

Chapter Six

Historicizing the Pattern of Betrayal : Qurratulain Hyder

Qurratulain Hyder seriously commits herself to the question of history in her fictional narratives. Her writing throws ample light on issues like the partition, destruction of the syncretic culture of India, communalism, casteism and so on. By representing these issues, Hyder points out the marked pattern of betrayal—both at the personal level as well as the historical level. Like Sahgal, Rushdie, Mistry and Ghosh, she constructs her narratives that evoke the interface between the domestic and the historic. At the same time, she focalizes her novelistic concerns on the betrayal of her female protagonists *vis-a-vis* the history of the nation. In short, Hyder's novels are notable for their representation of history in which a distinct pattern of betrayal emerges – both as a loss of syncretic Hindu-Muslim culture and the consequent loss in human relationships and values.

Balraj Komal comments that like other Hindi and Urdu novelists, Hyder "... lament[s] over the decline and annihilation of human values" (163). Apparently Hindu-Muslim relations become the dominant concern in most novels dealing with the partition irrespective of the language in which they are written. For instance, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Munshi Premchand and Rabindranath Tagore wrote their fiction at a time when Hindu-Muslim relations were at a rather low ebb and strained. Hyder's fiction also brings to light the divisive forces that brought about the destruction of harmonious unity between the two communities which have continuously lived together over a thousand years on the sub-continent. In their writings, these writers project these relations either as divisive, antagonistic or as a hybrid reality connecting with history and assimilation. Hyder's writing, therefore, focuses on such a harmonious past

of the country, but mourns its painful loss in the present.

Hyder's work shares with other North Indian writers of her generation a generically coherent preoccupation with the partition of India. For these writers, India's partition and its aftermath serve as the defining moment in the perpetuation of communal hostilities. They were mostly the writers and poets of the early sixties' era, who were beset by the problem of belongingness which is reflected duly in their works. For instance, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Sadat Hasan Manto and Hyder herself tried to grapple with the immediate and pressing issues such as "[T]o which country did they belong ? ... What were their links with their erstwhile homeland?..." (Hasan qtd. in Khanna 105). Abdullah Hussain's *Udas Naslein* is not only an excellent Urdu novel, but it is also unique in presenting an intense picture of an undivided sub-continent. Khadija Mastoor wrote *Angan* from the view point of the impact of partition on women. Intizar Husain narrated the story of divided hearts by his celebrated novel *Basti*. The short stories of Manto obviously reflect the painful trauma of the partition. Like Intizar Husain and Ashfaq Ahmad, Hyder also challenges the notion of cultural incompatibility embodied in M.A.Jinnah's two-nation theory and affirms that the subject of the partition was first the human being — not the Hindu human being nor the Muslim, nor the Sikh. Although Hyder's works do not deal with the partition directly, nevertheless they raise certain significant and serious points in relation to this horrific event. As Urvashi Butalia has aptly noted that "...partition was not ... a closed chapter of history..." but that "...its simple, brutal political geography infused and divided us still..." (6). She further comments that "...how families were divided, how friendships endured across borders, how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives...find little reflection in written history" (9). All these

aspects, however, are amply refracted in the fictional narratives of writers like Hyder.

Born in 1927 in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, Hyder emerged as one of the most celebrated fiction writers of Urdu. A trendsetter in Urdu fiction, she began writing at a time when the novel was yet to take deep roots as a serious genre in the poetry-oriented world of Urdu literature. She shook it out of its stagnation and purged it of its obsession with fantasy, romance and frivolous realism. She instilled in it a new sensibility and brought into its fold strands of thought and imagination hitherto unexplored. A prolific writer, she has so far written twelve novels and novellas, four collections of short stories and done a significant amount of translation of Urdu classics into English. Most of her own books have been translated into English and other languages. In particular, she has translated her novel *Aag Ka Darya* into English as *River of Fire*. Likewise her two other novels, viz., *Aakhiri Shab Ke Hamsafar* and *Mere Bhi Sanamkhane* have been translated by her into English as *Fireflies in the Mist* and *My Temples, Too*, respectively. The main representation of her fictional output has been put together in a collection of three important works – "The Sound of Falling Leaves", *Sita Betrayed* and *the Housing Society* – which have been collected in the title *A Season of Betrayals*. The former is a short story, while the latter two are the novellas. Taken together all these translated works form a fairly representative *oeuvre* of Hyder.

Hyder is outstanding in her recreation of the upper class she knew very well during the period before, during and after partition. Her novels carry a distinct mark of her dynamic personality. By virtue of her keen observation and imaginative presentation, she has brought about a novelty and freshness to her novelistic art. Like Jane Austen she is faithful to describe the only world she best knows and therefore she takes her characters mostly from the aristocratic society and the official world. Moreover, the titles of her works are also tellingly sig-

nificant. When Taqi Ali Mirza commented that the titles of her novels and stories are taken from the lines or parts of lines from poets like Ghalib, Iqbal and Faiz and asked her if she had any specific purpose in choosing such titles, Hyder replied : "I choose such titles quite consciously. Very often these provide the key to the theme of the novel..." (215). Apart from the depth and seriousness of her themes, Hyder's novels are also notable for their art of presentation. To quote Shafey Kidwai, "Hyder opened new doors in Urdu fiction by discerningly applying the stream of consciousness and cinematic techniques of montage and flash back with a view to unsettling both the traditional mode of story telling and time sequence" (219). In short, Hyder combines in herself the historical sense of Sir Walter Scott with the perceptive skill of Virginia Woolf.

A Woman's Life (1978) is the first translated work that contains Hyder's own English versions of two of her earlier Urdu works : it is a rendering of *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya na Kijo* ("Don't make me a girl in my next birth !") and *Tea Gardens of Sylhet* of *Chay Ke Bagaat* ("Tea Gardens"). The title work, *A woman's Life*, though a very short novel comprising of fifty-nine pages only, is a serious work about the condition of women in India. Its orphaned heroine, Rakshe Qamar, sings as a child at village festivals for a pittance, grows up into brief prosperity as a ghazal singer in Lucknow, drifts into prostitution, bears three illegitimate children, is exploited and then abandoned by her protectors as she grows older – until she is finally reduced to embroidering saris in utter poverty. One of her sons dies in infancy; the other son runs off to live as a hanger-on of the Bombay film industry; her daughter also runs away, becomes a prostitute, and is eventually murdered. Rakshe Qamar has a crippled sister, Jamila, who also suffers all her life and finally dies of terminal arthritis. *A Woman's Life* is an episodic novel and uses a number of Urdu and English slang words and expressions. Although the

story of the protagonist is tensely dramatic, yet one never gets the inner conflict of her mind. In this sense the novel loses in psychological realism by virtue of its lack of describing the heroine's experience with sex, music, or understand what either means to her.

Tea Gardens of Sylhet, on the other hand, is a longish short story rather than a novel. In fact it reads more like a memoir. It is written from the point of view of the narrator in the first person 'I' narration. The narrator pays a visit to her cousin Zarina, who is married to a manager of some tea gardens in Sylhet in Bangladesh. During her visit, she meets a few of the local residents and hears a series of stories, told by Zarina, which reveal the strangely interlinked patterns of their lives. One of the people involved in this complex series of relationships is murdered by another in a fit of jealousy. Finally, leaving Sylhet after this visit, the narrator concludes, "I have not been able to understand the world" (*A Woman's Life* 96). The entire story shows that the narrator's cousin Zarina looks at her own life of luxury cynically, with humour and some disdain, and that she is sensitive to the same existential problems as those which perplex the narrator.

If *A Woman's Life* narrativises the betrayal of women characters, then Hyder's next novel *Fireflies in the Mist* (1994) extends this theme of betrayal and links it with the national history of India. Unlike *A Woman's Life*, this novel probes deeper into the psychological realism by analyzing the motifs and ideologies of its fictional characters. At the same time it is also a unique combination of fact and fiction as it narrates the revolutionary movements of Bengal, Quit India resolution of 1942, the demand for Pakistan and the consequent partition of India in 1947. Translated by the author herself, *Fireflies in the Mist* is an English version of Hyder's 1979 Urdu novel *Aakhiri Shab Ke Hamsafar*, which has also appeared in Hindi and Russian translations. It depicts the setting of the 1930s national movements for the liberation

of India and covers the events up to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In that way, Hyder's concern here is with the recent history of the sub-continent and the way new generation, particularly young girls, who are newly emancipated and are full of idealism and revolutionary zeal, grapple with their disillusionment with the movement and its leader and how the partition sounds the death-bell for whatever ideals and values they cherish. The betrayal of their cherished ideals and dreams thus parallel the main historical action of the novel.

Fireflies in the Mist is structured around the lives of three women friends, Deepali Sarkar, Rosie Bannerjee and Jahan Ara, who, as college students, become involved with the communist movement in Bengal. Thomas Palakeel points out that here Hyder is "...also attempting to explore the British rule over the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian cultures, and how it has continued to unsettle the lives of so many people even after partition" (244). Inspired by revolutionary figures like Kalpana Dutt and Preetilata Wadekar, these women are inducted into the freedom struggle by Rehan Ahmad, the enigmatic and contemplative leader of the Bengal revolutionaries. The lives of these four characters detail the process of Independence, Partition, and the further division of the country into Pakistan and Bangladesh. Their relationships with each other, likewise, parallel the consolidation and division of nations during this period. Old solidarities and connections disintegrate over the question of Pakistan and the characters physically disperse by the end of the novel. The significance of the title points to the elegiac account of the brevity and tenuous nature of human relationships. In other words, it indicates the ephemeral quality of human interaction and further foregrounds its powerlessness against the onslaught of history and ideology.

The narrative of the novel is divided into three parts. In the first part, set in pre-Independence India, Hyder describes history as a grand narrative against which the characters

are unable to articulate themselves. The accumulation of facts and events effectively dwarfs the lives of the characters. Much in the Lukacsian tradition of social realism, the characters, at this stage, appear as representative types and Hyder manipulates every detail to achieve the unfolding of this typicality. Deepali, Rosie and Jahan Ara are quite literally and respectively 'widows' into Hindu, Christian and Muslim communities and the author describes their fraught relationship with each other and even with the British. The other characters become the mere pretext for ideological debate. For instance, giving a correct line on the communal question, Mushir says to Rosie : "... the trouble is when a Hindu glories in his traditions, it is Indian culture and Indian philosophy. When a Muslim mentions his own heritage he is a communalist. We must correct these attitudes before it is too late. Or else, comrades, this country will break up after the British leave" (*Fireflies* 59).

The second part introduces the complex network of radical movements through the characters of "Typhoon Uma" and Rehan Ahmad, both of whom are the intellectual leaders of the extreme leftist politics. They attract young Deepali into their 'charmed circle', and Deepali helps them in different ways possible. Rehan Ahmad takes control of the emotional lives of Uma and Deepali. Ironically, however, he symbolizes the eventual ruin and decay of the leftist ideology, although at the beginning he seems to carry the burden of personal and political alienation. Through these characters, Hyder indicates the ironies and betrayals of various political postures represented by the individual political parties. Following their party line, however, Uma Roy and Rehan Ahmad do not co-operate with Gandhiji's Quit India Movement. Deepali's friends Jyoti and Mahmood die for the cause, while Rosie is wounded during an attack on a police station. When the Hindu-Muslim divide becomes contagious in the final days of the freedom struggle, these revolutionaries become disillusioned. The communal riots

force many of them to lead a life of guilt while others compromise and gradually they are seduced by the corruptions of their respective post-independence nationalisms. Rehan Ahmed is the best example of this compromise, because he ends up as the richest jute tycoon in Dacca; he took on the fortune he had once turned down during his idealist days, along with a woman he once loved—Jahan Ara Begum. Uma Roy and Deepali Sarkar are deeply hurt and humiliated by Rehan Ahmad's betrayals and they are also disillusioned by their hopeless movement, too.

In the third and final part of the novel, however, Hyder shifts the narrative from the historical account to the present condition of the characters. Most of the characters are now liberated from the fixture of history into the unrecorded present. They also move from the goal-oriented formulae of the revolutionary movement into the formlessness and contingent chaos of their own individual lives. Following the dispersals occasioned by the partition, each character moves in a different direction – towards domesticity, spirituality or mainstream politics. Likewise, the tight local collectivity is replaced by the ambivalence of diaspora and dissatisfied individualism. Towards the end of the narrative, Deepali is found in an utterly disillusioned state. Old and unimportant as a postcolonial individual living in the diaspora, she is flying back to Trinidad. At this juncture, she suddenly becomes aware of the meaninglessness of it all as she looks out of the window of the aircraft at a sunrise over the China sea: "[F]or millions of years the sun has been rising and going down and rising again and going down again and rising" (*Fireflies* 347).

In this typically Yeatsian ending of the novel, Hyder imparts a note of disillusionment and disaffection that followed in the wake of the partition of the country. She articulates the loss the Indians and Bangladeshis suffered and are still suffering. Here her main concern is

the loss of a world where people lived in harmony despite their social and religious differences. M.Asaduddin observes that in *Fireflies in the Mist*, Hyder evocatively creates "... the syncretic tradition of Bengal where the teachings of the *bhakti* poets and the *sufi* saints combined to give birth to a unique folk culture of its own" (181). M.P.Sinha also points out that the novel's overall discourse follows Doestoevsky's tradition in which "...different ideological positions are set in play without being ultimately placed and judged by a totalising authorial discourse" (36). *Fireflies in the Mist* thus explores the issue of the partition through a panoramic sweep of the period between 1939 to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. This preoccupation with the question of the partition is reflected in her subsequent fiction, viz., *A Season of Betrayals*, *River of Fire* and *My Temples, Too*.

A Season of Betrayals (1999) contains a short story and two novellas which underline the same theme of betrayal as narrative pattern. All three comment upon the upheavals and cataclysmic times of the partition and its aftermath by describing/inscribing the wounds and betrayals of female characters in the context of historical forces.

The opening story in the collection, "The Sound of Falling Leaves" is the first person account of Tanvir Fatima, the daughter of a minor Zamindar from Meerut. She was seduced when she was doing her MSc in Delhi. She retells her story from her drab flat in Lahore. At partition she finds herself across the border in Pakistan, while her married lover remains in India. In this story she falls in and out of bed with men, as does the main character in "Sita Betrayed". Tanvir Fatima tries hard to analyse the reason why she turned "bad", but completely fails to do so. She is a Muslim refugee from India who has been forced to emigrate to Pakistan, but unfortunately she is betrayed by her admirers and lovers. Although she intensely resents her life in Pakistan, yet she tries her best to adjust herself to the alien soil. In her interior

monologue, her subtle feeling is expressed thus : "The change in my life was sudden and drastic; it left me stunned. I just couldn't understand what had happened. One moment there had been my gay and abundant life in undivided India, the next I found myself in a dark and dingy house in the Lahore of '48..." (*Season 12*).

In his 'Introduction' to this collection, C.M.Naim, who has translated both "The Sound of Falling Leaves" and "Sita Betrayed", comments :

[T]he days and months that preceded and followed August 1947... were filled with most horrific acts of physical violence ... It was also a time of other, equally rampant violations that were not any the less scarring for not being patently physical. These were violations of trust; they wounded and maimed the psyches of their victims, leaving the bodies intact. And their time-that season of betrayals - lasted longer than just several months. (vii)

Doubtless, Tanvir Fatima experiences this violation of trust inflicted upon her body even as the same violation of trust is inflicted upon the body politic of India at the time of partition. Her perpetual waiting for a marriage proposal from her suitor Faruq ends up in despair. Likewise her first love for Khushwaqt Singh had also met with failure due to Partition. Now here in Lahore, Faruq has become utterly indifferent to her. She wryly comments : "Faruq would visit us five or six times in a year ... Not once did he mention marriage" (*Season 12*).

Finally, Tanvir Fatima marries Viqar Sahib who is also ironically famous for betraying women. Now that she has already been jilted by her previous men, it hardly makes any difference to her. She expresses her feeling towards Viqar Sahib in her interior monologue in these words : "I listened to his tale half-heartedly, for I couldn't care less. Everything in life seemed so trivial, so colourless, so utterly without meaning or purpose" (*Season 16*).

Her words clearly indicate that she has been cheated not only by the political betrayal of the Indian sub-continent in the form of the horrible fact of division, but that she herself has been cheated by the personal history of male-dominated patriarchy. Partition thus forms the backdrop of this story in which the female protagonist tries to assert her own individuality through socially unacceptable relationships. She is fully conscious of her rebellion, but after the prime of her youth, like a tree shedding its leaves, she compromises completely. The energy for rebellion in her seems to exist only when she is young. The sound of the falling leaves, however, reminds the woman of her mechanical, energy-less existence. The story is a masterpiece in its quiet portrayal of a strong woman character who is victimized by the historical and patriarchal forces.

Just like Tanvir Fatima, Sita Mirchandani, the chief protagonist of "Sita Betrayed", is a Hindu refugee from Sindh (Pakistan), now living in Delhi. She is also victimized by a number of men and feeling the same sense of trial and betrayal as Tanvir did. "Sita Betrayed" is a novella that dates from the early sixties and translated by C.M.Naim from Hyder's Urdu 'Sita Haran'. The protagonist Sita ostensibly resembles to mythical Sita in that she is extremely beautiful, but here the obvious resemblance ends. A Sindhi, she and her prosperous family end up not much better than paupers in Karol Bagh in Delhi. But she is pulled out of this squalor by a scholarship in the USA where she falls for a UP Muslim, whose mother-tongue is Awadhi and who can quote Tulsidas by the mile, but whose family is now in Sindh—Sita's original home. Like Tanvir, Sita also falls in and out of bed with men, but like Tanvir, she is not a rebellious character, because there remains in her a desire for convention. Sita comes to Paris with a dream of getting married, even though it should have occurred to her that sleeping with a succession of men would finally end her relationship with Irfan, the UP Muslim she toured

Sindh with. The tragedy of belonging and not belonging is thus expressed well in the story of Sita Mirchandani. For example, travelling through her home province, she lectures to her would-be lover Irfan on its history. She is the one who was born and brought up there, and now a UP Muslim who does not know a word of Sindhi is showing her Sindh and she is the alien. Like Tanvir, she is equally shocked by the upheaval of history which has displaced and uprooted her life. The role of men in bringing chaos and disorder to her life is also as much responsible. She, therefore, remarks that "... these bohemians – intellectuals – playing musical chairs with music – so untrustworthy and also so untrusting..." (*Season 93*).

The narrative flow of "Sita Betrayed" moves fast and evokes the sense of history by giving one a 'feel' of different time and place. In order to create such a context, Hyder makes Sita move from city to city in search of love and security, but ultimately she achieves neither. The narrative flow is further interspersed with the textual fragments from the ancient dramatist Vishakhadatta's play *MudraRakshasha*; from Malik Muhammad Jaisi's medieval Sufi poem *Padmavat*; and Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*. These textual references play a unique structural role in the action of the story. For example, Vishakhadatta's play focusses on the fate of Rakshasa who was the exiled chief minister of the deposed Nandas. As he was too loyal and much-trusting by nature, he was destroyed by Kautilya's power-politics.

Sita is likewise too loyal and trusting, but ironically she is betrayed by the 'sexual politics' of men. Jaisi's love-poem tells the story of love between king Ratan Sen and Padmini. For the sake of Padmini, Ratan Sen betrays his wife, but the poem pays little attention to the grief of Ratan's wife. In Sita's case, too, although apparently there is some parallelism in the narrative structure, still the author has underlined a deep irony by contrasting them. For example, Hyder's Sita has nothing much in common with Tulsi's Sita except her beauty. There is therefore a

touch of irony in the inter-textual reference of *Ramacharitmanas*. In the case of both Sitas, however, there is one common factor which points to the fact that the 'agency' of their lives lies in the hands of men.

Repeated betrayals at the hands of her lovers thus trigger off a pathetic note in the narrative of 'Sita Betrayed'. Near the end of the story, Sita recollects some bits of ghazal –

"All my life long / I've been preyed upon ...

The chain of day and night / creator of all events..." (Season 172)

Such bits of poetry and snatches of forgotten songs and ghazals occur in almost all of Hyder's fiction. Their function in the plot-structure is to evoke specific time and event placed in history – whether personal or national. At the same time they serve the purpose of creating nostalgic memories of childhood. By placing it in a historical context, the segments of such poetry make the scene setting real and vivid.

Like "Sita Betrayed", the narrative structure of the final novella "The Housing Society" is also made up of different segments of a collage and underlines the narrative pattern of history as betrayal. The 'housing society' is the PECHS in Karachi, once the most upmarket address in the city. This is the story of three families, and in particular two girls—Surayya and Salma. One was abducted at the age of thirteen and rescued with the help of the local magistrate, while the other was the daughter of that magistrate. This is the most haunting of the three works, beginning in a rural British raj world and ending after partition in the fast-lane life of Karachi in the days before prohibition and Islamization. The magistrate's daughter, Salma, yearns for conventional happiness, only forced by circumstances to take up a job as a hostess for the managing director of a big company. "The Housing Society" contains within it the scope of a novel. This novella depicts the revolution in the economic and social status brought about

by the partition and subsequent migration. Sukrita Paul Kumar rightly maintains that "[P]artition ... provided the socio-cultural reason for modernism to emerge..." in the Urdu fiction and short story. (171).

Hyder skilfully presents the three families at one point of time in India before the partition. In the denouement of the novella again, the three chief protagonists meet at the house-warming party. Surayya makes compromise with Jamshed, a successful business tycoon, whereas the story of Salma and her brother Salman takes a downward trajectory. Interconnecting this main strand of action, the author introduces the pathetic tale of Manzur Nisa which heightens the tragic effect of the story.

Salman is a communist, although he comes from a well-to-do family. Giving up his parents' comforts and luxuries, he starts leading a life of simplicity. He was as much disgusted by the feudal system of Zamindari before the partition as he is now by the rise of new capitalism. For example, his beloved (past) Surayya is enlightened by Salman in these words : "The mansions of the past have burned down, but the mansions of the new bourgeoisie will soon rise on their debris in both countries. Yesterday's feudal lords give way to today's capitalists. Our real struggle begins now" (*Season* 210).

Towards the end of the tale, however, Salman meets with his tragic fate in the jail of Karachi, while Surayya succumbs to the need of her 'survival'. Salma, on the other hand, is shown as the loser of the two. "The Housing Society" thus underscores the pattern of history's betrayal. Here betrayal takes the three forms – personal, historical and economic. Salma and Surayya become victims of their personal betrayals, just as they are also victimised by the historical betrayal in the form of partition. On the other hand, Jamshed is as much a victim of capitalism as is Salman. Though Jamshed becomes super-rich, he loses his primary innocence,

however. To quote Corinna Byer, like Rajinder Singh Bedi's *I Take This Woman*, "... the necessity of recovering one's primary or youthful self is also present in 'The Housing Society', ... wherein Surayya and Jamshed consciously attempt to escape from their former, primary selves and become new people" (*AUS* 174). Like Jamshed, the new Surayya is determined to be entirely self-sufficient and to leave her past totally behind her. Ironically, however, their forgotten past and lost home-land catch up with them at the epiphanic moment during the house-warming party.

Hyder's next work *River of Fire* (1998) is the most ambitious novel both from thematic as well as stylistic point of view. Critics compare it with Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. *River of Fire* is an English version of Hyder's Urdu novel *Aag Ka Darya* published in 1959. Hyder herself has translated, in fact, transcreated this novel. This undertakes to retell the vast history of India covering at least two thousand and five hundred years. It is quite natural, therefore, that it gives a foretaste of Indian art, culture, religion and history. According to Masood-ul Hasan, "[S]eventeen early chapters – one sixth part of the whole novel – are rather dense with Buddhist echoes and allusions" (175). At the same time the novel also portrays the traumatic upheaval of the partition of India and its aftermath.

Commenting on Hyder as a great novelist of Indian culture and history, M. Asaduddin observes that "[H]er greatness over fellow writers in Urdu and other Indian literatures as well lies in the fact that besides her formidable scholarship, she has totally absorbed and internalized the history of the four great religions of the world, viz., Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam and the cultural ethos emanating from them. In Hyder there has always been so much of history involved" (162). In her selection of events and epochs from Indian history, however, Hyder chooses mainly those that best illustrate the plurality, absorptiveness and assimilative

strength of Indian culture. For instance, the most evocative sections of the novel are those that depict Kapilvastu and Patliputra in ruins, the Sharqui Sultanate of Jaunpur and the kingdom of Awadh (Lucknow) under Asaf-ud-Daula and Wajid Ali Shah. Hyder also portrays India's cultural exchange with the British even if the colonialist narrative runs as an undercurrent therein. In underlining the plural ambience of Indian culture and its legacy and locating the destiny of the main characters in its composite history, Hyder builds up a counter-narrative to certain kinds of the construction of the Indian nation as exclusively Hindu and the Muslim community as its Other. As Asaduddin rightly points out that in the complex and multi-layered narrative of the novel "... the process of constructing the Indian nation goes on simultaneously with the process of constructing the Muslim community" (303). In other words, although Hyder may not have been successful in accommodating the quotidian world of the common Muslim, yet her narrative quest is animated by a secular vision of history and society which she has been able to assimilate into a work of art.

The action of *River of Fire* is depicted through the experiences of the four chief protagonists – Gautam Nilambar, Hari Shankar, Kamal and Champa Ahmad. The same characters live through different periods of history in an archetypal manner. For the convenience of the narrative structure, the novelist has divided different periods of history in a chronological order – the early Buddhist era, the medieval India, the early nineteenth century of the British India and the modern times till 1950s. Kumkum Sangari, who has thoroughly examined the "configural mode" of *River of Fire*, aptly notes that "...the four moments..." of the Indian history in the narrative "... remain linked to each other through succession, sedimentation and retrieval and..." show "... some of the literary and historical coordinates of Hyder's chosen form" (22). Apart from distributing her temporal narrative space in this way, Hyder also takes her characters

to various places like Shravasti, Jaunpur, Calcutta, Delhi, Karachi, Lucknow and London. In short, the geographical landscape in the novel is as vast as its time scale.

As a matter of fact, Hyder shows Time as the determining force of all actions. She uses it both as a narrative device and as a character. M. Asaduddin remarks that in Hyder "[T]ime is linear as well as spiral and it has one face of hope and another of loss" (162-63). Time is described both a destroyer as well as preserver. For instance, Gautam's death is described in the following words : "[T]ime was pushing the torrent forward and there was a seemingly infinite expanse of water all around. Holding fast to the bit of stone, he felt secure for an instant, [...] but he could not hold on to the rock, [...] the angry waves of the Saryu passed over Gautam Nilambar" (*River* 53).

Later on in the narrative, Time assumes another dimension as a character when one finds Champa Ahmad in the Cambridge in mid-50's. Here it utters its narrative voice and reveals its true nature to Champa : "Recognise me, I'll keep walking along with you, you can't run away from me. People will leave you, I won't. [...] I solve all problems. All decisions are made, all intentions become actions because of me, and through me" (*River* 352-53).

On the other hand, the river also stands as a metaphor for time – both the past and the present. Hyder likens the stream of a character's thought to the flow of the river as well as the time. Thought, River, Time – these three intermingle freely with each other. In fact, the river becomes a central symbol in the novel, symbolized in almost every chapter – now Saryu, then Gomti, then Rapti and Rispana, later Thames and so on. Like the flow of the river, the flow of time also travels along with the characters. For instance, the main characters like Kamal and Talat remember their past repeatedly : "... 'We carry all of our past with us wherever we go', said Kamal" (*River* 304). Gautam and Hari also slip into the remembrance of the things past, but

they observe this tendency more in their friends : "... 'they were addicted to their past because it was safe and intact, more so for Kamal and Talat because there was no fear of partition in it' " (*River* 305). The narrative of history is thus juxtaposed with the fictional narrative of these characters. According to Liyanage, this novel, in different ways, "... works against, *parallel to* and as a *supplement to* history" (*AUS* 25). It is no surprise, therefore, that much of Hyder's narrative reads like a mixture of biography, auto-biography and even segments of journalism. It is based on the fact that Hyder herself experienced most of the things she describes – her migration to Pakistan soon after the partition; from there her departure for London; and back again to Bombay. All these facts of her own personal history run parallel to the events and action of *River of Fire*. The shocking memory of her own past finds expression in the memories of the characters who are equally embarrassed by what happened to their country. For example, this feeling is vividly evoked in the scene of Dehra Doon in 1942 when Kamal and Hari used to change the name-plates of the houses in mischief. At that time they would often philosophize over names and ownership of the houses. Later in 1956, when Kamal visits India from Pakistan, he goes to the same bridge, but as an example of history's bitter irony, he sees that the name-plates have really been changed. The painful tension between the personal and the historical is treated in such a way that it produces a strong critique of the received notion of history.

This scene gives a vivid recollection of the conversation which Hari and Kamal have had at the bridge. Through their conversation, Hyder bemoans the destruction of the Ganga-Jamni Indo-Muslim culture that was once prevalent in the country. It was a lived reality at the time of Hussain Shah. After the partition, however, it no longer exists and becomes only a nostalgic moment for her fictional characters. At this juncture Hyder introduces the symbol of Hussain Shah's broken *Tanpura* which stands for the division of India. Hyder believes that

partition happened due to violations of trust from both sides. And both the sides suffered because of this division. She asks a very pertinent question : who is there to blame except another victim ? Thomas Palakeel also comments that "... in each segment of the novel the prevalent mood is often that of nostalgia for the previous age" (*AUS* 295). Hyder's fictional character Kamaluddin also laments this fact : "I have seen the passing of a great and liberal civilization in my own lifetime, here in India" (*River* 89).

The loss of syncretic culture caused by the partition is thus critiqued by Hyder in one scene after scene. In yet another scene, for example, Hyder shows how left and liberal south Asian students make a new elective community which defies partition. They celebrate the secular nationalism which was envisioned by the leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Abul Kalam Azad. In their attempt of consolidating the true spirit of India, the Hindu, Muslim and Christian students of Tattarwalla School in Lucknow sing bhajans and qawwalis. The Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian students of Isabella Thoburn College come from different parts of India and the world. Here they learn Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi, Persian; girls from different religions celebrate every festival and exchange religious customs as much as clothes. In Hyder's works, therefore, civilization becomes a category extending beyond national, religious, and state boundaries; it includes not just literature, music, philosophy, myth or art but also affective structures of human dimensions. In short, Hyder's *River of Fire* seems to bear out Irfan Habib's contention that the 'idea' of India as a cultural unity was not a modern secular invention but a much older one, rooted in ancient India itself. Nayantara Sahgal also believes that the conception of India as a single, unified nation provides for the co-existence of pluralities. In her book *From Fear Set Free*, she has admitted that "... one language, one

culture, or one religion..." can never "... be the formula for India, unless a great deal of value was leavened and lost in the process and the very foundation of India destroyed" (203).

In the final segment of the novel, Hyder brings to completion the theme of betrayal through depicting the predicament of her fictional characters. For example, when after the partition Kamal leaves for Pakistan, Gautam and Hari Shankar feel that he has betrayed their trust. Hari, in particular, feels extremely sad by this and says : " 'Kamal has deserted us. Betrayed his friends, gone away for good and let us down'..." " 'We have all betrayed one another', Gautam replied quietly, 'can these western visitors to Shravasti understand the pain in our souls? In India's, in Kamal's, in mine?' " (*River* 425-26). In this way, Hyder sensitively engages herself with the problems of the divided countries, ruptured history and displaced identities in *River of Fire*.

One of the saddest aspects of the partition of India in 1947 is the way in which the contributions made by the Muslims of undivided India to the freedom movement has been almost totally marginalized. With the exception of a few individuals like Abul Kalam Azad, the sacrifices made by other Muslim leaders like Dr. M.A.Ansari, Hakim Ajmal Khan, the Ali brothers and countless others seem to have been written off. It is forgotten that Muslims fought shoulder to shoulder, with their Hindu brothers, for a hundred years, ever since the great uprising of 1857, to liberate the country from alien rule. This is the price they have had to pay for the creation of a separate state for which, it is now widely recognized, the British rulers were primarily *responsible*. Hyder's next novel, *My Temples, Too* (2004) brings out this tragic development poignantly, but very adroitly. To quote Mushirul Hasan, this novel "... portrays how the sparks of partition blew up the pathways of a composite culture, leaving a yawning gap of burning dust" (32).

Mere Bhi Sanamkhane, the Urdu original of *My Temples, Too*, was written in 1947, but its English translation came out almost six decades later in 2004. Like *River of Fire*, *My Temples, Too* is rooted in a specific moment of Indian history when freedom came with partition. In this novel the seeds of Hyder's basic concerns and novelistic assumptions already lay buried, although Hyder was hardly out of her teens when she wrote it. The most important of these assumptions is that she takes the whole of India's past as her heritage and she regards the Indo-Muslim encounter as one of the most significant civilizational encounters in human history, because it has touched every sphere of Indian life. Hyder depicts in this novel that every Indian is affected and hurt by the turmoil of partition. Above all, *My Temples, Too* is about a feudal order that finds itself thrust into a brash new age.

The novel opens with a prologue that creates a context for the subsequent narrative : "... Mahatma Gandhi says we are going to be free and Jinnah Sahib says the Muslims must have Pakistan (*Temples* vi). "And, Sahib, I want to get back to Lahore. I've seen enough of battle-fronts, and same people said other day ... that there will be a big war in India itself..." (*Temples* vi). From the world war II to the harmonious cultural context of Lucknow to the partitioning of India, *My Temples, Too* moves from the war outside to a war inside the nation, between the two major communities. In between, the narrative provides one with a glimpse of the leisurely life being savoured by a bunch of young people – Rakshanda, Salim, Peechu, Kiran and others – all of them avowed idealists floating in the quiet rhythms of upper class Lucknow ethos, attending parties and discussing politics and ideologies indulgently.

To Rakshanda, the society is in fact a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces will soon scatter. She is not ready, however, to succumb to any pressure from Peechu to compromise her principles and change the policy of her paper *The New Era*. There is a gradual transformation in the

reading public though, which, as Peechu tells her, has discarded its old principles. Rakhsanda's resistance to accepting the idea of a Hindu-Muslim divide as projected by Jinnah's Two-Nation Theory and the extreme right stance of the Hindu Mahasabha party shows her commitment to a united, undivided and secular India. M. Asaduddin notes that "... as the narrative progresses, the glory gradually departs from the world and we are overwhelmed by a deep sense of pathos at the loss of all that was valuable in our composite culture by the onslaught of communalism let loose..." (*Indian Women Novelists* 165).

The narrative of *My Temples, Too* thus deals with a period seeped in political tensions on the one hand and the story of the transformation of life and style of Lucknow on the other hand. Political developments suddenly begin to show their impact on the people of the syncretically rich city. "Lucknow ... was teeming with a new kind of human beings called "refugees" (*Temples* 127). Unlike the original residents of the city they look lost and bitter and "infinitely unhappy, having been driven from their homes in the North-West by the Muslims" (*Temples* 127). All of a sudden, the character of the city changes as Hyder captures the moments of transformation in vivid terms. What makes this experience significant is the presence of the simultaneously interrogating voice of the narrator who raises questions about the partition and the ensuing senseless violence. For instance, Kiran writes in *New Era* :

Apart from the new emotional adjustments, we will have to decide how we are going to divide our culture. For instance, we must decide what is Hindu music and what is Muslim music, what is Hindu dance ... (*Temples* 137-38).

As has been pointed out by Hyder, there was never a communal problem, particularly in rural India. Syed Fazle Rab also comments that in *My Temples, Too*, Hyder describes "... the absence of hatred among the religious communities towards one another" in the pre-partition

period... "the partition of the country, however, completely reversed the relationship between the two communities" (71). The so-called 'political awakening' causes a shake up of the composite living that had been evolved over centuries of living together. The dreams of Rakhsanda's *The New Era* are shattered as history betrays them all and gradually the hopes and aspirations of all those idealists burn, along with their lives, in the fire of communal passion. Hyder portrays the brutality of partition thus :

It was the Delhi of Hindu refugee camps at Kurukshetra and Muslim camps at the old fort and there was more rain, but this year when the rain fell, it did not fall on the picknickers at Qutub Shahi and in Qudsia Bagh. This year, the romantic rains were mingled with human blood which flowed in torrents on the earth below. [...] Corpses lay about in the streets or rotted in the sun or became decomposed and swollen in the rain. The bayonets of Gurkha soldiers flashed everywhere as they patrolled the corpse-ridden streets. [...] (*Temples* 156)

For Hyder the partition of India is painful not only because of the massive dislocation of people and the terrible tragedy it entailed, but also because it signalled a rupture in the continuity of the centuries-old shared experience of living together, of ingathering and community-making. Hyder is anguished at the disappearance of all that was valuable and enduring in India's composite culture. In relation to Hyder's *My Temples, Too*, Mahmood Farooqui aptly comments :

[...] Hyder begins her literary career at a time and place when the syncretic culture she would celebrate has already been heartbreakingly demolished by partition and the attendant massacres. While she constructs the contours of that shared space between Hindus and Muslims during the two hundred years of Nawabi rule in Awadh, and even celebrates it, it is already and

always prefigured by the destruction it is going to face hereafter. The dialectic is dynamic and inescapable in her works. She starts by celebrating something that she knows is doomed. [...] (*Biblio* 6)

Mahmood Farooqui thus evaluates Hyder's fiction in terms of nostalgia and observes that nostalgia for the lost world in fact resounds in all her works. In other words, Hyder's narrative quest and her vision are historical and politics is the terrain on which this quest rests. Finally, with the advent of partition, the merry group of Lucknow friends breaks up. Diamond Hussain's family moves to the security that Lahore offers. Rakshanda's brother Peechu is killed on duty in Delhi while protecting a train of Muslims leaving for Pakistan. Kiran, a Kashmiri Pandit, who becomes the public relations officer of the Indian Army, is killed in Kashmir. With Zamindari going, Polu makes do with the new shrunk landholdings and throws himself into the brave new world of farming and tractors. And Rakhsanda, the once vivacious princess and editor, roams around disconsolately. The overall ambience of the novel, though clinging on to the glorious past, still gives way to a new change in the cultural, political, social and economic moment in the history of the sub-continent.

My Temples, Too is thus a probing insight into an era of turbulence when the country was in the grip of communal polarization. It is a docu-fiction giving a testimony to a cracking world, a secure world ensconced in the stability of everyday living suddenly faced with the turmoil of partition. Above all, it is a gentle reminder of the times when communal harmony in the pre-partition India was a lived reality and not just a political cant.

Again and again, in all her works, Hyder returns to this question of the syncretic high culture that is emblematic of Indian culture *per se* and how the partition brought about the rupture and discontinuity in this culture. As Jasbir Jain has rightly pointed out, in *River of Fire*,

"[B]oth the continuities and the discontinuities of history are projected undermining the single vision or specificity of history" (164). That is, in Hyder, one finds that the depiction of Indian culture is more inclusive rather than exclusive and therefore she tends to celebrate the shared aspects of Indian history, culture and religion. Like Jain, Shama Fatehally also maintains that "[I]n the figures of its characters [*River of Fire*] traces with acuteness the several cultural strands which make up our composite identity..." (36). To that extent, Hyder's writings, therefore, centre on a declining syncretic culture with a deep melancholic sense of dislocation. In short, in Hyder, there is the concern for this lost cultural ambience of India with a ceaseless search for the limits and potentialities of that inextricably linked world of Hindus and Muslims and its coming apart.

In summing up the discussion of Hyder's fictional writings, one may venture to say that she chooses to write consistently about the common trends in Hindu and Muslim cultures which took shape in undivided India through the centuries. Her stories, whether novels or short fiction, therefore, continuously go back to the blessed days of Hindu-Muslim amity, when culture was not balkanised and the heart of the sub-continent was in its right place without being filled by the insanity and brutality of partition. Her *River of Fire*, *My Temples, Too*, *Fireflies in the Mist*, and her short stories like "Sita Betrayed", thus repeatedly remind one of the traditions of culture and thought that unite the people of Indian sub-continent.

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