

## A Study of Qurratulain Hyder's Selected Works

**Shakila Bhanu Shaik, Associate Professor of English**

VFSTR Deemed to be University, Guntur, AP, India

[bhanushakila@gmail.com](mailto:bhanushakila@gmail.com)

---

---



Qurratulain Hyder (1927-2007)

Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qurratulain\\_Hyder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qurratulain_Hyder)

### Abstract

The cartography of North-East India had been changed twice in fifty years first, in 1905 (Bengal Division) and secondly in 1947 (the Great Divide). Over time, it has been confronted with many upheavals and has a great facelift in the case of culture, history, and polity and passed it on to literature. This paper discusses the post-colonial period depicted in the famous works of Qurratulain Hyder *River of Fire*; *My temples too*; and *Fireflies in the Mist*.

**Keywords:** Qurratulain Hyder, *River of Fire*, *My temples too*, *Fireflies in the Mist*, colonial India, post-colonial India.

### Introduction

Many foreign rulers invaded India and brought a lot of complexity in culture, ethnicity, and civilization before the British started ruling. The impact left by British culture and language was huge on Indian history. The literature set in contexts of the national movement and Pre-Partition and Post-Partition delineated the mayhem of Partition, and migration of masses across the border was the popular theme of post-colonial literature in India.

Many authors wrote about Partition focused on the events that happened during and after Partition. Qurratulain Hyder's works depicted the story of characters from the Colonial era to the Post-partition period. She depicted the history of the Indian subcontinent through her life-like characters implanting them in a plot developed in the colonial period. Her characters were mostly from a middle and upper middle class educated elite, who believed themselves different from others. In her novels, central characters bear chaos and upheaval for their entire life to reach salvation.

### **United and Parted Indian Societal Framework in Novels: *River of Fire***

Qurratulain Hyder's work *River of Fire* depicts Indian history from the Vedic era to modern India. It wraps every prominent personality of Indian history in its folds whereas the novel *My Temples too* holds Indian society in a weathered colonial period. And the third novel *Fireflies in the Mist* discovers Bengal society in both colonial and post-colonial India.

The views held by many historians like Upendra Singh and Sailendranath are reflected in Hyder's delineation in *River of Fire*. In the novel *River of Fire*, the protagonist Gautam openly criticized the principles of Chanakya. Power, the vital aspect of history is depicted and showcased carefully through real-life characters like Chanakya, Chandragupta Maurya, Sikander Lodi, etc.

The novel holds kings living in riches and enjoying their sports in forests and courts and patronizing artists and priests. They fought for power and glory. Society of Vedic era was divided into five strata, and it has been evidenced through many historical proofs. The Brahmin caste celebrated and enjoyed its hierarchy in society. A Brahmin scholar Gautam ventured to seek the hand of royal bride Champak, showing that Brahmin was valued even in royal families. Among all remaining castes, Panchamas were looked down on in society. With time these divisions of Indian society found transformed in several ways.

The Medieval period in India had given a great scope to evolve many religions and sub-castes. Many movements like Bhakti Movement, Sufism, and Guru Nanak preaching had greatly vitalized native masses. People from lower strata of society and outcasts from society were enticed by these religious movements to gain respect, esteem, and approbation. In the novel *River of Fire* Sujatha, a sudra girl married Kamaluddin and became a Muslim.

The end of the medieval period in India was marked by the entry of the English. India had been slowly drawn into the hands of the East India Company giving ultimate powers to the British. Many colonizers found their way into Indian society. Cyril is one of such Englishmen found in the novel with great love and passion for Indian women.

### **Men and Women**

Marriages between the English/Europeans and Indians gave a new stream into society namely Anglo-Indians or Eurasians. Anglo-Indian women were leading wretched life as cabaret dancers, etc., in colonial Indian society. In the novel *My Temples too*, Queen Rose (an Anglo-Indian woman) and her brother lived since their childhood an insecure and unsettled life, and disgrace. Queen Rose's brother ran away to build his career and she remained alone with her parents.

### **Feudal Society**

In Hyder's novels, many young men and women with different ideologies found clashing with one another. Hyder is much engrossed in feudal society in her novels (*River of fire, My Temples too, Fireflies in the Mist*). In colonial India, feudalism strengthened its roots. The novel *My Temples too* also referred to the feudal society in colonial rule. Old feudal lords, who were enjoying the fruits of the feudal system and benefits of their lands strongly willed to live in colonial rule. But the younger generation of these feudal landlords disliked continuing under the British flag. This clash between generations soured with meditated partition and freedom.

In the last part of the novels *River of Fire* and *My Temples too*, many upper-middle-class feudal families were in dilemma choosing between Pakistan and India. Kamal belonged to one such family. He was a passionate nationalist and never dreamt of leaving his country India. But finally he had to leave India after taking many trails from Indian government and fellow Indians

In *Contemporary Indian Writing in English: Critical Perceptions*, N. D. R. Chandra noticed "Nineteenth century intellectuals began to question the orthodox prejudices, dogmas and superstitions that prevailed in India. The impact of western learning embarked Indian Renaissance. Indian society was undergoing transformation (5)." He opined that many English-educated young men and women who started living in different and novel spheres of the world became self-conscious about their culture and heritage. Their understanding and education instigated them to revolt against age-old systems and colonial rule.

### **Newly-born Middle Class**

Society in pre-colonial India was stained with communal riots and disbelief towards their neighbours. The downfall of feudalism was marked strongly by the newly born middle-class. A significantly educated middle class that was coming into existence firmly laid its marks on the new

country. This middle class viewed young people from feudal society as their enemies. This scenario was noticed in both the novels *My Temples too* and *River of Fire* through a character like Dr. Saleem and Chapa Ahemad respectively. These clashes between classes and communities had thrown Rakshanda Begum in great danger; the danger of losing her own identity in the novel *My Temples too* and in the novel *River of Fire* Kamal endured the same problem.

### **Partition**

British bestowed independence along with never healing wound to Indian society, Partition. It was an unforgettable nightmare for many who were directly connected to those regions which were torn apart overnight. Many people witnessed that villages were strained with blood and roadsides, railway tracks and train platforms were heaped with dead bodies. It was evident that, after announcing Independence and Partition, the British grew apathetic and unconcerned towards the safety and security of Indians. British acted inhumanly by withdrawing its troops from delicate regions after partition resulted in great tragedy.

Partition served as a subject matter for many fiction makers and many authors like Khushwant Singh (*Train to Pakistan*) and Bapsi Sidwa (*The Pakistani Bride* and *Ice Candy Man*) concentrated on the happenings during partition and the immediate catastrophic events happened after it. In *My Temples Too* also Hyder focused more on the consequences of partition. In *My Temples Too*, Qurratulain Hyder through the characters Rakshanda (a Muslim) and Kiran (a Hindu) sensitize the harmony among the rival community people. Hyder wanted to show that the partition was the objective of a handful of people who wished for their better political career, but it had troubled many.

### **Focus on Bengal**

Partition had torn many states of India in both directions, the East and the West. Hyder put her novel *Fireflies in the Mist* in the backdrop of Bengal during colonial and post-colonial Bengal amidst two partitions one in colonial India and later at the time of freedom in 1947.

Bidyut Chakrabarty in *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932-1947: Contour of Freedom* noticed how the society of colonial Bengal constituted and Muslim and Hindu communities related with each other. In a conversation at Arjumand Manjil, Deepali was informed by Nawab that half of Bengali literature was accumulated by Urdu literature and language.

In Bengal, the Hindu and Muslim relations in colonial Indian society were defined by their socio-economic equations of those times.

1947 Partition was a bitter reality of south Asian history that made many Muslims and Hindus migrate from their lands and homes to an alien land. Some people left both countries and

migrated to more alien lands like England, France, or America. In *Britain through Muslim eyes - Literary Representations, 1780-1988*, Claire Chambers described such happenings. In the novel *River of Fire*, educated upper-middle-class characters parted after partition and found their dwelling in London exhibiting racial tolerance.

Hyder, through her soft narration, presented the vast and tolerant Indian culture before the reader through the novels which was later compromised at separation.

### **Indian Historical Transition and Political Configuration in Novels**

Through the novel *River of Fire* Qurratulain Hyder established a historical shift that happened in India from the Vedic era to the post-partition period. In ancient India, many local dynasties Kasha, Anga, Kosala, Magadha fought among themselves for power and Magadha emerged as a victorious star in the sixth century BC. The Mauryan dynasty celebrated the great fame and wealth of the country and the Mauryan period was considered a golden period in Indian history. During the Mauryan era, many foreign elements entered the country and even Mauryan kings developed friendships through marriage. The first king of the Mauryan dynasty Chandragupta Maurya defeated Dhan Nand. In that serious war many common men lost their lives. Every war is marked with the bloodshed of common men, still, people were interested in warfare to get or sustain their power.

Guptas' establishment in India could be studied through works like Travelogues, biographies, and local chronicles about the history of ancient India. The most famous Kavya was Bana's *Harsha-charita*. Buddhism and Jainism advocated self-control and asceticism as the only way for the salvation of the human race. The nucleus of these two religions was the Gangetic valley where civilization flourished.

Hyder put her first part of the novel *River of Fire* in the backdrop of the Muryan dynasty taking Shravasti, (present U.P.) Pataliputra (present Patna, Bihar) as background for storytelling. The political and social conditions were set in clear observation. Gautam, the main protagonist of the novel presented as a student of Forest University (Gurukul) in Shravsti in the first part. Hyder depicted the realistic political systems of that era such as learners staying in Gurukuls, serving their Gurus.

In the novel *River of Fire*, medieval India was presented from the Lodi dynasty to the end of the Mughal Empire. 1857's sepoy mutiny was considered the first freedom struggle. As Albert Memmi argued in his *The Colonizer and The Colonized*, colonized rejects the situation one day or other though how powerful the colonizer could be.

If one chooses to understand the colonial system, he must admit that it is unstable, and its equilibrium constantly threatened. One can be reconciled to every situation, and the colonized can wait a long time to live. But, regardless of how soon or how violently the colonized rejects his situation, he will one day begin to overthrow his unlivable existence with the whole force of his oppressed personality. (164)

### **Colonizer Attitude**

Albert Memmi opined that the colonizer wished to live in his colony forever, but he would remain there until his colonized could tolerate him. Albert also added that the stability of the colony is always in jeopardy. It has been noted in many historiographies that to some level colonized would tolerate the domination of colonizers after that they will certainly revolt against them. The same happened in the history of India. Although for many centuries Indians had borne the supremacy of other races, finally they revolted for freedom.

First World War marked the severity of colonialism in India with highly levied taxes to meet warfare and many Indians lost their lives in war. The early twentieth century was marked with intense colonialism and at the same time newly born nationalism ideology. *My Temples too* focuses on the period immediately after the First World War. The novel thus is found in whirlpools of the socially unsettled and emotionally confused period. India was spotted in fighting with external as well as internal enemies. Political and religious cleavage among national leaders threw common people in dilemma about national movement.

### **Polarization Between the Muslim League and Indian National Congress**

Newly born many political parties galvanized young masses into different directions. In *River of Fire*, *My Temples too* and *Fireflies in the Mist*, main characters are found polarized between Muslim League and Indian National Congress. Every group was a strong believer in their party policy. This polarity led the country towards Partition.

1947's divide was recorded as the greatest partition ever happened in the history of South Asia. Millions of people migrated across the country and a lot of genocide happened. Hyder's *My Temples too* described the heart-rending story of partition. In this novel, the protagonist, being romantic about the unreal ideology, bore all the pains of partition. The novel focused on the momentous events of pre- and post-partition.

In *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, Yasmin Khan observed that still after a few years of Partition and becoming independent, nations both India and Pakistan faced inexorable and unlimited difficulties in the form of refugees. Political leadership was not enough powerful to consolidate this problem (28). Partition and followed massacre, violence, and humiliation eclipsed much other great loss of both newly formed nations and citizens.

In the novel *My Temples too*, Rakshanda and Kiran helping at rehabilitation centres heard the stirring stories of people who managed to escape death and reached India. The situation was not different from the other side of the border. Peechu who chose to remain in the Indian Army and serve the Indian government had to prove his loyalty to his fellow soldiers. He was ardently discharging his duties at the border and helped many to cross the borders and had witnessed soul-stirring incidents happening across the border. Finally, he was shot dead by a rioters mob while he was policing a caravan across the border.

Gyanendra Pandey noted in *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* that there were three levels of ‘historical’ discourses, primary, secondary, and tertiary. The primary level refers to the reports from the front, the secondary level from the commentaries and memories that aspire to the status of history; the third level might be described as historic. Remembering history happened through discussing it with next generations which would be possible through historical discourses.

Gyanendra Pandey accurately noted in the above-cited work that understanding Indian history is easy in comparison with many other nations’ histories. It seems recording history had been stopped in 1947 after independence; afterward, it turned into political science and economics. He also argued that historians in India, draw a line between the history of nationalism which led to Independence, and the history of communalism leading to Partition.

For Indians, remembering Partition means, remembering the dark side of Independence, a moment of loss, a moment of despair, loss of lives, properties and more, which cannot be articulated said Butalia. It is true even after seven decades, we, Indians have still not found a way of memorializing Partition, acknowledging what people lived through as Butalia felt memories became more complex.

What Pandey and Butalia mentioned above about histories of nationalism and communalism is true. Furthermore, they were greatly depicted in creative and imaginative works that attracted many with their great capacity of evoking and igniting interest. Social and political shifts in history lead to cultural flux and thereby define multiple facets of societies.

### **Political Uncertainties and Apprehensions**

In Hyder’s novels, political uncertainties and apprehensions were illustrated through different characters.

Three novels of Qurratulain Hyder discussed here depict the practices and religions and cultures that were established in the progression of Indian history. These novels ascertain the

mayhem that happened during partition, by putting more concentration on consequences than happenings. She succeeded in establishing almost all events and incidents that happened in Indian history from the ancient era to the post-partition period and reflected the cultural and historical progression of India.

---

### References

Butalia, Urvashi, ed. *Partition: the long shadow*. Penguin UK, 2015.

..., *The other side of silence: Voices from the partition of India*. Penguin UK, 2017.

Chakrabarty, Bidyut. *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932-1947: contour of freedom*. Routledge, 2004.

Chambers Claire. "Britain through Muslim eyes: literary representations, 1780–1988." (2017): 216-217.

Chatterji, Joya. "New Directions in Partition Studies." *History Workshop Journal*. Vol. 67. No. 1. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Hyder, Qurratulain. *River of Fire*. New Directions, 1998.

---. *My Temples too*. Women Unlimited, 2004.

---. *Fireflies in the Mist*. Women Unlimited, 2008.

Kaul, Suvir. "Remembering partition: Violence, nationalism and history in India." *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 3.3 (2002).

Khan, Yasmin. *The great partition*. Yale University Press, 2017.

Memmi, Albert. *The colonizer and the colonized*. Routledge, 2013.

Pandey, Gyanendra. "In defense of the fragment: writing about Hindu-Muslim riots in India today." *Representations* 37 (1992): 27-55.

Ritu, Menon. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. Rutgers UP, 1998.

Saini, Rupinderjit. *The Partition Theme in Indian Novel*. Unistar Books, 2012.

---