

## Reading *River of Fire* as a North-American Student

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Hyder, Qurratulain. *River of Fire*. New York: New Directions Books, 1998. 428 pages, ISBN: 978-0-8112-1533-6.

Though written about half a century ago and “transcreated” into English from the Urdu in 1998, Qurratulain Hyder’s *Aag Ka Daria (River of Fire)* provides new challenges to students from North American universities. The novel tells the story of the personal quests of four main characters across two millennia of Indian history. Gautam, Kamal, Cyril, and Champa appear as different people throughout history. The second half of the novel takes place in the present day, the time of writing, within a decade of Partition, and represents its psychological impact on the characters.

What do North American students know about the history of India? They know Gandhi’s life story, perhaps from the 1982 film starring Ben Kingsley. And thus they know of India’s independence from Britain along with Partition and the violent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. The latter they hear of in the news. They probably saw *Slumdog Millionaire*, which portrays a riot scene. They may have heard of sati, the custom of widow immolation allegedly ended by the morally upright Europeans. The sources of knowledge, then, for the averagely informed North American student, include movies, television, and if they are lucky, university courses.

Hyder’s novel provides little context to the story that would inform readers unfamiliar with the cultural history of India. They must approach it from a position of at least some background knowledge. The novel thus encourages students to further research the history of India, in order to better understand the story. The novel becomes even more complicated because it subverts previous knowledge of India such students may possess. In the mainstream media, over and over, narratives of economic strife and the lingering effects of colonialism are buried in favor of philosophical, religious or ethnic differences, guiltless explanations of conflicts. The story of post-partition violence between Hindus and Muslims might be familiar to students in the United States, but an earlier history is less so. Students familiar

with the Western cultural tradition of grand narratives extending from the history of Ancient Greeks and Romans through the sweep of European history, up through basic American and British literature have not been much exposed to the histories of other nations. However, just from reading the novel, students learn that other cultural histories exist, as complicated and contradictory as their own, which are equally important in shaping the present situations of other parts of the world.

North American students can more easily relate to other aspects of the novel. Though the timescale of the novel spans two millennia, much beyond a human lifetime, anyone can relate to each of the characters' personal quests and emotional attachments. Relationships between the four main characters, Gautam, Kamal, Champa, and Cyril change throughout the course of the novel. Their changing relationships stand in for the progress of the course of history, the river of fire. Much that happens in history is doomed to be forgotten, leaving only fragments. For example, Hyder represents certain details that are picked up later, like the statue of Champa that Gautam created around 400 BC during the time of power struggles of various Mughal emperors, which is then seen in a museum by the characters in the present time. For many of the characters, art, music and learning were important. They concerned themselves with unrequited love, their economic security, and their sense of identity as it related to their nationality, their religion, and ethnic group. The characters possess certain traits that carry through their various iterations: Gautam, an artist; Cyril, a representation of the conflicted colonizer, Champa, a proud yet displaced woman, the object of love who comes into her own by the end; and Kamal, a misfit and a Muslim.

In the course of history and for the characters, Hyder represented Partition as one trauma in a series of traumas. Partition happens in the space between chapters, as if the author considered her audience already familiar with the events. In the second half of the novel, which deals with the "present time" of writing, a few more characters appear. Hyder's contemporaries criticized her for focusing on the upper middle classes and leaving out the physical violence of Partition. However, this aspect of Partition had already been adequately captured and described by others. Instead, Hyder chooses to represent the psychological impact on her characters. She wrote from her own experience, of being in her early twenties at the time of Partition. One of the characters, the journalist Talat, interviewed Oscar Wilde's granddaughter, the Queen's beautician, as did Hyder, while working as a journalist in London. Another strong female character, Champa Ahmed, longed to --yet never did -- fit in among the other main female characters because of her lower class. She couldn't hide her disdain for them. Near the end of the novel, when some members of the group of friends begin to relocate to Pakistan, while she remains behind in London, Champa wanders to different places she used to hang around, such as a

coffee house and the BBC Canteen, announcing her name. No one knows who she is, and this upsets her, though she knows her actions seem ridiculous.

The emotional center, or climax of the novel, occurs when Kamal, as a Muslim in India, realizes he has become “stateless.” He must confront the fact that his connection to his own country, India, has been literally severed. What else could define his relationship to the country of his birth? Kamal feels he has nothing left. In Pakistan too, he fears the mistrust of those more “at home” than he. Anyone could recognize his anguish, even those who have not endured something similar. My own experience of growing up in Quebec during the referendum in 1995, the only serious discussion of secession in North America since the American Civil War, seems barely comparable. As an Anglophone born in Montreal to American parents who spent part of her time in Ohio, I had somewhat more than the usual difficulty with national identity. If Quebec had separated from Canada, I would have felt as Kamal did, a stranger in the land of my birth. It seems crazy to imagine such things happening here and now in the West, which Kamal and his friends went through and which exist in living memory for many in India and Pakistan. American students know the bloody history of their country’s Civil War, but that belongs to a far-off time. Hyder’s book makes history present, not in the actual memories of her characters, but in their collective cultural memory, which they cannot quite forget. Histories are not merely composed of grand narratives. Ordinary people must live their lives and establish their identities in times when such narratives become unstable.