

'Becoming' and 'Belonging': The Ambivalent Space of Hybrid Identity in Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*



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Abstract: This research paper explores the role of ambivalent space of hybrid identity and the 'longing' and 'belonging' in the lives of major characters of *River of Fire* by Qurratulain Hyder to attain a positive vision towards life. In addition, the research tends to perceive the ways by which major characters in the different eras get insight to bridge the 'longing' and 'belonging' by standing in a liminal place. Thus, the study explores the role of subjective liminality in a person's life that induces a new perceptive sociocultural vision in the lives of Hyder's characters. This research uses postcolonial theory as a lens to examine the circumstances that compel the characters towards slippage without regarding their social status and hierarchy. Furthermore, according to Homi k. Bhabha, the term 'belonging' represents the cultural history of a nation that always remains in flux because of the 'longing' or desires of its individuals of sharing their objectives with other nations in new places to make harmony with new people and circumstances. *River of Fire* tends to combine a synchronic and diachronic approach to show that cultural hybridity always orientates the social, economic, and cultural tenets of the characters by idiosyncratic ambivalence.

Key Words: Postcolonialism, Hybridity, Ambivalence, Homi k. Bhabha

Introduction

"The interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, 2004, p.4).

Homi K. Bhabha, a pioneer of postcolonial critics, discusses hybrid identity in *The Location of Culture* (2004) and claims that identity remains in flux, because of settlements of people in new areas. Moreover, owing to the interconnectedness of people, pure identity cannot be seen anywhere. As a result of the influence of postcolonial theorists and writers, South Asian literature also deals with representation, identity, diaspora, language, class, gender, hybridity, and many other issues. [Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* \(1999\)](#) engages with the question of the amalgamated culture of Hindus and Muslims in India and maybe explored from the point of reference of the postcolonial framework. In addition, it captures several turns of centuries, both with historical linearity as well as with a sense of history that surpasses chronology. According to [Braj B. Kachru](#), (1997) The

English language was used as a vehicle to open up the past, and as an access to the Western views of the colonized people, their histories, cultures, and regions. The past is full of a variety of linguistic, cultural, and religious convergences and types of hybridity ([Hyder, 1999, p.9](#)). Hence, *River of Fire* (1999) may be assumed as one of the classics of modern literature. It covers not only Indian history but also discusses the positive aspects of hybrid identity. For instance, in the second era, Kamaluddin's hybridity can be realized in the context of Indian culture when he meets different people having different cultural values to satisfy his curiosity to analyse different aspects of belief and social traits of different people belonging to different cultures. Consequently, his experiences with different people make him stand in a 'liminal' space and alter his vision of life. He restarts his life under the influence of a new positive vision and rejects all discriminations among people of different races and creeds. He lives a life of

a peasant and marries a Sudras girl in spite of her lower caste.

Postcolonialism explores and expounds upon different types of hybridity like racial, linguistic, literary, religious, and cultural hybridity. A critical evaluation of hybridity can also evaluate how deeply it can affect the rules which are used to assess the forms of migration and settlement in the contemporary epoch. Mostly the term hybridity concerns diaspora, migration, ethnicity, anxiety, lost identity, and disavowal of minor culture by the superior one. It also involves anti-essentialist schemes as all characters are open to cultural change.

This study is an analysis of the colonial practices involving culturally hybrid identities which bridge the 'becoming' an 'belonging' of the characters of *River of Fire* (1999) as a result of being in a liminal or ambivalent space. The study focuses on the fluctuation of desired destinations and ambitions as a result of the emergence of a "third space" (Bhabha, 2004, p.37). While, the third space or threshold is a liminal space. The word liminality originates from the Latin word 'limes' meaning 'a threshold'. In addition, Bhabha discusses cultural hybridity to reveal the role of liminality in society. He states, "theorizations of the threshold or liminal in postcolonial studies have pointed to its performativity as a space of activity, and empirical existence as a site of enunciation" (Bhabha, 2004, p.7). Likewise, such a liminal space of activity can be seen in *River of Fire* (1999) when we sense Gautam Nilambur's anxiety before taking a final decision about his career as an artist, while he was undergoing the educational procedure of becoming a prominent Brahmin officer in a royal court after completion of his degree at Forest University. In addition, the part of liminality can be seen in the renunciation of Harishankar, who was a crown prince of 'Kushal Desh'. However, he adopted the belief of Buddhists during a journey while getting his education, living far from his own country.

Literature Review

Different literary studies highlight the key elements of the narration of *River of Fire* (1999) which exhibits its historiographical and narratological approaches. Nishat Haider perceives it as a diachronic and synchronic novel at the same time, and asserts Hyder's novel is less focused on Hindu-Muslim communal violence and creates a sense of syncretic past through the simultaneity of narratives, which feature varied

characters with parallel experiences that makes them all part of the same 'imagined community of the nation' (Haider, 1999, p.2).

The diversity of narratives of *River of Fire* (1999) opens up the possibility to revisit and question the past to illustrate how the past influences the present based on cultural history. In his journal, "History and Existential Absurdity in Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*," Khurshed Alam remarks, "Hyder has briefly touched upon a variety of cultural and linguistic issues which undermine the idea of the presence of an egalitarian composite Indian culture" (Alam, 2017, p.28). Besides, Pratibha Biswas describes that Magical or marvelous Realism in *River of Fire* tends to observe imaginative romanticism as a normal element while considering the apparent world grounded in the real world. He states, "In magical realism, the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things" (Biswas, 2015, p.497). Apart from this, Hyder practices multiple narratives to exhibit that India is a multinational and multiethnic realm, which allows outsiders to adopt or affect the subcontinent's mixed civilization. That is why it has attracted the attention of peoples belonging to different nations and ethnicities all over the world. R. Sunder Rajan illustrates, "Hyder's *River of Fire* symbolically invokes an Indic civilization, and show subcontinent's connection with an adaptation of several foreigners: travelers, conquerors, merchants, and mendicants who have come and stayed or left over the centuries" (Haider, 1999, p.46).

Claire Chambers (2011) argues, "Hyder is conscious and cautious not just of more traditional implements of lessening but also modernity's binarism. The oxymoronic title, *River of Fire*, may act as a clue to disclose the 'metaphysical conceit' or philosophy of the novel" (p.150). Likewise, the reviewers do not ignore to explore the narration of the *River of Fire* in the context of a gigantic historical period. In the book *Britain Through Muslim Eye*, (2011) Claire chambers raises an issue of the diaspora and says, "Hyder's diasporic position was complicated. Her multiple exiles made her more diasporic than most writers can claim to be, and her experiences of uprooting add poignancy and texture to her work" (p.149)

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonialism gained strength in 1970, and still, it is known as a live theory. Bill Ashcroft says, "The term

post-colonial is used to point out all the cultures affected by imperialism since colonization till today” (Ashcroft et al 2007). Hybridity is an important term in the field of postcolonialism. It may produce mimicry when natives’ culture is rejected by colonizers. Subsequently, natives try to appropriate themselves to adopt the traits of colonizers to get a privileged place in the society, but fail to adopt a new culture fully. In response, they become ambivalent. However, the failed attempt to adopt the imperial behavior is called ‘colonial mimicry’. Homi K. Bhabha discusses ambivalence, and asserts, “the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (Bhabha, 2004, p.126).

According to Bhabha a third-place always creates misperception. He underscores, “What articulates cultural difference is defined as ‘in-between’ spaces (p. 1, 2, 38). However, Michel Foucault (1998) uses the term ‘Heterotopia, as a concept to describe certain cultural, influential, and broad spaces that are by some means disturbing and contradictory. Foucault writes, “Heterotopias are defined as sites which are embedded in aspects and stages of our lives and which somehow mirror and at the same time distort, unsettle or invert other spaces. Foucault contrasts these spaces with utopias; both are connected with the rest of space and ‘yet are at variance somehow’, but whereas utopias are unreal, heterotopias are ‘localizable” (p.178). Moreover, Bhabha claims that all cultures have become ‘heterogeneous’ because of hybridity. He asserts, “the national cultures are ‘homogenous’, there is ‘consensual or contiguous’ diffusion of history and traditions, therefore, the imagined ethnic communities are the grounds of cultural hybridity and thus are in the complex process of ‘redefinition’ (Bhabha p.4). In *The Location of Culture* (2004) Bhabha discusses the liminality of hybridity by using words like ‘incommensurable’ and ‘heterogeneity’. While incommensurability stops comparison among people of different classes and races of hybrid characters as liminality has not any standard value and it affects every migrant equally. Bhabha (2004) asserts that cultural hybridity generates liminality which is experienced by a person when he wants to leave his previous status and feels the reluctance to attain a new rank in a new place.

Analysis and Discussion

Hyder’s River of fire (1999) engages with the question of composite culture in India in the framework of the Partition of the subcontinent. However, it captures several turns of centuries, both with historical linearity as well as with a sense of history and hybridity that surpasses chronology. It covers the stories of repeated characters during four major eras, such as the first era is about the Mauryan empire under Chandragupta in 4th BC. The second era belongs to the end of the Lodhi dynasty and the beginning of the Mughal rule in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. The fourth era comprises the two decades leading up to the 1950s. Through the projection of this era, the story reveals the social, political, and cultural changes based on the partition of the subcontinent. Moreover, this research compares hybridity with aurora because both terms come into existence after passing through the process of amalgamation of two or more different things such as cultures or colours.

A Place of Ambivalence in Cultural Hybridity

According to Homi k. Bhabha, (2004) hybridity produces ambivalence. It is such uncertainty that keeps a hybrid person on a threshold and intermingles the perception of a previous and a new position whenever a person tries to appropriate himself to be an exact part of a new culture but fails to adopt it fully because of his originally embedded cultural values. Therefore, Bhabha affirms, the concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the name of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation (Bhabha, 2004, p.34).

In the first era, the study finds ambivalence in the character of Gautam Nilamber. Being a student of Shrawasti University, he is not allowed to desire worldly comforts. He even has to beg to feed himself. Apparently, he is following the rules of his university and bearing hardships which are a part of his training to attain the high order of Brahmin. However, he still has not conquered his ego. He still loves dancing in the forest like a peacock. He is not allowed to look at any woman but falls in love with Champak after watching her at bathing ghat. He has an artistic mind that does not allow him to follow the ways of his father to become a priest. Hyder writes about Gautam and says, “He did not want to be a bagla bhagat if his heart was not in priestcraft. He liked to carve in stone but could not adopt it as his career. His future was unsure, and

he was crazy with an unknown girl" (Hyder,1999, p.12).

The study catches the culture of Brahmins different from other people because of the restricted Indian caste system. It can be noticed that Gautam is under the influence of lower Hindu casts who are free to do the work of their own choice like his friend Aklesh who is an artist of Shrawasti. Therefore, Gautam can be seen confused while performing different educational and ritual activities. His ambivalence is evident when he says to champak, "We do not seem to be presupposed to bask in complimentary spoken language with host, particularly females" (Hyder,1999, p.18). While Hyder informs, "He spent the day lecture Champak. They laughed and chatted" (18). The study can detect the controversy of the words and actions of Gautam being inclined towards mixed culture. In the first era, the study discovers ambivalence also in the character of Hari Shankar. He is princess Nirmala's brother who has changed his vision after joining buddha's missionaries, and a missing prince of Kaushal Desh. Thus, the research observes that Hari's 'naturalization' has engaged him in slippage as a result of cultural hybridity. Hari's slippage appears when Hyder states, "A cloud appeared on the bhikshu's face. "Permission granted," he answered, attempting to be jolly. "Now, offer this to her from Brother Hari Ananda along with his blessings. He gave Gautam the ring. His hands trembled" (Hyder,1999, p.13). The study notices that Hari Shanker's trembling hands reveal his confusion to attain a new vision completely and his longing for champak still lurks in his heart.

Bridging of the Cultural Hybridity between 'Longing' and 'Belonging'

Bhabha asserts that present attains newness from cultural hybridity that appears as a result of the perception of 'Beyond'. In this process, to make harmony with the present phenomenon, historic experiences are used partially to make a new domain of visions and experiences. Such a phenomenon can be observed in marginal areas where the people having different historic values share their cultures. Bhabha affirms "The negating activity is indeed, the intervention of the 'beyond' that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where 'presencing' begins" (Hyder,1999, p.9). The study finds out such 'presencing' in Hyder's narration when Gautam negates the teaching of his mentor by recalling his

words, who utters, "Evil came into existence as a result of creation. A woman gave birth; therefore, she was the origin of all sin. And yet, despite her weaknesses, she might be vastly virtuous, trustworthy and self-sacrificing (Hyder,1999, p.20).

Likewise, in the first era, Gautam finds himself standing in a third space when he thinks about the concept of a woman that is taught to him by his teachers at 'Ashram'. He is taught that all sins generate from a woman because she is a love seeker and give birth to humans who are full of sin. Contrary to this, He is also taught that woman is respectable because of her self-sacrificing nature. This paradox of thinking compels him to take a final decision about women and he goes against the rules of Ashram when he sculpts a statue of Champak and gives it a name as 'Sudarshan Yakshini'. In this way, he gets rid of the idea of 'rup' and 'arup' and feels that his pure aesthetic proficiency was an unconnected joy. The research explores that this new aesthetic sense, bridges his belonging and desire, and fills his mind with a new vision towards life.

At another place, Bhabha affirms, "The discourse of the minority reveals the unbeatable ambivalence that structures the *vague* movement of historical time" (Bhabha, 2004, p.157). By this statement, Bhabha tends to assert that among the members of a minority in diasporas, ambivalence keeps on working in re-establishing the history by adding it with new trends. Likewise, the study explores the same phenomena in Hyder's narration when Kamaluddin faces ambivalence at that occasion of the ceremony of 'beera uthana' but feels no more inner passion to show loyalty towards the king Hussain Shah. In this way, he rejects the play of bloodshed that elevates the personal prejudice of sovereigns. It is evident when Hyder writes, "This paan culture was sensible. He was all for it, except that though he wore a sword, he didn't need to fight" (Hyder,1999, p.70). Likewise, Gaston Bachelard discusses the framing of the present with the traces of the past and asserts, "A man who was familiar with the deep sea could never be like the other men again" (Hyder,1999, p.227). By dint of the above statement, the study explores the similarity of Bhabha's and Gaston's statement as both critics have the same fundamental concept of cultural hybridity. Firstly, the research approaches Gaston's point of view who uses the metaphor of sea to describe the idea of home as the idea of home is the first experience that is achieved by a man. Furthermore, this first experience act like a

'mirror' for a person who changes his place. He always tends to give meaning to his present according to that image that he watches in the mirror of his past. Although, in the case of hybridity, the example of the mirror can be connected to the idea of the home that always gives the feeling of comfort in the form of Bhabha's "traces of the cultural history" that modify the present in Diasporas.

Likewise, in the fourth era, the study finds Kamal making efforts to make his life successful in a new place. Therefore, he sets new strategies to cope up with new 'unhomely' situations by choosing an alternative way to live a successful life. For instance, despite having pure nationalist ideas and immense love for his motherland before partition, and despite having possessive feelings for his motherland still after partition, he does not allow the circumstances to ruin his career and appears as a successful and prosperous scientist in Pakistan after pushing back his all anxieties.

Conclusion

This research concludes [Qurratulain Hyder's River of Fire \(1999\)](#) with the perspective of culturally hybrid identity that produces ambivalence because of the interaction of 'longing' and 'belonging' to bridge the cultural past with the unusual and requisite circumstances of the present time in a new place. Moreover, the study determines how a positive socio-cultural vision is obtained standing in a liminal place, and how a liminal place affects a hybrid personality regardless of his social status in an unhomely region. The novel, *River of Fire*, (1999) covers the last twenty-five hundred years and presents the traces of cultural hybridity and ambivalence based on 'longing' and 'belonging' to illustrate the mechanism of changing of mentalities and ambitions of the characters of the River

of Fire in almost each of its four major eras from the rule of Chandragupta Moria to the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan.

In the first era, the study concludes that Gautam Nilamber is an ambivalent character, and the hybridity based on the restricted caste system leads to ambivalence in his personality. Furthermore, the controversy of his desire of appearing in the world as an artist and the achievement of his fatherly ambition keeps him standing in a liminal place. After attaining a new vision, he rejects the philosophy of 'rup' and 'arup' and creates a statue of Champak named 'Sudarshan Yakshini' to explain the meaning of beauty, and the expression of love and honor.

Moreover, in the second era, Kamaluddin's hybridity develops in India when he remains interconnected with the people of different cultures. Moreover, his curiosity to explore diverse beliefs as a linguist meets him with ambivalence and changes his vision about life. That is why, after the death of the Sultan, he intends not to take part in wars to accomplish political issues and the exhibition of power and authority. Furthermore, in the third era, the study concludes that ambivalence deals with the colonizer and the colonized in the same way because it is the production of hybridity. Therefore, a hybrid person can be anyone who leaves his place to settle in another place. Hybridity discusses the matter of 'home' and a 'new home' therefore it has not any specific subject.

Thus, by all the above references, the study meets with its aim to define the possibility of a hybrid personality of bridging the 'longing' and 'belonging' to make harmony with new cultural values in a new place in a positive way and to share common objectives living among different nations at the same place after confronting the ambivalence created by a hybrid context.

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