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SYNCRETIC CULTURE OF CIVILISATIONAL SOCIETY IN *RIVER OF FIRE*

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ABSTRACT

In her magnum opus *River of Fire*, Qurratulain Hyder annexes over twenty five centuries of history, tracing the formation, development, evolution and the subsequent partition of culture resulting into the journey of India from a civilisation to nation(s). The integrated vision of India is the one held up by its syncretic culture which transcends history. The wonderful tale that flows through time shows India in its splendour, in its conflict-ridden times as a fabric which absorbed the colours of other cultures that have seeped into it, exposing a design which has been enriched with time. With the task of constructing the amalgamated identity of India, she brings together the history and heritage for her purpose. This paper intends to investigate the cultural inclusiveness of India as explored by Qurratulain Hyder in her magnum opus *River of Fire* and reaffirm the notion of India as a civilisational society instead of a multicultural nation. It also seeks to challenge the concept of India as a multicultural society and advocate a civilisational one as proposed in the novel.

**Key words:** syncretic culture, Indian novel, Qurratulain Hyder, nation, Indian civilisation

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Qurratulain Hyder first published her novel in Urdu as *Aagka Darya* and recreated it in English as *River of Fire*. The composite culture portrayed in the novel is a unique phenomenon in history according to Bipan Chandra. He describes it as “a continual presence and process of reciprocity, mutual sharing and overlapping of cultural practices, styles of life, values and belief-systems cutting across the divides of space”(195). Though

the uneven textual space given to the four stories provides the most emphasis on the *Ganga-jamunitehzeeb* or the Hindu-Muslim culture of Lucknow (as evident in the third and fourth stories), Hyder's choice of the setting of first story makes a different point. It begins with Gautam Nilambar, in 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC—two hundred years after the death of Gautam Buddha—in the town of Shravasti on the banks of the river Saryu. Even before the advent of Islam, India was a civilisation society, carrying Hindu, Buddhist and Jain philosophy. The recently formed religion, thinks Gautam, "has added yet another philosophy to the vast kingdom of thought, where sixty two systems already flourished" (8). Through his conversation with Hari Shankar, whom he mistakes to be a *Yavana* or *Mlechha*, we see the then ongoing cultural, commercial and epistemological traffic in the subcontinent. When Hari Shankar mentions Daryush as an Aryan descendant, Gautam cannot help but comment on the superiority of the people of noble birth: "Iranians and us Aryans" differentiating themselves from the 'lesser breeds' (11). The Jain *sadhus*, the Saffron-robed Buddhist *bhikshus*, and Brahmin students wander and preach in the same region as contemporaries to practise peace. Gautam comes across Persians who tell him about the mystery of language with the common origin of Sanskrit and Persian where the same time is called by different yet similar names: *Saptah* becomes *Haptah*, *Ramesh* becomes *Ramish*, and the prayer *Namo* becomes *Namaz* (12). The architects from Persepolis are the ones to reconstruct *Pataliputra*. The names *Hind* and *Punjab* are given by Persians. Although Gautam Nilambar discovers that the words in spoken languages are reappearing in new form—languages being developed under the confluence of different cultures—, he does not take long to realise that an affinity in languages does not keep people from fighting and hating each other (43).

As if to highlight the cultural continuity, we are introduced to the next protagonist Syed Abdul Mansur Kamaluddin from Nishapur (Iran) in the same chapter as Gautam's drowning. Unlike the move from the second to third story—that of British arrival in India—the transition from Gautam's story to Kamaluddin's is smooth and without any interruption. It is as if the same Saryu that engulfed Gautam produced Kamaluddin. More than thirteen centuries have passed since Gautam Nilambar's time but the culture has not changed much: men still carry out ablutions in the Saryu river, and students are still recognised by their hairstyles (54). His Persian half-coat, linen shirt called *kurta* in Turki, and baggy central Asian shalwar have since become a common dress in India (54). Mansur Kamaluddin is not a *Yavana* or *Mlechha* anymore; he is a *Vilayati* since the ruling class has changed. But according to Bipan Chandra, the concept of foreigner or *videshi* was not a part of Bharatvarsha since there was "an absence of element of territorial exclusiveness from early Indian political and geographical thought" (153). The *Yavanas*, *Sahas* and *Hunas* were not the only ethnic groups whose cultures were immensely different from those of *Madhyadeshis*: the cultures of *Prachya* (the East) and *Dakshinapath* (the Deccan) were dissimilar too. The lack of territorial exclusiveness allowed the easy and natural adaptation of different sources of cultures within the loosely woven fabric of India. Furthermore, the "spatial scheme of India accommodated many communities within a broad framework which did not and could not underline cultural differences or insist on a territorially circumscribed country" (Chandra 153). The flexibility to house heterogeneous cultures and a juxtaposition of multiple communities within a space implied a complementary space for cultural contestation.

Standing at Saryu's bank, Kamaluddin discovers that most mystics, including Mansur Bin Hallaj and Kabir Das belonged to the working class. He notes, "The mystics in India were also humble folk and were busy attracting the masses" (55). Compiling the *Marvels and Strange Tales of Hindustan*, he is left awestruck by the native's understanding of Manu as Nooh and equates it with the veracity of Eve's grave in Jeddah on being informed that that the resting place of Prophet Nooh's son Sheth is in Ayodhya (75). Similarly confounding for him is the *jeevan-lila* of Sultana Razia, popular with Jats and Khokars, and who had been murdered, as the cowherd tells him, because she wanted to abolish the poll-tax levied on Hindus (61). She is another able ruler in the list of ones presented by Qurratulain Hyder who was living proof of the syncretic culture of India. With Sultana Razia's currency coin bearing her embossed name on one side and an image of goddess Lakshmi on the other, Kamaluddin marvels at the woman belonging to the Turko-Iranian tradition of able female-monarchs who ruled the hearts of the people of different religion who were generally hostile to the Turks (61-2). After his conversation with Champavati, the witty and intelligent sister of the pandit, he interprets Radha—

under Irani mystic scholar Ruzbehan's teachings—as human soul yearning to be one with divine; what he calls *fana-fi-Allah* (78, 97). After getting disillusioned with war, like his predecessor Gautam Nilambar, he embraces Sufism and Kabir's syncretic outlook which reminds him of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi of Turkey of two thousand years ago whose teachings were same as Kabir's (98).

Kamaluddin, as a traveller in quest of knowledge, and as a sufi was a part of 'secular communities' which were ever mobile, cherished their own culture and religious identities self-consciously, and yet mutually shared—spontaneously and freely—a variety of cultural attributes, customs and life styles. The syncretic culture was strengthened by continual social and cultural reform movements by the sufis, saint poets, and folk-singers. Sample the folk ballad of Nizam the robber—the notorious highwayman who had written this "strange ode to the prophet" after coming under the influence of the sufis (98). The cultural superstructures of society further reinforced the emergence of composite culture by "establishing cultural linkages by building cultural centres with its networks" (Chandra 196) like the *serais* and *khanqas* where the resting Hindu guests had been given separate kitchen (65). Kamaluddin -who had married a lower-caste woman Sujata Debi and is no more a court scholar but a folk artist who composes Bengali folk-songs with Arabic, Persian and Turkish words- cannot understand why "politics has no place for mysticism and scholarship" (56). Neither can he understand the logic of his killers even while they are speaking in a language which he has spent his years beautifying (102).

Vajid Ali Shah who celebrated *BasantJogia Mela*, dressed as a *jogi* in yellow; Hussain Shah Nayak of Jaunpur who composed many *ragas*, *raginis* and *khayals* in Hindustani classical music, and Sultan Baz Bahadur of Malwa who created *Ras Lila* ballad and danced as Krishna: they are all emblems of composite culture of India and examples of able rulers who effectively answered the questions that are now challenging the social scientists: How are society and Nature to deal with composite culture? What attitudes to adopt? How are culturally diverse people to live together? How should the state deal with persons culturally different from majority? However, there are no simple answers but *Sulh-i-kul* philosophy shows a way out. The *Sulh-i-kul* or peace for all philosophy-exemplified by these rulers- was derived from earlier syncretic traditions and at its basis was the liberal philosophy of Ibn-Arabi and *sufi* and *bhakti* saints (Chandra 173). As a leader of all communities, the king was expected to be the fountainhead of fostering peace and promotion of cultural life.

But with the advent of the British and emergence of India as a nation such philosophies got problematic and newer questions were posed. In words of Kumkum Sangari "How was the subcontinent to be defined as a historical community shaped by ancient, medieval, colonial and ongoing interactions and intertwinings of languages, settlements and religions, and how was the line between diversity and systemic inequality, between religion and culture to be drawn and navigated?" (36). Bipan Chandra believes, "As a result of political, economic and historical changes in a society, an exclusivist cultural identity is formed which narrows the cultural space of compositeness" (199). It is here that Qurratulain Hyder shows that India's has always been a civilisational society and not a multicultural society. It is not multicultural, since there are no distinctive diverse cultures. Neither were there any "different views regarding good life and values to live and die by" (Chandra vii). The rich and diverse culture is not a result of globalisation and technological changes; rather it is based on earlier travels and migrations. India has always been a civilisational society. The interaction between "institutional-cultural and socio-structural elements through the civilisational society in India has given birth to a cultural phenomenon popularly known as composite culture" (Chandra 195). This civilisational society of India evolved through a dynamic historical interaction of communities. The pattern of culture as evolved by this society is adapted to its own unique historicity and no community could claim its cultural superiority over the other. This cultural relativism does not preclude co-sharing and co-existence of common attributes across cultures.

It was under the British rule, that the shift from India as a civilisational society held together by threads of culture to the European idea of India as a land, as a nation took place. Colonisation allowed the shift where state authority defined the rules of identity; more specifically, identity was based not on the unifying and inclusive principle of culture, but on the differentiating, dividing and exclusive force of religion. Unlike the conception of India as an evolving and dynamic civilisation in constant flow, it now came to be identified as a

fixed nation with settled boundaries. This attempt is shown as an exercise in futility since it is in conflict with the quintessential essence of the accommodating identity of India. This identity of India, no longer centred on homogeneity, on co-existence of diversities, becomes suffocating for the characters as well as the author. The author's view of India as a civilisational society bears the pain, nostalgia, memory and loss instigated by the partition. It transpires to conquer the "two-nation/two-culture theory" and stand up for a cultural space which is larger than nation. For her, "Civilizations were not divisible into nations, national boundaries came and went, civilizations endured." (Sangari 35)

It is in the fourth and the last section that the amalgamated cultures of all the preceding three sections (which have by now found their place and have completely gotten assimilated in the Indian culture) come together and implement themselves. The Lucknow gang is a product of this Indic civilisational society which is not based only on the main pillars of culture (literature, philosophy, language, music, dress-code, art etc) but also includes emotional configurations that binds that civilisation. "Culture is not merely a normative construct as formulised or scripted and prescribed style of expression of values, beliefs and aesthetic standards to which members are expected to conform; rather culture as living reality is also grounded in the existential, ecological, social and political settings of society." (Chandra 196) These forces constantly encroach upon the scripted text of culture. Kamal Reza, brought upon the bedtime stories ranging from *Father Tuck*, *Arabian Nights* and allusions from *Ramayana*, is an example. For him India and Indian culture manifests itself instances exemplifying the *ganga-jamuni tehzeeb*, of Hindu officers and U.P. police cavalry showing mark of respect to Imam Hussain's *chuptazia* (237), or image of old Basharat Hussain *khansama's*, standing on a leg, skull-capped, hands-folded imploring the folk-spirit *Shitala mata* to leave small boy Kamal-at that time suffering from chicken-pox (226). He questions: How is this country to be defined? How is Indian culture to be defined? "The ancient Hindu-Buddhist-Jain, the intermediary Turco-Mughal-Iranian and the latter day British features of Indian civilisation were so intermingled that it was impossible to separate the warp and woof of the rich fabric" (229). He sees India as a "big self-contained joint family, subdivided on the basis of caste. Muslims are merely another caste" thinks he on his train-journey to Calcutta as a student volunteer (229). For him, "every honest person should be a nationalist" (254). No wonder he is a Nehruvite since it was Nehru who was deeply cognizant of the reality of Composite culture and its processes.

Years later, on another train-journey, this time to Pakistan, he breaks down. His dislocation is not just spatial but cultural as well. Still at the crossroads of conflicting loyalties, as a member of India's lost generation (a trait he shares with the author) which is not his country anymore; where he has to report his arrival every time at police-station, he fails to understand this division where he is neither here or there. His consciousness of identity is not triggered by the perception of 'the other' in terms of one's own culture. At most he can wonder how the beauty in fusion of Hindu-Muslim imagery in the song usually sung at Muslim weddings describing Ali and Krishna simultaneously; or the ballad of Alha-Udal with Ali and Syed as characters would be understood by any western sociologist. He too, like the author, is a product of the *Lakhnawi tehzeeb* (which traced its origins to the culture of Vajid Ali Shah's Oudh) and cannot comprehend the other as Hindu since his identity has been shaped under its cultural influence. He, along with other members of the Lucknow gang, joins a community of students from the subcontinent, mainly Indians, East and West Pakistanis, which is unrestricted by the partition and strengthens their composite heritage regardless of the conflict at the borders.

Compelled to leave his country, Kamal Reza is forced to think about the relationship between nation and culture. Does cultural identity determine national identity or rather does a nation have to have a single, well-defined cultural identity? Stuck between his loyalties to two lands where on one hand he will be suspected as a Pakistani spy and a traitor, and on the other side seen as an exploiter of a young nation; he who has once defined Indian society and culture as "a potpourri or cocktail where cheerful coexistence was the norm" (214), asks of his country: why has it forsaken him, made him an exile? (389). Though Hari, Kamal's alter-ego, his *humzaad*, observes that "the rope of our culture has already snapped, and we hang in mid-air on its separate ends", the spirit of composite culture remains resilient (363).

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