

RECLAIMING CIVILIZATIONAL MEMORY: READING RIVER OF FIRE THROUGH JAN ASSMANN'S THEORY OF CULTURAL MEMORY

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Abstract

This paper, by using the theoretical framework of cultural memory given by Jan Assmann, offers a new interpretation of Qurratulain Hyder's River of Fire (Aag Ka Darya, 1959; English trans. 1998). The analysis focuses on how Hyder's novel engages with various literary, philosophical, and religious traditions while also performing the work of memory across two millennia of South Asian history, thus going beyond traditional Partition or nationalist frameworks. The study examines how River of Fire externalizes, interprets, and transmits civilizational knowledge through narrative, ritual, and place, drawing on Assmann's distinctions between communicative and cultural memory, the function of remembrancers, and the significance of mnemotopes. The book concludes that River of Fire is not only a literary record of India's pluralistic heritage but also a significant intervention in the politics of memory. It also offers an example of how literature can support, challenge, and revitalize cultural identity during turbulent and uncertain times.

Keywords: Qurratulain Hyder, River of Fire, Cultural Memory, Jan Assmann, South Asian Literature, Remembrance, Mnemotope, Narrative Multiplicity

Introduction

Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* (Aag Ka Darya, 1959; English trans. 1998) is a monumental literary work covering more than two millennia of South Asian history. The novel is often appreciated for its vast sweep and cultural syncretism and most scholarship has focused on its political and historical dimensions, more so the way it engages with Partition and questions of identity. But what remains underexplored is how Hyder's novel

enacts the very processes through which civilizations remember, reinterpret, and pass down their intellectual and cultural legacy. Hyder, in *River of Fire*, does not merely narrate the past; she performs the labor of memory, which she does by interpreting, transmitting, and refiguring a civilization's intellectual, spiritual, and cultural inheritance.

How *River of Fire* sustains and reimagines collective identity across temporal ruptures can best be understood by using Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory which provides a robust framework for this. Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory which is short-term, interpersonal and passed orally, and cultural memory, which is institutionalized and preserved through texts, rituals, and monuments (Assmann, 2011, p. 6). His model shows how cultures externalize memory through fixed forms and then maintain relevance by bridging the temporal "gap" through interpretation. Hyder's novel not only references canonical texts and sacred traditions across Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Western frameworks; it actively engages with them, offering commentary, performance, and reinterpretation. The characters-especially Kamal, Talat, and Gautam-often put on the hat of remembrancers trying to mediate between the past and the present, while at the same time invite readers to participate in this interpretive act. Along this, the river, the city of Lucknow, and other recurring locales become what Assmann terms mnemotopes, which are the sites of memory, anchoring identity and emotion (Assmann, 2011, p. 34). *River of Fire*, thereby, through narrative discourse, intertextual allusion, and spatial imagination, dramatizes the struggle and necessity of keeping memory alive in a world where "languages fade away or are forced into oblivion... even the river and the jungle are not eternal" (Hyder, 1998, p. 339). This paper analyses that how Hyder's novel enacts the very basic operations of cultural memory as put forward by Assmann: the role of external storage (texts, traditions, places), the role of the remembrancer, the tension between permanence and historical change, and the continuous reinterpretation responsible for sustaining cultural identity. It argues that *River of Fire* not only represents memory but performs it, offering a literary archive that

simultaneously critiques and preserves India's pluralistic civilizational memory.

theory offers a much-needed framework for the explanation of the process whereby societies secure their collective identity through the generations by establishing memory in fixed, externalized forms. Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory, referring to lived present experience that is handed down orally for a period of about 80 to 100 years, and cultural memory, spanning centuries or millennia and being preserved through institutionalized forms (Assmann, 2011, p.6). Cultural memory is different from communicative memory in the sense that it is detached from the contingencies of personal experience. It is encoded in symbolic and material forms which could be texts, rituals, monuments, or buildings that fulfill what as per Assmann is the obligation to recollect "what must not be forgotten" (Assmann, 2011, p.14). This type of memory is aided by what he refers to as "intermediate, external storage"-the literate systems of writing, ritual, and discourse developed to process, stabilize, and pass on meaning through historical time (Assmann, 2011, p.16). Writing, for Assmann, does not automatically result in cultural memory; rather, it only acquires meaning when certain texts are canonized and read, thereby acquiring a transgenerational authority (2011, p. 28, 30). The principal task necessary for ensuring the continued relevance of these kinds of texts over the course of time is the act of interpretation, or hypolepsis. This interpretive activity makes possible cultural memory in connecting the stabilized text and a shifting historical context, thereby enabling the past to "erupt into the present" through actions of retrieval, renewal, and recontextualization (Assmann, 2011, p. 45).

A literary example of Assmann's theory can be found in *River of Fire*. The novel performs the continuous reactivation of cultural memory through its narrative structure, invocation of historical and sacred texts, symbolic geography, and storytelling motif. It exemplifies what Assmann refers to as reconstructing the past in line with the "predominant thoughts of the present" (2011, p. 15). Hyder brings in a range of intertextual references drawn from Hindu, Islamic, and Western traditions- the Cult of Radha and Krishna,

Vedantic metaphysics, and teachings of historical philosophers such as Ibn-i-Rushd of Andalusia and Abu Rehan Al-Beruni. In the novel, these figures and systems of thought are not presented as static or reverential citations but as dynamic cultural texts which are open to reinterpretation. A particularly relevant example in this regard is the Buddhist Sanyasin's recitation of the Fire Sermon:

All things, O priests, are on fire. The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire, eye-consciousness is on fire . . . the ear is on fire; sounds are on fire, the body is on fire; things tangible are on fire . . . the mind is on fire; ideas are on fire . . . with the fire of passion, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation, with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief and despair, are they on fire . . . fire . . . fire . . . The body is like a house which is on fire, but we keep talking! We keep talking till the house is finally burnt down (Hyder, 1998, p. 23).

A fundamental truth from the past suddenly erupts into the present story, making this moment more than just a religious text quotation. The reader and characters at once are able to comprehend the cyclical nature of time, suffering, and rebirth. Throughout the novel, the metaphor of fire conjures up images of both destruction and purification connecting traditional wisdom with contemporary trauma, especially the violence and displacement of Partition.

For studying Islamic intellectual history too, Hyder takes a similarly measured approach. When Kamal thinks over Ibn-i-Rushd's legacy in the twentieth century, he is not only remembering a historical person but also bringing up a cultural synthesis and rationalism which are becoming more and more threatened in a fractured world: "Look, I am a believer in free will; Ibn-i-Rushd has said... Who?... Ibn-i-Rushd of Andalusia—he says except for revealed religion everything should be examined scientifically" (Hyder, 1998, p.112). The Andalusian tradition of philosophical investigation and intercultural intellectualism is being revived at this time. Instead of nostalgia, Kamal's reflection reveals a pressing call for intellectual memory: to resist the erasure of Islamic traditions of rational thought in contemporary discourse and to remember that they exist.

For Assmann, mnemonic techniques are embodied forms of cultural memory (Assmann, 2011, p. 41), and *River of Fire* provides a rich ethnographic and symbolic treatment of ritual practices besides textual allusions. Hyder, by incorporating these rituals into her characters' social lives and emphasizing their importance as carriers of collective identity, depicts them with both great narrative sensitivity and cultural insight. For example, Muharram is commemorated with national unity and solemnity: "A colossal black Chup Tazia was taken out in utter, awesome silence on the 40th day of mourning. Hindu officers and men of the U.P. Police Cavalry dismounted as a mark of respect to Imam Hussain, as they accompanied the Chup Tazia. This was what India and Indian culture were all about" (Hyder, 1998, p.184). This instance is a prime example of ritual as inclusive memory work, a collective act that transcends religious boundaries and reflects a common respect for loss and sacrifice. This syncretic culture defying polarizing historical narratives is brought about by the gesture of Hindu officers dismounting. Similarly, Hyder's portrayal of Diwali customs depicts a culture that is both personal and multi-layered:

"... clay dolls for Diwali, miniature figurines moulded by the expert potters of Old Lucknow... Laj and Nirmala had made rangoli in their courtyard to welcome the goddess, Lakshmi. Ram Autar and Gunga Din had gone out to gamble—if you don't indulge in the game of dice on Diwali night, you'll be reborn as a dormouse in your next life..." (Hyder, 1998, p. 211). These brief narratives highlight the performative and educational aspects of ritual, demonstrating what Assmann refers to as "mnemonic devices" in action—living customs like rangoli-making, clay doll-making, and Diwali folk beliefs that serve as cultural scripts, encoding and passing down memory through generations not just through spoken words but also through embodied gestures, tangible objects, and social spaces (Assmann, 2011, p. 41).

The Remembrancer and the Performance of Memory

As per Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, the remembrancer is the person or group that is in charge of preserving, interpreting, and passing down tradition thereby playing an important role (Assmann, 2011, p. 45). It is the remembrancer who actively participates in the continuous balancing act between the past and present unlike a passive archivist. Assmann emphasizes that cultural memory is a dynamic process that is constantly molded by acts of "hypolepsis," or the reinterpretation and adaptation of tradition to modern circumstances, rather than a static reservoir (Assmann, 2011, p. 56). Thus, choosing what should be remembered and framing how it should be understood are both integral parts of the remembrancer's task, which is by its very nature creative and dialogic. This process of renewal is essential to the vitality of cultural memory, according to Assmann: "The remembrancer must continually bridge the gap between the fixed canon and the living present, ensuring that the tradition does not become obsolete but remains a resource for identity and meaning" (Assmann, 2011, p. 58). It is the remembrancer who chooses what is to be preserved while at the same time making it relevant to future generations. This bridging becomes an act which is tense and full of responsibility.

Hyder dramatizes these theoretical insights in *River of Fire* through characters (remembrancer here) who are highly aware of their role in the transmission and transformation of memory. For instance, Kamal becomes a symbol of remembrance. After giving it some serious thought, he cautions Gautam: "... if, from the dawn of recorded history, prophets and philosophers and rishis and Sufis hadn't talked, there would have been horses stabled in the libraries of the world. You should be grateful to god that we talk and you listen..." (Hyder, 1998, p. 246). Kamal's remarks here are not only sentimental, but they also remind us of memory's fragility and its need for constant renewal. His reference to "prophets, philosophers, rishis, and Sufis" as the defenders of culture is exactly what Assmann's claim that interpretation and transmission are paramount to the preservation of cultural memory. The vivid imagery of "horses stabled in the libraries of the world" highlights the disastrous results of forgetting—a world wherein knowledge repositories are reduced to rubble and age-old wisdom is lost to neglect.

Although Talat too shows the remembrancer's predicament, she does so in a very ambiguous way that emphasizes how memory is constructed. Her attempt to recount her family saga is marked by hesitation and self-awareness: "I am narrating this story from this point on... How shall I begin? I don't know which characters are more important. Where did this story start? Who is the listener of this story, and who is the narrator?" (Hyder, 1998, p. 302). Talat's hesitancy shows not a weakness, but the remembrancer's ethical obligation. As Assmann observes, memory is always "constructed, selective, and responsive to contemporary needs" (2011, p. 56). This makes the narrative of *River of Fire* a performance of the complexity of memory which entails assembling fragments, completing the gaps, and discovering significance amidst loss.

Hyder's use of the polyphonic narrative structure incorporating multiple narrators, shifting perspectives and temporal leaps reflects the collective, contested nature of cultural memory itself. Each character in the novel has a different perspective on the past which brings about an overlap, conflict or diverge of their memories. This multiplicity resists the closure of a single, authoritative narrative by offering a model of memory that is dialogic, open-ended, and ever-evolving. The reader is invited to take part in this process as a co-rememberer, piecing together the story from the provided fragments. This way, *River of Fire* embodies the very processes that Assmann theorizes: memory is always dynamic and contested, and that it is the remembrancers who through the creative act must constantly reinterpret the past in order to give it significance for the present. At the same time, the novel is a meta-commentary on the politics and ethics of memory itself because of its self-awareness regarding the act of narration. Talat's doubts about beginnings and endings, Kamal's insistence on the importance of remembering are illustrations of this.

Space as Cultural Archive

Mnemotopes are the site of memory and form the basis for Assmann's theory of cultural memory. These "memory containers" are not just actual places but are the spaces that brim with emotional, symbolic, and historical

significance (Assmann, 2011, p. 34). They serve as the anchors of the collective identity, a place where the past is constantly renegotiated and reactivated in addition to being remembered. These mnemotopes are also the anchoring points which are necessary for memory thereby serving as repositories of collective memory. According to Assmann, these can be rivers, cities, monuments, or even myths and rituals. Their strength lies in their capacity to capture acquiring a symbolic aura and pass on meaning through the ages (Assmann, 2011, p. 37). Thus, the mnemotope is that place where the past and present converge, both literally and figuratively.

Hyder demonstrates this theory directly in *River of Fire's* spatial imagination. Jaunpur and Lucknow are not merely cities serving as backdrops; they are also repositories of memory, layered with remnants of many different eras and civilizations. For example, Hyder's depiction of Lucknow is particularly vivid: "Lucknow had changed too. Historical monuments were falling to pieces. Hazrat Ganj looked like a slum, the Mall was full of stray cattle. Lucknow had gone to seed." (Hyder, 1998, p. 211). In this description, the city at once changes into a living archive, a place where memory is not just preserved but also animated. City here functions as a mnemotope—a site where the past merges with the present. In Lucknow thus can be seen a decline, from a once-glorious cultural center into a run-down, decaying area, no less than a historical disillusionment.

Landmarks like the "Moti Mahal bridge," "Riverbank Road," and "Chattar Manzil" are infused with historical and emotional significance. Particularly instructive is Gautam's reflection of the Gomti from the Singharewali Kothi or Water Chestnut House:

Gautam Nilambar came out of his room and watched the river... the river was flowing. Houses stood on its banks. These houses had names and there were people sleeping inside. The people had names, too. Some houses were built of stone, stones also lay scattered on the shore. Time was flowing, time was arrested in the stones. (Hyder, 1998, p. 98).

Assmann's realization that mnemotopes are both mobile and fixed, transient and permanent, is captured in this passage. Singharewali Kothi becomes a site where memory is both anchored and set adrift, and like the

city, it bears witness to history. The eerie aspect of remembered space is further demonstrated by the ghostly appearance of the "fiery-eyed agiya betals" that follow Gautam, "the ghosts of his memories. He had witnessed so much. What else was there left to see" (Hyder, 1998, p. 99). These ghosts are more than just supernatural occurrences; they are representations of the city's restless, inescapable, and memory-insistent nature. They support Assmann's assertion that memory is encoded in architecture, landscapes, and the very ambiance of a place in addition to being stored in books or minds. Likewise, Hyder's spatial imagination includes not just real geography but also imagined and mythical places and battlefields, lost cities and literary landscapes. For Pierre Nora, these imagined areas serve as "lieux de mémoire," or places where memory crystallizes and releases itself (Nora, 1989, p. 7). Hyder dexterously shows that memory is not only based in the physical world but can also be created through imagination by incorporating these spaces into the story.

The Challenge of Temporal Continuity and Rupture

Hyder's story and Assmann's theory both emphasize how memory is vulnerable to trauma, displacement, and rupture. Cultural memory is constantly in danger, Assmann cautions, particularly in periods of violence, migration, or upheaval (2011, p. 56). Active participation is necessary for memory to persist; otherwise, memory may fade and disengage people and communities. Assmann's theory relies heavily on the metaphor of the "gap": interpretation and renewal are necessary to continuously bridge the gap between the changing present and the fixed tradition (2011, p. 54).

Hyder's novel is a meditation on rupture and the struggle to maintain continuity. The river is frequently used to convey the passage of time and its pauses, both literally and figuratively. The idea of continuity—the idea that history, memory, and identity are preserved despite changes in the world—is summed up in the quote, "The river is time, flowing" (Hyder, 1998, p. 411). This flow is risky, though. When: "Dusk falls. The river has stopped flowing." The streets are deserted and the city is quiet. The statement "The river may dry up or shrink or change course, just as human beings disappear or change

the direction of their journeys. " (Hyder, 1998, p. 411) denotes a significant break in the transmission chain and the imminence of memory oblivion. Assmann's worries are directly echoed by the novel's characters' struggles with memory erasure or transformation. " Languages fade away," the lament goes. Not even the jungle and the river last forever (Hyder, 1998, p. 339). So, what is there to cling to? This is a reflection on the transience of language, tradition, and the ways in which memory is passed down. particularly the loss of language, which represents how susceptible cultural memory is to uncontrollable historical forces. Kamal's alienation from his native land is depicted in particularly moving words: "The train began its westbound journey. Burdwan . . . Asansol . . . Patna... Mughalsarai... Banaras... Allahabad... hurtling through a strange, unknown land. A year ago, this was his own country, the land of his forefathers. Today he was a foreigner here. He felt as though people were looking at him suspiciously." (Hyder, 1998, p. 355). This sense of alienation-of being cut off from the memories that once anchored identity-is precisely what Assmann identifies as the crisis of cultural memory in the modern age (Assmann, 2011, p. 56). It is a crisis that can only be addressed, Hyder suggests, through acts of remembrance, storytelling, and reinterpretation-through the continual work of bridging the gap between past and present.

"Great Texts" and "Bridging the Gap": Canon, Interpretation, and Cultural Continuity

As per Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, textual traditions become very important for maintaining and passing down collective identity. This theory however, is based on the assumption that "Great Texts," which are canonical works serve as permanent archives of cultural significance. Assmann says that within a cultural framework, these texts include "everything worth saying and everything worth knowing" and that is the reason why they are regarded as foundational (2011, p. 45). Canonization, by making their contents inviolable, preserves their high status and protects them from the deterioration of time. In particular, sacred texts are untouchable and can only endure through ceremonial recitation. Though less

inflexible, classical texts are timeless models that can be imitated and modified. But this permanence creates a problem because the world keeps changing even though the texts don't. According to Assmann this discrepancy between tradition and modernity is "the gap" (2011, p. 54). He claims that though human consciousness, language, and historical context are ever-changing, "not one letter can be changed" (2011, p. 56). In this situation, interpretation is the key to cultural continuity. Fixed meanings are kept accessible, relevant, and resonant across generations through interpretation, which turns into the "central principle of cultural continuity and identity" (Assmann, 2011, p. 45).

With numerous references to holy and classical texts, *River of Fire* is a work of canonical commentary in and of itself. One of the best examples is when the *Sanyasin* recited the Fire Sermon. Drawing on composite Indo-Islamic devotional practices, the story also invokes religious figures like "curly-haired Satyapir Satyanarayan, sandalwood paste on his forehead, a flute in his hand", chanting "Allah-hoo-Allah-hoo". Through the poetic imagery of Urdu ghazals following Persianate traditions that allude to Majnun, a representation of mystical love and insanity, Hyder quotes Raja Ram Narain Mauzan's couplet: "Gazelies of the desert! You know how Majnun died. What happened to the wilderness once he was gone?" (Hyder, 1998, p. 251). These instances are mnemonic nodes—literary intersections where memory, culture, and identity are encoded and transmitted—rather than merely being embellishments. By actively interpreting and reconfiguring these allusions, Hyder's narrative structure enacts the commentary that Assmann argues is crucial to the preservation of cultural memory.

Conclusion: Comparative and Critical Perspectives

When *River of Fire* is read alongside prominent theorists and South Asian literary peers, the work's uniqueness as a literary enactment of cultural memory gets highlighted. The best lens, however, for Hyder's story is provided by Jan Assmann's emphasis on the institutionalization and reinterpretation of memory through texts, rituals, and mnemotopes, even though Pierre Nora stresses upon *lieux de mémoire* as symbolic anchors and Maurice Halbwachs draws attention to the social frameworks of memory.

Besides supporting these theories, Hyder's book also adds complexity by showing how memory is socially embedded and constantly vulnerable to disruption, more so in the face of events like colonization, Partition, and conquest. To sum up, *River of Fire* is a dynamic performance of cultural memory and not just merely a history of South Asia. It enacts the processes through which civilizations remember, reinterpret, and transmit their foundational knowledge which invariably happens by fusing together of canonical texts, symbolic spaces, and the voices of remembrancers. The novel comes across as a living archive through Assmann's theoretical framework wherein he both critiques the frailty of memory itself and upholds India's pluralistic heritage. Hyder offers a potent example of how literature can preserve cultural identity over time by insisting on the need for active remembrance and interpretive renewal in a world that is so very characterized by disruption and loss.

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