

From *Aag ka Darya* to the *River of Fire*

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Abstract:

Aag ka Darya (1959) is a novel by Qurratulain Hyder which she herself translated/transcreated into English as The River of Fire (1998). This paper analyses the different strategies used by the author in the “transcreation” of this ‘new text’. It is pertinent here to examine the ways in which the author retains the cultural expressions, interprets those for his audience of the target language. Hyder acts as a cultural ambassador in her translation which gives us the feel of Aag ka Darya itself but she also keeps in mind the sensibilities of the target language audience. This paper traces the act of translation as a dynamic process of the Text as a whole which captures the aesthetic, linguistic, and cultural sensibilities of its changing audience while keeping in it the message of holistic continuity of Indian civilization.

Key words: Self-translation, Transcreation, Target Language, Culture, Civilization

“Main dewtaon ke mutaliq zyada nahin janta, lekin main samajta hoon ki darya
Ek taqatwar aur mitiala devta hain; Tund mizaj, gussela.”

(*Aag ka Darya* 11)

[Translated by Qurratulain Hyder]

(I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river is a strong brown God-
sullen, untamed and intractable.)

T.S. Eliot – *The Dry Salvages*

This is how Qurratulain Hyder translates one of the poems of T.S. Eliot from his *Four Quartets* into Urdu and she used her translated version as an epigraph to *Aag ka Darya*. It is interesting to see a self-translation of Hyder's *Aag ka Darya* as *River of Fire*. Is it just to widen the readership of the text that she transcreated it or is there something more than that? Is the "translation" *River of Fire* totally a "new writing" that has nothing to do with *Aag ka Darya*? (Mukherjee 76) This paper would try to explore various variations that might have come there in the *River of Fire* either as the modification or as the deterioration of the original. When we have self-translators like Samuel Becket and Qurratulain Hyder, it becomes a bit problematic to decide which one is "original". Becket and Hyder have themselves rendered *River of Fire* and *Waiting for Godot* into English from their French and Urdu versions respectively. *Aag ka Darya* was published in 1959 and *River of Fire* in 1998. How far is Qurratulain Hyder able in meeting the requirements of her readers? Is her translation just a linguistic shift from Urdu to English? In addition, is there something missing in any of these two texts? The paper would try to explore the politics behind these texts. She has written *River of Fire* in India and the *Aag ka Darya* in Pakistan. This makes it pertinent to know the notion of nation in Qurratulain Hyder.

Sujit Mukherjee's idea of translation as a *discovery* fully fits with *River of Fire*. He points out "a literary text uses words the total effect of which is greater than the sum of what the words may individually add up to. Discovery of this totality is the real job of the literature to offer, and translation is one of these modes of discovery" (140). *River of Fire* has significant importance in understanding the irreducible totality of both these two texts.

O voyagers, O Seamen,
You who come to port, and whose bodies
Will suffer the trial and judgment of the sea,
Or whatever event, this is your real destination.
So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna
On the field of battle.

Not fare well,

But fare forward, voyagers.

T.S. Eliot- The Dry Salvages. (Four Quartets).

This is how T.S. Eliot ends the third stanza of a poem from his 'Four Quartets'. Qurratulain Hyder uses the Urdu rendering of the first three stanzas of same poem (The Dry Salvages) as an epigraph to her 1959 novel *Aag ka Darya* but she has not retained it in *River of Fire* which she 'transcreated' some four decades latter in 1998. Kumkum Sangari once asked her, why not she had retained the epigraph in the River of Fire. To this Hyder has replied with an answer as if she had dropped it unintentionally. She says 'chhut gaya hoga'. How can she leave it without her proper intention when she claims her translation to be the 'transcreation'? Prof. Assauddin points out that "this epigraph foregrounds the particular historical vision projected by the work" (164). However, the transcreation, *River of Fire* also projects the historical vision as projected by *Aag ka Darya* so it too deserves the epigraph. It might have been difficult for her to decide which version she should use as the epigraph to *River of Fire* because she had two options of either using the Eliot's original version or the English rendering of her 'translated' version. One of the reasons for not using the epigraph could be that *Aag ka Darya* is a very bulky book of some six hundred and fifty pages while *River of Fire* is just a novel of four hundred and twenty pages. Moreover, we have proper content names to all the 73 chapters of the *River of Fire* while the *Aag ka Darya* bears simple numbering of 101 chapters having no content name. The content name somehow holds the attention of the reader, which we do not have in the *River of Fire*. Chapters like Farewell to Camelot, and The Forest of Arden are titled to meet the requirements of English sensibility. Forest of Arden is the chapter number 43 in *River of Fire*, which is the untitled chapter number 52 in *Aag ka Darya*. There is no mention of rehearsing of the play *As You Like IT* in *Aag ka Darya* but we do not have it in *River of Fire*. Not using

the epigraph has less to do with the possibly little readership of Eliot at that time and it could not be this fear, which might have forced Hyder not to retain his poem as an epigraph to the *River of Fire*. She produces almost the same effect with the structural modification, which she does in the *River of Fire*. The purpose of this paper is to show how the transcreation, *River of Fire*, and *Aag ka Darya* are both contributing to each other. The self-translation or transcreation is more than the *modification* or the deterioration of the original text. Prof. Asaduddin points out that we should take both of them as a composite text. It is not just the Urdu version which should be considered as the original version, the English version becomes a new “original” for it totally differs from the earlier one (168). Kumkum Sangari argues that “the two novels have now to be read against each other and grasped together as part of a single configuration” but it is possible for an Urdu-English bilingual only (197). Prof. Asaduddin points that just as the French translations of Kundara’s works, the English translation of *Aag ka Darya* has assumed the status of the original” (168) but it does not mean that the that the original loses its originality with the new transcreation. Though *River of Fire* is self-translation, it still needs *Aag ka Darya* for filling the gaps in the transcreation. One of the gaps as mentioned is the epigraph itself. The epigraph is a significant structural device used by the author in *Aag ka Darya*. Hyder wanted her readers of *Aag ka Darya* to have a cyclic view of life, which is implicit in the epigraph itself.

In the middle of third stanza of the Eliot’s poem the parenthetical line: (And the time of death is every moment) sounds similar to the philosophy of Heraclitus that “you cannot step twice into the same river”, for other waters are continually flowing in (qtd. in Ahmad 59). Because human life is a continuous phenomena so every moment is the continuity of life and not the continuity of death. We see this continuity in the characters of Qurratulain Hyder. It need not to be confused with the concept of reincarnation as per Hindu mythology,

which upholds the idea that a person gets a next life in accordance with the good or bad deeds he does in the present life.¹ Here we see the recurrence of different characters not as per deeds of their previous life as different people who participate in the continuity of life. Every time we see Gautam as an educated upper man. The employment of characters with a slight tinkering with names is very interesting to the structure of *Aag ka Darya* and the *River of Fire*. Both the novels are divided into four sections namely the Buddhist Period, the Time of Kabir, the Period of British Colonial Rule, and the Period of Freedom Struggle and the characters in these sections seem to be shifting their identities. For example Champak (section 1) becomes Champavati (section 2), Champa Jain (section 3), and Champa Ahmad (section 4). Similarly, we have Gautams like Gautam Nilambar in the first section, and Gautam Nilamber Dutt in the second section. We have one more Gautam Nilamber in the fourth section of the story. All these characters are different but they need to be understood as a whole to have a holistic understanding of the Indian civilization. Hyder's covering of some 2500 years of history is a significant contribution to our historiography. Asim Siddiqui highlights the transcending ability of Hyder by pointing out "Tehmina's admonishing of Talat for bringing in mention of Humpty Dumpty while talking out the great Urdu poet Faiz is possibly an example of explaining the sophistication and refinement characterizes the Urdu poetry (Siddiqui 239). Therefore, Hyder's version of history is different from the colonial version and she seems upholding her own cultural superiority.

Hyder does not offer the western notions of nation. She wants to have a holistic understanding of it as a 'river', which is changing as it is flowing but it still, remains connected. "The manifestations of syncretism" or "the Ganga-Jamuni culture" as we see Champak becoming Champavati, the Brahmin girl, then Champa Jain the Courtesan in Oudh, and Champa Ahmad

¹ According to this myth of reincarnation, one gets the next rebirth in the shape of some animal if he is doing some bad deeds.

(qtd. in Jalil 178). Hyder takes the Sufi aspect of Islam which has a more assimilating tendency. We have the same assimilating power in the Bakti tradition. This syncretism was holding us together. British exploited this dimension by employing the 'divide and rule policy', which finally caused partition of 1947. Qurratulain Hyder wants to focus our attention towards this problem, which is still lurking in both India and Pakistan. Qurratulain Hyder highlights in the last section of the novel the ill-treatment of people of East Pakistan (the present Bangladesh) at the hands of the officers of West Pakistan (the present Pakistan) and there was the sense hatred in West Pakistan. *Aag ka Darya* was completed in 1958 and it was published in 1959. It was just the eleventh years of Pakistan as a separate country at that time. After some more eleven years in 1970, we see the partition of Bengal. It is indeed a prophetic vision of the novelist that projected the consequences of the hatred between the people of East and West Pakistan. The ticket driver tells Kamal in the final section of the novel that he has "been traveling on tha[t] line since 1947" but he has never like seen an officer like him from West Pakistan who spoke to him gently (Hyder 385).

Hyder's concern is a serious one, which needs a proper attention before it is too late. There is a need to look into the rise of discreet identities in the context of modern day democratized notions of nation. We can trace the rise of ethnic confrontation in an alarming in so-called independent and free postcolonial nations. According to an estimate:

Nearly two-thirds of all the world's armed conflicts included an ethnic component. In fact, ethnic conflicts are four times more likely than interstate wars...; some 15 million people have died worldwide as a result of ethnic violence since 1945 (including war-related starvation and disease). (Wallenstein 340)

In such a situation it is important for a country like India to recognize the importance of different minorities and ethnic identities to have a holistic notion of India as it is the

amalgamation of the these discreet identities which makes India. We as India are not just, what we are now, we need to have a diachronic understanding of our civilization, which is a hybridization of various civilizations. Edward Said rightly points out the importance of this diachronic aspect saying, “Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in the interpretations of the present” (Said 1). India as a nation is not just only a particular culture of a particular community. Qurratulain Hyder points out:

There was yet another aspect of the new nationalistic moment that was making its presence felt-- some people had openly talking of Ancient Hindu Culture and the Glory-that-was-Islam. How was Indian culture to be defined? Was it ruse for Hindus to enslave the Muslims? Could real Indians only be Hindus? Were Muslims unholy intruders who should be treated as such?

(Hyder 202-203)

To conclude, it may be said that just as it is Qurratulain Hyder’s “individual talent”² that she used her Urdu rendering of Eliot’s poem (symbolic of western tradition) in *Aag ka Darya*, the *River of Fire* could be considered the gift back from the “individual talent”- Hyder to the western “tradition”. The paper does not dismiss the individuality in either of these two texts. It has rather tried to explore that apart from the linguistic and tempo-spatial differences, in which Hyder has produced these texts, both of them have a role to provide holistic overview of India as the assimilation of different civilization influences. To put it differently *River of Fire* is not just an attempt to ease those English speakers, who do not know Urdu, its condensation and simple prose is helpful to those bilinguals also who could read *Aag ka Darya*.

² Eliot’s essay “Tradition and Individual Talent” deals with the idea that individual talent of a writer comes out only by following the tradition.

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