of communication with non-Scandinavians. It is not a carrier of their culture"(Thiong'o, 13).What Ngugi Wa Thiong'o argues about language is universally true. Language in today's world is not an innocent means of communication. It is a most powerful tool in the hands of emerging colonial powers. For Edward Said it a culture-inspired imperialism which colonises mind of men and nations. There is an urgent need to recognise such power groups both inside the country and outside the country. This type of colonisation needs to be resisted because it is more dangerous than physical or political colonization. Ashis Nandy brilliantly sums up this argument in his book *The Intimate Enemy*:

This colonization colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all. In the process, it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The west is now everywhere, within the west and outside; in structure and in minds. (Nandy vii)

One has to make conscious efforts to maintain a decolonized mind. And only through conscious efforts that one can reclaim one's language, history, culture and literature. Bapsi Sidwa makes a successful experiment in *Ice-Candy-Man* and rewrites history that questions not only the British but also the Indian version of the history of the vast Asian sub-continent. Similarly Hyder makes a bold attempt not only in writing *Aag ka Dariya* in Urdu but also in transcreating her Urdu novel into her English. She overcomes the deadness of English language by altering its conventional syntax and grammar.

There is no doubt about the fact that "the historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonial elitism and bourgeois -nationalist elitism (Guha, xiv)" and Hyder realizes this truth more than anybody else as she experienced the pain and pangs of partition when she migrated to Pakistan in the wake of partition. Though she returned to India after some years but the naked dance of death, destruction and depravity witnessed during the partition remains permanently embedded in her memory. The history writing at that time was not a neutral affair, rather it was "a part of a larger nationalist discourse"(Pandey, 6). In *River of Fire* Hyder writes an alternative history which takes into account the brave deeds of "the Subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of laboring populations and intermediate strata in town and country--- that is, the people"(Guha,xiv- xv). She discredits the grand narratives involving the glorious life of kings and queens and writes from the post colonial perspective which foregrounds the 'local' and 'small' through her fragmentary narrative which covers four epochs of our civilization.

The texture of *River of Fire* is lyrical and yet draws elements from heterogeneous sources --legends, philosophy, world history, nursery rhyme, classical quotes, diaries, theatre songs, letters, Urdu poetry, chronicles etc. The narrative is full of love, romance, Intrigues, suspense, war and everything else which is essential for an interesting reading. All diverse elements which characterise India and which bear the stamp of our composite culture, go into the making of this novel. The narrative design and within it language reflects the composite culture of undivided India. We encounter in her narrative the courts and courtesans, poets and painters, sailors and saints, Maulvi and migrated class, layer and lyricists and so and so forth. Of course, the reading of her novel requires a deeper understanding of India, Indian culture and the form and content of the Urdu novel. The canvas of her novel is full of royal personages—kings queens, princes, colonial masters but she tells her story through the unprivileged voice—the voice coming from the periphery or somewhere between periphery and the centre. Hyder employs the technique of meta-fiction and allows her narrator to quote from the text of *The History of Oudh*. Kamal, the narrator describes the glorious past of royal kings.

He opened it tenderly. The frontispiece had a preposterous pen-and-ink drawing of "His Highness the Hon'ble Maharaja Sir Digbijay Singn Bahadur, of Balrampur and Tulsipur, the Province of Oudh, on whose gracious command the present history was compiled.' He[Kamal] began reading [the book] at random. ... It was obvious that there was disunity in the Indian nation, as if all the lamps of Hindustan were put out one by one...

The pathetic demise of Mirza Ali Kha, June, 1816. '--- he was buried in Calcutta's Kasi Bagh wherein the son of Tipu Sultan is also enjoying his eternal repose.

'--- Mirza Muzzafar Bakht, son of Delhi's Prince Mirza Sulaiman shikoh, tried to venture out of Lucknow wherein he lived as a pensioner of the Court of Oudh. Some down-and-out loafers of the town also accompanied the prince. When he returned to Lucknow disappointed and dejected, he married Sally Begum, one of the English widows of general Claud Martin, and lived on his wife's pension....

Kamal threw the book back in the basket, and for some moments looked sadly at the dust which clung to his hands(409).

Kamal, the common man describes the life and death of kings and princes who once ruled the vast kingdoms. The uncommon becomes common and the common[Kamal] becomes the commentator. Kamal's commentary on the lives of kings of the bygone era is a case in point.

Hyder deviates from the 'standard' historiography and does rely more on the 'fragments, in people's account than the 'official' versions of happenings which are based on questionable sources like Govt. archives, court records and police F.I.R. in order to write an alternative history. *River of Fire* is full of historical events and the description of these historical events includes those details which do not figure in the 'important' and notable books of history. Nehru also underlines this fact in *The Discovery of India*. He notes:

A great deal of false and perverted history has been written about the revolt [revolt 1857] and its suppression. What the Indians think about it seldom finds its way to the printed page. Savarkar wrote 'The History of the War of Independence' some thirty years ago, but his book was promptly banned and is banned still. Some frank and honourable English historians have occasionally lifted the veil and allowed us glimpse of the race mania and lynching mentality which prevailed on an enormous scale.... The days of Timur and Nadir Shah were remembered, but their exploits were eclipsed by the new terror, both in extent and the length of time it lasted. (Nehru 325)

Hyder shares Nehru's perspective on the writing of history and brings out what has been deliberately left out by the mainstream history. The following from the text brings out the strength of Hyder's historiography.

Indians have become victim of urban middle-class politics. Life in the villages is different. Here everybody is referred to as bhaiya, chacha,, dada--- a big self-contained joint family, sub-divided on the basis of caste. Muslims are merely another caste.... Upper caste Hindus do not dine with the lower castes of their own community either...Asad Mamoo told us stirring tales of Maulana Obeidullah Sindhi, Raja Mahender Partap, their Free India Government, their underground "Red kerchief Movement". Their leader, Maulana Mahmoodul Hasan, Rector of the seminary of Deoband, was arrested and deported to Malta.... And the legendary Firangi Mahal, the seventeenth-century college of theologians—after 1857 its Rector Maulana had not eaten sugar or ice made in English factories and had not used English blankets. He was the first boycotter of British goods (229-230).

The historical details and the personages involved in these events may not interest the mainstream historians who always look for big stories involving big people. They focus on the sensational and violent events or the birth or death of big people. The small but the beautiful is always left out. Hyder weaves the texture of her novels by bringing to the fore the truthful account of the local, the traditional and the small. She is truly a goddess of 'small' things which make big differences in our life.

She is a story teller in the Indian tradition. The words, rhythm and syntax in the novel have been artistically manipulated to suit her purpose. *River of Fire* is a successful experiment in Indian English. In the novel there is a frequent use of Hindi and Urdu words. The Urdu couplets are transcribed in English and the narrative technique is also typically Indian. While reading the novel the reader can easily identify himself/herself with the characters who speak directly to our heart. *River of Fire* is an interesting work of art because of its semantic openness. Too many Indian words/phrases may cause semantic obscurity to a non-Indian reader. Consider the following expressions:

Dohai hai Company Bahadur ki (137)

Nasri Swatantram (no freedom for women) 137.

Aad anant, ant, nit, bhed naad ke—Everlasting are the mysteries of sound) 195.

Adaab arz karta hoon(237).

Jhuppata waqt hai, behta hua darya thehra—Dusk falls. The river has stopped flowing (245)

Hazrat jatey hain London, kirpa karo Raghu Nandan—The venerable King is going to London, come to his aid, O lord Rama(152)

“Yaar, Gautam...” “Bolo”(425)

Hum Dilli,tum Agre, to kaise baje gi bansuri(335). [I am in Delhi, you are in Agra. How can we paly a duet on the flute?]

Ladke walon ne dehleez ki mitti ley daali(335).

Yeh cooch ke waqt kaisi awaz

Dil ke kanon mein aa rahi hai(188).[Whose voice do I hear in the depth of my heart as the carvan leaves]

Kaha main ne, gul ka hai kitna sabaat?

Kali ne ye sun ke tabassum kiya(188).[I asked how long the rose last. The rose-bud heard me and smiled.]

Ghazalen, tum to waqif ho, kahoMajnun key marney ki,

Diwana mar gaya, aakhir ko, veeranay pe kya guzri(230).

In order to capture the very spirit of Indian culture, Hyder evokes the Indian way of storytelling. In the chapter entitled “Lala Rukh” she describes the manner in which a story is to be listened:

“LalaRukh.”, he resumed, “was Aurangzeb’s daughter. She set forth in a caravan for Kasmir where she was to wed the King of Bokhara, and her barge sailed on the Indus. Say hoon, hoon, that is the tradition, when you listen to a story you keep saying hoon.”....

“ So, there was this poet Framrose in Lala Rukh’s entourage, and she fell in love with him. There fore she banished him from the royal caravan because she was on her way to marry the king of Bokhara, remember?”

“Hoon”(291-293)

Nothing can be more Indian than this art of story telling. In every household the grandmother and grand-maternal mothers tell the story to the little ones only in this way. The words/ phrases are not just simple Indian words, in Hyder’s creative hands they become the metaphors of Indian society and culture. The reader enjoy the manner in which her English is imbued with Indian sensibility. This sensibility gets expressed through persona and places and the two are so closely linked with each other that one is unimaginable without the other. Hyder describes Kings, Queens, Nabobs, Princes and colonial masters with perfect verbal felicity. She uses the idiom appropriate to the status of her characters. This is how Hyder describe the conversation between Champa and Qamrun, the wife of the driver:

“Bitiya you don’t know what men are. We do. They are happy as long as you go on adoring them, and they want enormous sacrifices from us....

[Champa]: “He is not the only man in the world, there are thousands of others. All men are not alike, driver’s wife,” Champa said weakly. (267-68)

Her description of India, rather Indian Sub-continent is not only historically correct but also culturally authentic in terms of minute details about people, places, customs, songs and superstitions. The descriptions are true to the minutest detail:

So, how was this country to be defined? India was Qadeer’s old mother, clad in yellow sari of rough cotton. She was a career woman, as it were, warder of the district jail’s female wing...The quiet avenues of Civil lines where the dog-boys of the Angrez Sahebs took out their pets, were also India. In rural areas chicken-pox and small-pox were simply called ‘Mata’ and considered a manifestation of the wrath of the goddess of Sitla.(226)

As a writer imbued with postcolonial consciousness Hyder celebrates plurality of Indian traditions and cultures and she firmly believed that India “ was made up of so many things”(225). This idea of plurality is most evident in the use of language and the portrayal of characters that come from different backgrounds, religions, and regions. The reader from south India may feel a little bit disappointed as the narrative describes people and places mostly from North India. It may be due to the historical frame of this novel and not because of any regional or sectarian biases. Events happen everywhere but in Indian history most of the notable historical events happen in and around Delhi.

Hyder’s knowledge about India especially North India is remarkable. Hyder narrative is made of mosaic of fragmented and fractured narratives. The narrative does not follow a linear pattern. There are sudden jumps and jerks in the course of the narrative. It seems Hyder follow the pattern of life and not that of poetics.

Empirically speaking, human beings live life and experience experiences in short narratives. Life does not follow any definite pattern, it cannot be subjected to the rules of poetics. Hyder unfolds her story the way life unfolds its pattern. It is recalled and reconstructed in various ways through short and broken narratives. It appears that Hyder believes that only fragmented stories can express the most delicate and difficult truths of life. It is through such stories that we have a variety of human perceptions about society, history, time and reality.

Hyder’s postcolonial stance becomes more emphatic when she brings to the fore the stories of women about whom the world knows little. For instance, Kamaluddin’s travelogue tells about Razia Sultan, a female Muslim monarch who advocated the abolition of the tax paid by Hindus. She never liked to be addressed as sultana. (Sultan of Delhi in India from 1236 to May 1240). “She was killed in tragic circumstances as she rested under a tree with her husband, on her way to Delhi. Murdered right here, where we stood, more than two hundred years ago. Her cabinet of forty ministers had disapproved her enlightened policies. “She was very popular with us jats and Khokars,” the cowherd said(61).

Kamaluddin’s travelogue records the story of queen Bibi Raji . She who was the Queen of Sultan Mahmood Sharqi, a ruler of the Sharqi Dynasty, now the city of Jaunpur, U.P. She removed her son Mohammed Shah from the throne

because of his callousness and despotism and crowned her younger son, Hussain who was devoted to music. Hyder's account of history goes like this:

"She[Bibi Khonza] keeps urging Hussain to capture Delhi". ... nevertheless , I think I am getting the pangs of Indian politics. Everybody wants to capture power at Delhi and for that purpose they make and break alliances, go to war and swap allegiances all the time (65).

It sounds very meaningful even in the present-day political scenario. It also offers an alternative view of male-centric history where women are only mute spectators of things happening around them and happening to them.

River of Fire is a testimony to the fact that it is an outcome of Hyder's first hand experience at various places wherever she happened to live. Unlike Salman Rushdie, who lived in India only in his childhood, and V.S Naipaul, who is oscillating between two heritages—Indian and Trinidadian, Hyder is genuinely cosmopolitan in her outlook as she has lived both in Pakistan and India. And she also lived in England while working for the B.B.C. She transcends the spacio-temporal boundaries and treats history as one living tradition and treats India and Pakistan as part of the large and unbroken civilization. At temporal level too there is an unbroken flow of time and it is evident from her artistic method which unfolds the history of Indian Subcontinent from 4th century B.C to the post-partition period . She may not have included in her narrative all the people and places as it is impossible in book of fiction but she is absolutely conscious of this unbroken continuity both of time and history in her magnum opus *River of Time*. As a writer she is above regional, national and religious prejudices. Both India and Pakistan recognized her worth as a writer and awarded her national honours. This is a rare distinction which speaks volumes of her stature as a writer of universal significance.

But she has not received the kind of attention that she deserves. It may be because of late translation of her novel *River of Fire*. The work deserves a new method of reading i.e. a reading that reads from the point of view of the marginalized, the people of the periphery. This reading involves greater understanding of those things which have been deliberately excluded. Hyder does not write from the Eurocentric standpoint. She 'writes back' and writes from an alternative point of view. That is why her choice is Indian English not Babu English.

Hyder seems to disapprove the ideology of nation-state which is divisive in nature. She brings to the fore the result of the working such ideologies. Such ideologies, Hyder seems to suggest, fuel the fire of separatism, bigotry and religious fundamentalism. The hostility between Pakistan and India is a case in point. The efforts are always made by the writers, thinkers human right activists and, of course by the common people within border and across border to bring these two neighbors together but the divisive ideology, which is operative in both the countries, constantly jeopardizes the process of coming together The fact that India and Pakistan are one at cultural and civilizational plane has been reinforced by many writers and Hyder is one of these prominent voices. She begins her novel in the undivided India of 4th century B.C and this beginning has a significance. It suggests that we share a common history and a common past which held us together at some point in the past. For her India is multiethnic and

multicultural country and this accounts for the use of multiple narratives. Her history-like fiction involves readers in fiction-like reading which foregrounds the neglected voices . Thus *River of Fire* emerges as a powerful text which systematically resist both colonial history and ideology.

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