

# Qurratulain Hyder and the 'Idea' of a Nation: A Reading of *Aag ka Darya*

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As a student of literature, and more recently of literary histories, I have long been tempted by the idea of exploring ideas through literature. I attempted to do so first with the idea of revolt in the poetry produced in Urdu in the immediate aftermath of the Revolt of 1857. I tried that again by exploring the idea of protest in the work of the Progressives. It was tempting to explore both the idea of India and of nationhood as reflected in Urdu literature. I found that while there was much in both Urdu prose and poetry that dwelt on the idea of a nation, much of it was written in moments of crisis, whether it was in response to the atrocities of the colonial oppressor or the horrific genocide during the Partition or whenever the threat of war loomed on the horizon. And much of it was concerned with the here and now, the immediate and topical; it was almost necessitated by a hair-trigger response to a threat perception. I looked for something that explored the idea of nationhood in a larger, broader, more panoramic sense. I found nothing could serve my purpose better than *Aag ka Darya* written by Qurratulain Hyder.

*Aag ka Darya*, written in Urdu in 1959 and trans-created into English by Hyder herself some 40 years later, traces the trajectory of the Indian people from the Mauryan period to modern times. *Aag ka Darya* is, to my mind, a classic instance of Imagining India, an India from ancient times to the modern age, an India which as I shall attempt to show, is changing yet constant. Putting four sub-stories into one composite whole, this magnum opus portrays an immense and complex smorgasbord of cultures and identities while remaining true to the spirit of liberal humanism that was the hallmark of both Hyder's writing and her personality. Hyder published the Urdu version when she was a mere 28 years old and in it not only does

she present 2500 years of Indian history, but more importantly, gifts us – perhaps unwittingly — with a timeless metaphor for imagining India in the form of a ceaselessly flowing river. Through it she also shows how history is a continuum, a coming together of many small rivulets and tributaries that together make one sweeping river. Somewhere, she also rebukes those who go looking for important and not-so-important bits and pieces of history for they fail to see its totality.<sup>1</sup>

The River of Fire is the River of Time and Time, like the river, any river or a river anywhere known by any name, is by its very nature ceaselessly flowing. Those who stand, or live beside its banks, occasionally watch it pass by; but very few stop to listen to its wordless story. The river urges those who stand on the banks to travel with it; some do and some don't. Even those who travel on the river do so only for a short while; then they must either get off or drown. Some travel on the river on barges big and small, modest and stately; some succeed in traveling a short distance while some are carried off on strong currents and are lost forever within its waters. And while men and women carry on with the business of their lives, while wars are waged, empires rise and fall, Time is flowing too as ceaselessly as the river. One can neither hold it nor ride it; one can however try and hear it as it passes by in the soft ripples of the waters.

Before we look at Hyder's *River of Fire*<sup>2</sup>, it might be interesting to first look at the metaphor of the river itself and how it has served Indian poets and writers down the ages. The mystically inclined Amir Khusrau spoke of love as a river:

*Khusrau darya prem ka, ulti wa ki dhaar,  
Jo utra so doobgaya, jodooba so paar*

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Oh Khusrau, love is a river, it runs the other way  
He who jumps in it drowns, and who drowns, gets  
across (Translation mine)

Invoking the river Ganges to bear witness to the arrival  
of those from other lands who set up home beside her  
banks, the revolutionary Urdu poet Iqbal asked:

*Ai aabrood-e- Ganga woh din hai yaad tujhko  
Utara tere kinare jab caravan hamara*

O waters of the Ganga, do you remember that day  
When our caravan had stopped beside your bank  
(Translation mine)

The river, for the poet, became both Time and Witness to  
Time. By the time Hyder decided to use it as the title of  
her epic, both the *darya* and the *aag ka darya* had become  
accepted metaphors in the Urdu lexicon. Jigar  
Moradabadi, the classicist, had already written his  
famous ghazal which ended with these lines:

*Yeh ishq nahi aasan, bas itna samajh lije  
Ik aag ka dariya hai aur doob ke jaana hai*

Love is not easy; however it is enough to understand  
That it is like a river of fire and you must drown in it  
(Translation mine)

However, it was Hyder who wrenched the metaphor  
from its philosophical-mystical moorings and located it  
in an altogether different, *sui genesis* context. Hyder  
reinforces the sense of continuity borne by her central  
motif – that of the river – in several other ingenious ways  
all through the book. Everywhere in the *River of Fire*, the  
adage holds true – the more things change, the more they  
remain the same. Characters keep reappearing in different  
guises but with the same names in episodes spanning  
several thousand years. We first encounter Gautam  
Nilambar, a final year student of the Forest University of  
Shravasti in a spot not far from the Buddhist vihara at  
Jetvan. As he is waiting to cross a swollen river, he sees  
Kumari Champak, the daughter of the Chief Minister,  
and is inexorably drawn towards her. Soon he meets a  
motley set of dramatis personae: the princess Nirmala,  
her brother Hari Shankar, and the low caste milkmaid  
Sujata. The time is 150 years after the Buddha, the place  
is Shravasti in the Bahraich region, and the river is the  
Saryu. Hyder uses her characters to make several  
sweeping statements about the time: about shudras  
converting to Buddhism and thus incurring the wrath of

the powerful Brahmins, and about the prejudice against  
the newly emergent Buddhism from orthodox  
Brahminism.

Gautam, Champa, Nirmala, Hari Shankar, Sujata will  
reappear in many reincarnations as the novel hurtles  
across the centuries. They will be accompanied by a  
motley cast of characters bearing the same name in each  
reincarnation – Englishmen called Cyril Ashley,  
coachmen called Ganga Din, maids called Jamuna, and  
so on. Kumari Champak becomes Champavati, the  
Brahmin girl, then Champa Jan the courtesan in Oudh;  
she resurfaces as Champa Ahmed. Somewhere these are  
manifestations of a syncretism, the Ganga-Jamuni culture  
as it was called.<sup>3</sup> These reincarnations are handled  
imaginatively and make for an interesting sense of  
continuity.

Continuity is maintained in other things too. While the  
landscape changes – as the narrative traverses the length  
and breadth of the Indo-Gangetic plain, sometimes  
upstream sometimes downstream – a river runs all  
through it. While its name might change, it is – both  
literally and figuratively the same river. The Saryu of the  
opening anecdote becomes the Jamuna, or the Ganga, the  
Gomti, or the Padma. No matter what the name of the  
river or of those who dwell beside its banks, there is  
always a wandering mendicant somewhere nearby – an  
incarnation of Khwaja Khizr who had drunk from the  
fount of immortality and, like Saint Christopher, appears  
as a guide before travelers who have lost their way. Like  
everyone else in this novel, he is called by different names  
and takes different guises. Called Satyapir Satyanarayan  
in rural Bengal, this wandering mendicant appears in the  
guise of a sufi or a yogi, a nun or a monk, and shows the  
way both literally and metaphorically to those who are  
lost.

The novel opens in the season of *beerbahutis* (tiny  
velvety red insects, a bit like the ladybirds, called the  
'Bride of Indra') and rain clouds, sometime in the 4<sup>th</sup>  
century B.C., with Gautam Nilambar chancing upon Hari  
Shankar, an absconding prince yearning to be a Buddhist  
monk. And thus begins a magnificent tale that flows  
through Time, through Pataliputra during the reign of  
Chandragupta Maurya, then the Sharqi Empire of  
Jaunpur, the Kingdom of Oudh, the British Raj till finally  
the night-bitten dawn of Independence ushers in Free  
India. While the same set of characters are born and re-  
born in different circumstances in different times, they  
are destined to be forever grappling with the same set of  
emotions – love, wanderlust, the yearning for something  
indefinable yet inexorable. The fiery River of Time flows  
along the banks of their lives as they are reborn and  
recreated, weaving through the twists and turns, the

flows and eddies, keeping them together, and yet keeping them apart. The story comes full circle in post-Partition India when Hari Shankar and his friend Gautam Nilamber Dutt meet yet again, beside the same river Saryu, and mourn the passing of their lives into meaninglessness, their friends who have left for Pakistan, and what remains of their country of which they were once so passionately proud. Have those who have left betrayed them, or have the ones left behind betrayed those who have left? In answer, there are only more questions.

What happens between then and now — between that first meeting 2500 years ago and now in 1955 — is history, full of clamour and conflict, the deviousness of rulers and apathy of the ruled, and the irrelevance of religion in defining Indianness. Interspersed with the human drama involving the main cast of dramatis personae, the narrative throws up many questions. It is these questions that look at the 'idea' of India from different points of view at different times in history. The earliest indication of this interest in the notion of a nation-state that will continue to preoccupy the protagonists all through comes in the first episode when a group of traveling Persians tells Gautam Nilambar that they have come to Hind to seek a livelihood. A perplexed Gautam asks: 'Where is Hind?'<sup>4</sup> 'The country in which you live!' the Persian answers. He then goes on to list the similarities between Persian and the languages of Hind. To which Gautam cynically remarks, 'Affinity in language does not keep people from fighting and hating one another.'<sup>5</sup> His words are prophetic as we will see later.

Gautam dies while trying to cross a river in full spate. Chandragupta Maurya's army invades peaceful Shravasti, a small, semi-pastoral outpost ruled by a weak *rajan* because the Prime Minister of the great Mauryan empire doesn't want weak feudatories. As Chandragupta becomes the first *samrat*, emperor of the state of Bharat, Hyder muses when 'Death cancels all conflicts of Rup and Arup, Bhava and Abhava'<sup>6</sup> is there any place for pacifists and theorists? An ordinary mortal, 'not descended from the sun or moon', Chandragupta trampled over the old kingdom of Pataliputra, causing Hyder to muse: 'Victory breeds hatred because the vanquished sleep in sorrow, and only that person is peaceful who is above victory and defeat and happiness.'<sup>7</sup>

The narrative jumps 1500 years and Gautam's place is taken by Abul Mansur Kamaluddin of Nishapur. Born of an Iranian Shia mother and a Sunni Arab father, he has come to India in search of fortune. It is the year 1476 and at the crossroads of the world India is being touted as the land of tomorrow. Sufis, scholars, merchants, scribes, people of all faiths and classes are flocking to this

land of opportunity. One of them is Kamaluddin or Kamal who is headed to Jaunpur, the academic capital of India, aglitter with the lamp of learning lit by the enlightened Sharqi rulers. 'The Sultan business is good business,' a wandering dervish tells Kamal as he trots along on the high road to a new life in a new land:

The modus operandi is simple and to the point. Wherever the government at the centre loses its grip over the provinces you gather enough military strength and a few allies, usually Hindu Rajput chieftains, and declare your independence. Then you obtain a firman from the nominal caliph of Islam who resides in Cairo. According to this decree of the figurehead pontiff you become his deputy caliph and the Friday sermon in the cathedral mosque and all the mosques of your realm is read in your name, instead of the reigning monarch's at Delhi. You mint your own currency and send out your envoys. You assume the grandiose titles of the ancient Kings of Iran till you are replaced, often violently, by another dynasty.<sup>8</sup>

And, indeed, every power-hungry militiaman of Turko-Iranian descent wants to proclaim himself sultan and capture Delhi, the beating heart of the country called Hind. Towards this end they make and break alliances, wage wars, buy peace, extend the borders of their ever-changing kingdoms. And what of the people of Hind? They seem happy enough with whoever rules over them as long as they are allowed to indulge their one grand passion, namely, Religion. They are happy as long as they have the time to indulge it and to celebrate their many fairs and festivals all through the year. Qalandars hobnob with yogis, exchanging ideas and practices from each other, bhakta cults flourish side by side with Sufi silsilas, and the countryside is awash with wandering mendicants of different faiths and orders. In the midst of all this Gautam reborn as Kamal meets Champavati, the sister of a learned brahmin in Ayodhya. Fated as they are to be forever separated, he moves on, across the breadth of Hindustan, witnessing the rise and fall of empires.

In 1484 Bahlol Lodi captures Jaunpur and in 1500 the city of colleges and universities, the academic capital of Hind, home to thousands of ulema, sufi lodges and writers, is razed to the ground by his son, Sikandar Lodi. 'Every age produces a liberal,' writes Hyder, 'who behaves like a barbarian due to the exigencies of the times.' Kamaluddin witnesses the destruction of the great and liberal civilisation of Jaunpur nurtured by the Ganga-Jamuni Sharqi rulers at the hands of Sikandar Lodi. Though he is himself a poet, scholar and educationist, Sikandar Lodi orders the scholars of the Sharqi court to be presented before him 'tied by their turbans.' Sikandar Lodi also bans the annual *urs* of Salar Baba at Behraich and the worship of Seetla Mata; he also declares the weaver-poet Kabir a heretic. Kamaluddin reminds us of

how history does indeed repeats itself when he rues:

Baghdad fell once again with the fall of Jaunpur. I, Abul Mansur Kamaluddin, live to mourn its loss, just as I grieved for the holocaust of Baghdad though it happened nearly three centuries ago. I have seen the passing of a great and liberal civilization in my own lifetime, here in India. The Mongols were heathens who sacked Baghdad, Sikander is a Muslim who devastated Jaunpur.<sup>9</sup>

Stirring things were happening all through the medieval ages but Sikandar Lodi's reign was especially tumultuous. Kabir was singing his songs of heresy and irreverence when a child called Nanak was born in a Khatri household in Punjab; he was destined to lay the foundations of a new syncretic religion. Kabir reminds Kamal of Rumi, who had lived two hundred years ago. 'They all say the same thing,' rues Hyder, 'but it doesn't help.'<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, in the far eastern arm of Hindustan, the Suhrawardy order was busy enticing the lower castes of Bengal:

Everybody seemed to be a singer in Bengal. Storytellers chanted roop-kathas; ferrymen, snake-charmers and elephant-trappers sang their ballads. They sang of Allah, Mohammed or Radha-Krishna. Vaishnavism was flourishing. Kamal rowed his boat from dargah to dargah, also singing. There were dangerous rapids in Chittagong, broad, winding rivers, mountain paths shaded with radhakali and krishnachura blossoms. Mosques and Tantric temples lay hidden in bamboo groves.<sup>11</sup>

Kamal, the wanderer from Nishapur, eventually marries the low-caste Sujata Debi, settles down in a village beside a river and becomes the writer of innumerable ballads and folk songs that are sung in rural Bengal long after he is dead and gone. An unwilling pawn in the great game between Afghan and Mughal forces, as the rude soldiers of Sher Shah's army continued their eastward offensive, Kamal dies with these words from the Holy Quran on his lips: 'Return, O Soul, to thy Lord, accepted, and accepting —'<sup>12</sup>

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The next episode begins with Cyril Ashley as its 'hero'. It is the year 1797. The Battle of Plassey is over and the English have long shed their garb of traders. The once-mighty Mughal empire is divided into 22 provinces each governed by a provincial viceroy. Delhi has been ravaged by Nadir Shah. Famines stalk the once-fertile land from Bengal to Oudh. The Nawab Vazirs of Oudh are holding on to the last vestiges of high culture. They celebrate Holi and basant with as much fervour as their Hindu subjects.

But the Court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah is like Camelot; its candle burning brightly at both ends gives out a lovely luminous light.

Like other provincial rulers such as Baz Bahadur of Malwa and Hussain Shah Nayak of Jaunpur, Wajid Ali Shah is also an accomplished musician, an exponent of *thumri* and *dadra*, a master-stylist of Kathak, creator of Ras Lila in which he himself dances as Krishna. This most unusual of rulers is known to his people as Akhtar Piya or Jan-i-Alam – the life and soul of the world. In this fairy kingdom, Kamal reappears as Kamal Ali Raza Bahadur alias Nawab Kamman and Champa as the courtesan Champabai – once again, they are lovers destined never to meet. Gautam appears as Gautam Nilambar Dutt, a fine specimen of *bhadralok* gentility who regards the Uprising of 1857 as a quixotic impulse. 'The solid fact remains, thought Gautam, that after 1857 the English ushered India into the modern age.'<sup>13</sup> Kamal, on the other hand, cannot reconcile the atrocities committed by the English upon the Indian people with their otherwise modern and liberal outlook. Having spent two years in England and France, Kamal says, 'The English are a fine people in their own country; they become a different species as soon as they cross the Suez.'<sup>14</sup>

The narrative takes another leap forward. The year is now 1940 and the setting once again Lucknow but a Lucknow seething with political unrest. And it is here, in the fourth and last section that the terrain becomes more contested, the dualities sharper; what is more, there are no longer clear-cut answers to any questions. The same set of characters reappears in different guises. Hari Shankar and his sister Nirmala Raizada live in Singharewali Kothi on the banks of the Gomti. Their friends and neighbours are the equally genteel, well-born, well-educated Kamal, Talat and Tehmina. Kamal is Hari Shankar's alter ego, his *hum zaad*. Together, they listen to Pahari Sanyal songs on the radio, and along with the girls enact scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and go 'ganjing' in the tony Hazrat Ganj. The girls play the sitar and learn to dance while the boys play tennis at the club and sprout poetry. A cocktail of Indian society – from different parts of the country, of different classes and castes – is found in the campuses and coffeehouses of Lucknow. In the midst of all this, Hyder throws a googly:

There was yet another aspect of the new nationalist movement that was making its presence felt – some people had openly begun talking of Ancient Hindu Culture and the Glory-that-was-Islam. How was Indian culture to be defined? Was it a ruse for Hindus to enslave the Muslims? Could 'real' Indians only be Hindus? Were Muslims unholy intruders who should be treated as such?<sup>15</sup>

These are new questions. And Hyder refuses to give clear answers; instead, she flits from story-teller to historian. She adopts a style that is at once sweeping and innovative in the Urdu fiction of her generation. Every now and then her characters dive inwards and resume their journey through Time in their imagination. That is when Hyder steps in and takes us on a conducted tour of history. That is when some of the most significant questions get asked – questions about religion, culture and identity and the over-riding question of Indianness. Who are 'real' Indians? Can 'real' Indians only be Hindu? Can culture be pure Hindu or pure Muslim? Who will decide its purity and content — the Hindu Mahasabha or the Muslim league? The Muslim thread, Hyder says again and again, has been present in every pattern of the Indian tapestry. Can this thread be destroyed, pulled out by the root and obliterated by the demand for Pakistan? And, is the demand for Pakistan a threat to the idea of India?

Through certain members of the extended family like the staunch 'Congressi' Asad Mamu and his diametrically opposed Zaki Chacha of the Muslim League, through Gunga Din the coachman and Ram Autar the gardener, and their illiterate but enlightened wives, Hyder tries to explore why some families hitched their wagon to the Muslim League and others put their faith in the Congress, and why the Muslim League enamoured some Muslims and left others cold. When the Leaguers first spoke of protecting the rights of the Muslims by securing fair representation in the legislature, they gave voice to a long-felt need to recognize the Muslims as a distinct religious and political unit. On the face of it these seemed perfectly legitimate aspirations; the problem, Hyder muses, lay in the manner in which the League went about its business. It employed a combination of rhetoric and religion to bludgeon its way. It used fear as a campaign tool, making Muslims view all Hindus as a "threat" to their survival once the protective presence of the British was removed.

The League's final unequivocal demand – a separate homeland – did not appeal to some Muslims on the grounds of faulty logic. Jinnah's assurance of providing constitutional safeguards to minorities appeared humbug in the face of his proclamation of a Pakistan that would be a hundred per cent Muslim. To return to Hyder's narrative, when Pakistan is eventually formed, it leaves many wondering if the cleavage of hearts and land was truly inevitable, or could it have been averted? What went so wrong between the two major communities of the subcontinent? What caused the disenchantment with the Congress? What made some staunch Congressmen rally around the once-derided Muslim League? What cooled the Muslim's ardour to join nationalistic mainstream

politics? For that matter, why was the Muslim suddenly regarded as a toady and a coward content to let the Hindus fight for freedom from the imperial yoke? Why was he suddenly beyond the pale? How did he become the 'other'? And what of the dream of the Muslim Renaissance spelt out in such soul-stirring verse by the visionary poet Iqbal? In turn, why did the Congress balk at the issue of separate electorates, calling it absurd and retrograde? Why did it do nothing to allay the Muslim fear that the freedom promised by the Congress meant freedom for Hindus alone, not freedom for all? Seen from the Muslim point of view, the Congress appeared guilty of many sins of omission and some of commission. 'Nationalism' increasingly began to mean thinking and living in the Congress way and none other. Those who lived or thought another way came to be regarded as anti-national, especially in the years immediately after independence.

Given the scope and extent of the questions posed by Hyder, I want to raise a question of my own, the question of progressivism. Considering that Hyder was consistently reviled by the progressives (with near-contemporary Ismat Chughtai mocking her bitterly for her the anglicised characters), it is important to see how Hyder can be located (if at all) in the progressive current that swept through Urdu literature of the 1930s-50s. For that, one must first establish who or what is a progressive? Only those who belong to particular schools of thought and subscribe to well-established ideologies? Or, those who are willing to look ahead? Those critics of Hyder who have called her, among other things a Pompom Darling and a reactionary, would do well to remember that she admitted that there was blood on the hands of the beautiful people of Camelot:

One morning we discovered that our own hands were drenched in blood, and we saw that all those fine people – intellectuals and authors and leaders – many of them had blood-stained hands too. Most of them were not willing to atone. They ran away, or took different avatars, but there were some genuine human beings, as well.<sup>16</sup>

And who are these genuine people? They are humble folk, gardeners, farmers, peasants and betel-leaf sellers, *chikan* embroiders – the 'real' backbone of India. For all her talk of expatriates living in St John's Woods, of high tea on manicured lawns, of young men playing tennis and girls reciting Shakespeare in the sylvan surroundings of IT college, in short, for all her talk of people who live in houses with quaint names like Singharewali Kothi who traipse through Moon Garden (Chand Bagh!), there is in Hyder's literary sensibility a profound understanding of

the real India that lived on the fringes of the Camelot she knew and inhabited. And it is this clear understanding that runs like a shaft of clear light not only through *River of Fire* but through much of her writing that — to my mind, regardless of her ideology or affiliation, makes her a progressive writer.

A large part of the last section of the novel is located in England where the diaspora of young intellectuals from the Indian sub-continent congregates – in search of higher education, better jobs, and a more cosmopolitan outlook. But like birds of passage, they must eventually fly back home – either their old home in India or in search of a new home in Pakistan. Kamal, a highly qualified scientist, returns to India and finds his home declared evacuee property and he an ‘intending evacuee’. He files a law suit to reclaim his ancestral home, but loses. He looks for a job but can’t find one in a newly-independent country grappling with rampant unemployment. Defeated, he leaves for Pakistan with his aged parents. The staunch nationalist who had once declared, ‘I don’t want religion; India needs peace and bread’ capitulates. Hyder neither condemns nor approves. She has set out the facts of her ‘case’; she leaves the reader to draw his own conclusion.

Millions of families cross the border in search of new lives; others stayed back, often to an uncertain future. Hyder too left for Pakistan where, incidentally she wrote *Aag ka Darya*. She returned to India in 1961 and never discussed her reasons for going away or returning. Perhaps because she had already given her answers and had no further desire to rake the ashes; her answers can be found scattered not just in *Aag ka Darya* but in her entire corpus of writing which is one long ode to syncretism, pluralism, liberalism and secularism.

## Notes

1. The question being asked all the time by some character or the other in *River of Fire* is – Do people cease to be relevant? Did Beethoven become irrelevant after the Second World War? Why then have historically important personages such as Baz Bahadur, Husain Shah Nayak and Wajid Ali Shah become irrelevant in modern India?
2. Considerably shorter than the Urdu original, the English version was ‘transcreated’ by Hyder herself. There are several apocryphal, and delightful, stories about Hyder’s insistence and arbitrariness as a translator of her own work. She insisted on chopping off large chunks of historical passages, assuming perhaps that the English reader would be privy to factual details that the Urdu reader might not. This brutal self-censoring and excising has given an occasional jumpiness to the English text; however, this is apparent only to those who have read the Urdu version. It is safe to say that *River of Fire* stands on its own as an outstanding piece of writing in English. Since there is more than one version of *River of Fire*, in this paper when I refer to the English text, I am referring to *River of Fire* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 1998).
3. The question of syncretism has concerned most of Qurratulain Hyder’s contemporaries. Ismat Chughtai, for instance, has used the presence of the folk and popular traditions to enhance the multiculturalism that was such a vital part of the *qasbati* culture of the Awadh region.
4. *River of Fire*, op. cit., p 43.
5. Ibid., pp. 43-44.
6. Ibid., p. 39.
7. Ibid., p. 42.
8. Ibid., p 63.
9. Ibid., p. 89
10. Ibid., p. 98
11. Ibid., p 99
12. Ibid., p. 102
13. Ibid., p 170
14. Ibid., p 171
15. Ibid., pp. 202-203
16. Ibid., p. 310