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MUHAMMAD ALI & SAIRA FATIMA DOGAR

Moving on Fluvial Land: Human Migration and Liquid Identities in Shiv K. Kumar's A River with Three Banks

What Elizabeth DeLoughrey terms as the “grammar of heavy waters” is a reciprocal relation between humans and the liquid element, in which not only water constitutes what humans consign to it, but humans also carry “the sea in the blood, rendering the immensity of the ocean as an internal (blood) ‘vessel’ to naturalize human migration” (DeLoughrey 708).

Taking this statement as its basic argument, this article critically analyzes the migrations of the protagonist of Shiv K. Kumar's *A River with Three Banks*, Gautam Mehta, and his consequently changing identity, which is a result of his repeated attempts at settling in new places. This research also shifts focus from how water is affected by humans to how humans are affected by water, and therefore strives to link the constant movement of the novel's protagonist with the geography of his land, the Indian Subcontinent, which is essentially fluvial. However, what renders Kumar's Gautam different from other victims of the partition¹ of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 into India and Pakistan is that he does not travel extremely long distances. His migrations, for the most part, take place within the confines of India, yet induce him to change his religion and attire repeatedly, as if making him realize that the land on which he is trying to travel with a fixed identity has “water roiling” under it (Shafak 306), as the Turkish writer Elif Shafak puts it when describing cities built on water.

One of the several mishaps which characterized the cataclysmic events of 1947 was the subsequent and recurrent change of religious identities as Hindus and Muslims forced to stay behind in either Pakistan or India chose to forego their own religion to escape persecution and convert to the faith practiced by the majority. While some of the religious conversions were forced, there were many cases in which new identities were deliberately donned in order to eschew physical violence at the hands of opposing religious groups. While Muslim men in India are known to have put on tilaks to avoid being murdered by Hindu rioters, Hindus in Pakistan went through circumcisions lest they be found out as Hindus and get killed by Muslims. These were some of the visible reasons backing the victims' change of identities during 1947, inducing

¹ Partition is routinely characterized in history as the great migration of 1947. More than fifteen million people moved across borders between India and Pakistan as partition became a reality while the intercommunal riots, which broke out between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslim, claimed the lives of one to two million people.

us to focus more on what took place *above* the land, but a shift towards the ocean demands that the depths of water be also probed for seeing how activities inside and outside water have always synchronized to give shape to human history. “History no longer stops at the water’s edge,” says John R. Gillis in his attempt at introducing the readers to the subject of Blue Humanities (“The Blue Humanities”). Following Gillis, this article gives equal attention to the characters’ geographical affiliations to gain a hydro-critical understanding of their actions.

A River with Three Banks, published in 1998, refers in its very title towards the failure of the Subcontinent at incorporating a specific religious group within its territory by employing the image of the three discrete banks. Also, Kumar, while introducing his story to the readers in an article, says, “It is also intended to be a story of love and marital conflict, and of India’s three religions (the “Three Banks”) – Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity – interacting in strange contexts” (“A River with Three Banks” 177).

After having made it clear that it is the Subcontinent being referred to as a river, the writer begins the story with the protagonist, Gautam, on his way to be converted into a Christian. After receiving a date for his baptism, Mehta walks out of the church and finds a Tonga driver, whom he asks to escort him to his residential area, Darya Ganj. The name of the place can easily invoke the image of a river for readers of Urdu and Hindi languages; “darya” means river and “ganj” means a wholesale market. Also, according to the INTACH Delhi Chapter, the name suggests that Darya Ganj was

originally a wholesale mart for grains and other bulk goods that came to Delhi on the river Yumna, which flowed just below the city walls on the east. On the west, Darya Ganj was bounded by a prominent market street – Faiz Bazaar – which had shady trees and a central stream of running water (“A Walk”).

This description of Darya Ganj reveals a link between Gautam Mehta’s residential area named after a river and his identity, the liquidity of which he embraces without showing a rigid disposition, evident from his following statement: “‘I’m now a Christian. A few days ago I was a Hindu,’ he said. ‘And I wouldn’t mind becoming a Muslim’ (Kumar 80).

Coming back to the initial pages of the novel, readers are told that behind Gautam Mehta’s conversion lies his objective of getting separated from his Hindu wife with whom he does not wish to live further owing to her extra-marital affair resulting in an illegitimate child. However, what is interesting to note is that this conversion from Hinduism to Christianity aids Gautam in crossing many other hurdles apart from the divorce, and makes his movement within the premises of the Subcontinent smoother.

On the day of his baptism, when Gautam and his friend are stopped midway by Muslim rioters, what turns out as beneficial is Mehta’s new identity and not his affiliation with one specific religion: “At once Gautam pulled out his certificate of conversion and handed it to the moustached fellow, who appeared to be utterly illiterate. Turning it over in his hands, he looked blankly at the words. ‘Let’s go – they’re Christians all right,’ he said” (Kumar 55).

After seeing the conversion certificate, the rioters clear the path for Gautam and his friend, suggesting that it is Gautam's realization (although an unconscious one) of his land, and his actions' synchronization with his land's geographical qualities which cause ease and comfort for him, resulting in an unobstructed movement for him inside India. Had Gautam Mehta stuck to one religious identity instead of allowing himself to internalize the fluid nature of Darya Ganj, his movement would have probably been hindered, something he stops from occurring by listening to his region's geological demands: "If we do not listen to the water, it will move from babble to roar" (O'Gorman 142).

For a scholar like Roisin O'Gorman, who believes that humans are "water made, water marked and water moved" (120), the idea that listening to water is necessary carries with it the notion that humans need to realize the presence of water inside and around them and move accordingly, which, if not done, creates problems. This is seen when Partition victims who did not agree to migrate, either physically or mentally, with the latter referring towards a movement to another religion, faced grave brutalities.

This idea mentioned above procures further credence in the context of the proceeding incidents Gautam encounters. A few chapters into the novel, he is taken to a restaurant by his friend Berry, near which stands a brothel. The customers for the brothel are obtained from the restaurant by a Hindu pimp known as Pannalal. On the enticement of Pannalal, when Gautam agrees to have intercourse with one of the brothel workers in order to shake off the memories of his unsatisfactory matrimonial life, he comes across Haseena, a Muslim girl whom he recognizes as the daughter of a man whose murder he once witnessed. After witnessing this man's murder, Gautam searched the corpse's pockets and found a letter stating that the man was on a mission to find his daughter, who was whisked away during Partition riots. Instead of having intercourse with Haseena as he decided prior to the revelation, Gautam promises to escort her to her remaining family members living in a Muslim area in Allahabad. It so happens that in their next rendezvous, both Gautam and Haseena secretly plan an escape and it is on the terrace of the brothel that they map out their route. What is observed by both of them from above the terrace reintroduces readers to a whimsical quality of the Subcontinent's region. It emerges as a region carrying "broader cultural spheres" as Oestigaard puts it for territories "where water is a fundamental component" (14).

The panoramic view stretched before the two characters is described in the following manner:

[...] Gautam looked all around, taking in the fields which stretched up to the southern end of Darya Ganj. Then they climbed up the Tower.

From there, Gautam could survey the entire area. He could even see the turrets of the Mecca Mosque near Neel Kamal, the dome of the Victoria Zennana Hospital, and, further down, the archway of the Delhi railway station. (Kumar 94)

This passage is noteworthy. While the first sentence shows that the vast area lying before Gautam and Haseena falls inside the boundaries of Darya Ganj, an area named after a river, the second part of the passage altogether denies fixity to it by drawing a map incorporating three

buildings belonging to three different religious groups. The Mecca Mosque by its very creates association with Muslims. The Victoria Zennana Hospital, although including one Urdu word referring to the female gender, does not fail to give credit to its Christian architects. Similarly, the Delhi Railway Station establishes its importance as a terminal of a place having Hindus in majority.

This cartographic description of the area carrying a different religious identity marker at every step reflects that constant activity is taking place beneath the soil of the Subcontinent, establishing its fundamental component, water, as a sculptor if looked at from the perspective of Astrida Neimanis. According to the hydro-critic, one of the multiple logics of water that provide us an intelligibility of transformations is the role of water as a sculptor, “referring to its terraforming properties” (Neimanis 54). If Neimanis’ idea is applied to the view Kumar lays out before us, we are inclined to believe that the abundance of water in the Subcontinent has always stimulated people to move inside and outside the region, strive to settle there, and change it in accordance with their own lifestyles. This movement, like the very movement of water, becomes a continuous phenomenon and translates into a failure to settle for long in one place. The cases under consideration here turn out to be those of Gautam and Haseena, the former entering another venture with his mission to take Haseena to Allahabad and the latter deciding to migrate back to Allahabad after spending some time in Delhi.

Significantly, the starting point of both the characters’ expedition becomes Darya Ganj, and both are also made to encounter multiple local water sources on their way to the railway station. They cross “the furrowed rows of cabbages and cauliflowers”, “a marshy spot”, “a small strip of water” and “a shallow puddle” (Kumar 94-95), time and again reminding the readers that theirs is a watery land. After having travelled all this distance, when they change their identities through attire at the railway station, Haseena wearing a “sari and blouse” and Gautam donning a “three piece suit” (98), it seems that their act of running on the raw and natural strips of their land has strengthened their connection with the riverine region, and has infused in them some more of the liquidity inherent in their very soil. As a result, we are reminded of DeLoughrey’s idea of water becoming “an internal (blood) ‘vessel’” (708) for naturalizing human movement, as a certain span of time spent crossing a watery region in the open air with continuously shifting cultural landmarks results in Gautam and Haseena entering new personae. As O’Gorman reflects: “movement-based practices activate and embody a sensibility and awareness of how water moves both inside and alongside the human body” (O’Gorman 119).

In the proceeding chapters of the novel, the “movement-based practice” of Gautam and Haseena ingrains in them a realization of their region’s fluvial quality, for water continues to “move inside” them and inclines them to change their identities once again. The next time a difference in appearance occurs is when both the characters reach Allahabad. However, before such an activity takes place, readers are already introduced to Allahabad as a place with geographical characteristics more or less similar to those of Darya Ganj. If it is the river Yumna which gives Gautam’s locale its name, it is “the holy Ganges” (Kumar 114) which runs through Allahabad. Besides, Allahabad also comes forward as a region with “diverse cultures, religions

and languages” (114), stimulating us to consider Oestigaard’s idea of water-marked places as carrying “transnational regions” (14). The diversity mentioned above is experienced by Gautam when they succeed in reaching Haseena’s residential area, but out of fear of being caught as a non-Muslim in a Muslim majority area, Gautam prefers putting on a “sherwani and fez cap” so that he may be “transformed into a “Muslim”” (Kumar 116-117). Haseena too, removes her sari in a public toilet and meets her Muslim family members “in a kameez and garara” (117).

A few more pages into the novel, the transformation of Gautam is not realized in terms of clothing only, but instead through religious identity; this time from a Christian into a Muslim, ultimately authenticating the author’s idea that the Subcontinent is a confluence of three religions constantly merging into one another.

What is interesting is that before Gautam’s third experience of a liquid identity, his curiosity is aroused about what flows underneath the most important of India’s rivers. This happens when Gautam and Haseena decide to make a trip to the Ganges, before which Gautam also recalls how he was a schoolboy “when he first visited Allahabad for the immersion of his uncle’s ashes into the holy Ganges” (Kumar 121). Readers are also told that a “vivid recollection that had stayed with Gautam all these years was of an old, clean-shaven man, with a long fluffy tail drooping from the middle of his head, feeding three white swans on the holy bank” (121). Readers are thus given a hint that Gautam had formed an attachment with the waters of his region from a very early age, considering how one of his strongest memories is the one related to Ganges.

This episode also suggests that Gautam’s identity transformations and migrations began in his very childhood, taking their departure from the banks of the Ganges and causing him to keep migrating with a water-related memory attached to him; from Delhi to Allahabad and from Allahabad to Delhi as a child, and from Delhi to Allahabad again as an adult, all the while not being able to forget “three white swans on the holy bank,” foreshadowing his three religious identities in connection with his land of rivers. That Gautam comes to the Ganges in his childhood as a Hindu and revisits it as a Christian adult soon to be turned into a Muslim also makes us believe Intizar Husain’s argument that the “source is water, the end is water” (Husain 241).

Gautam’s current feelings for the Ganges, however, are expressed in the following manner:

But now, as a free-thinker, the Triveni appealed to Gautam’s aesthetic sensibility only. The image of the two rivers, the Ganges and the Jumna, merging into each other, with the third river, the Saraswati, flowing invisibly underneath to forge the Triveni, merely testified to the fecundity of the Hindu imagination. (122)

While this interest in the third, invisible river prior to Gautam’s conversion into a Muslim may make us believe that it is his unconscious curiosity regarding his third and hitherto unknown step, this curiosity also makes Gautam one with the researcher; bent upon finding out what lies under the rivers of the Subcontinent which causes people to move from one terrain into another, be it a physical one or a metaphysical one. His purpose becomes that of the scholars

who are shifting their “attention from the land to the sea” (Gillis) and are focusing on how water affects the happenings in human beings’ lives.

Gautam also makes another trip to Ganges. This time, however, he is alone, and ponders some more upon the invisible yet accepted happenings underneath the water: “Indeed, the invisible was always more potent than the visible – that’s why the Saraswati claimed supremacy over the Ganges and the Jumna” (158). That the third, invisible river continues to pique Gautam’s curiosity is suggestive of the importance of knowing about a place’s geological characteristics in order to attain an intelligibility of one’s actions. The existence of this inquisitive attitude tells that there is more about the land which is to be known, and accordingly, about Gautam himself as well, which is why he is inclined to visit the river time and again. His retreat to the water lends further credence to the river’s depth’s important connection with the protagonist, and it is after this visit that Gautam goes through his third transformation and embraces the last of the three important religions of the Subcontinent: Islam. As readers, we are made to realize that in order to understand his place-based identity and the proceeding journeys it had to undertake, it was important for Gautam to spend time near the biggest of his country’s rivers, for it is after some more reflection on the third river that Gautam goes for the hitherto unaccepted religious identity, that of a Muslim, which marks the protagonist’s as well as the story’s completion: “It was a simple and brief ceremony in Haseena’s house, without anybody in the neighbourhood knowing about it, except the Kazi. All that Gautam was required to do was to recite the kalma, and adopt a Muslim name” (202).

However, the last scene of the novel, it seems, demands as much attention as given to the whole of Gautam’s journey, for the writer discusses nature at length in the concluding lines. The way he incorporates nature at this point in the novel is suggestive of his motive behind the story, which is to give a lesson to humans to learn from their natural surroundings and move in complete harmony with them.

When Gautam and Haseena are seeing Haseena’s family off at the border separating India and Pakistan, what they observe is this:

The sky was now covered with mountains of clouds – white, inky blue and grey. They assumed all sorts of fantastic shapes – of giant dinosaurs, their long necks craning forward, of the skeletal remains of some primordial mammals, of an army of soldiers on the rout. Ceaselessly, they sailed across the bridge, from India to Pakistan, casting fugitive reflections in the tawny waters of the river.

Suddenly, a flock of birds shot into the sky, and began to circle joyously over the maize fields on either side, as though scornful of the happenings on the earth below. (214)

These passages seem to carry two ideas, one being that elements of nature do not adhere to boundaries. Be it the clouds, the birds, or the maize fields, their movements spread across the bridge severing India and Pakistan, and are not confined to one side of the border. The boundaries dividing the maize fields are made by humankind. Secondly, the birds’ reflections in the river point at a natural synchronization between water and wildlife, making an attempt at

having us believe that the inspiration for life, after all, is water. While the water is flowing on the earth regardless of man-made boundaries, the birds are following the same pattern in the sky. Kumar then transfers this inspiration from a borderless, irregular element like water to his characters, who right at the very spot, decide that they will “start a new race – sans caste, sans religion, sans nationality” (214), after which they cast a look “at both sides of the river” (214), referring to a connection between flexible humans and a water body flowing despite the presence of borders.

That Gautam’s story begins at Darya Ganj and ends at a river bridge illustrates DeLoughrey’s idea. Gautam certainly surfaces as a character who carries water in his blood, something that ultimately makes migrations an ineluctable part of his life. These migrations, however, become easy only when Gautam fully realizes the presence of water inside and around him and succumbs to it by not acting as rigid in terms of national and religious identities, but taking different paths whenever required; be it his experience of encountering a Muslim mob where he presents himself as a Christian; or his risk of entering a train to Allahabad by enacting a Hindu woman’s husband; or his presence in Haseena’s residential area where he has to look like a Muslim to avoid any mishap. Behind all these mishaps lies the event of Partition, and it is in order to escape various forms of Partition riots that Gautam goes through these changes. That it is a constant change of identity and a flexible attitude towards it which causes comfort in his travelling experiences reinforces the idea that Partition, with its focus on fixed religious and national identities, was a decision against nature and against the geography of the Subcontinent. When the Subcontinent’s natives were moving in accordance with their region’s liquidity and were mixing up with people from even the opposing religions, things were smooth. The tragedy was unleashed when people went for fixity, both in terms of identity and territory. In lieu of this tragedy, the whole of the Subcontinent’s environment responded in a harsh way. While writers like Khushwant Singh tell us that floods were on the rise when people were being killed and thrown in the rivers, Khalida Hussain, through her story “The Car Wagon,” tells how the dead bodies and the smell they gave out was damaging the over-all climate during 1947, which is something the Partition victims themselves have expressed: “Even the fruit on the trees tasted of blood, recalls Surdeshana Kumari, who fled from her home town in Pakistan to India. ‘When you broke a branch, red would come out,’ she said, painting an image of how much blood had soaked the soil in India” (Doshi and Mehdi).

Kumar’s nature, as visible from the concluding lines, is not Tennyson’s nature “red in tooth and claw,” but rather one that works placidly. Kumar’s protagonist, belonging to the soil of the Subcontinent, is not an extremist when it comes to religion, nor are his migrations backed by religious fanaticism, as happened in the large-scale migration during 1947, which was not naturally imperative but a result of human-made political ideologies.

If it is to be argued why DeLoughrey’s idea of water naturalizing human movement does not apply to the large-scale migration of 1947, it is because migrations, too, are of various types. There are, for example, migrations that are seasonal, done in response to the varying attitude of nature. These migrations are synchronized with the way the natural environment works, and are the kinds that keep the people prepared instead of taking them off-guard, like the one

planned on a political level in 1947. Still, a rigid adherence to DeLoughrey's idea would raise the argument that migration, in any case, was ineluctable for the people of the Subcontinent, considering their riverine land flowing incessantly. However, it is to be realized that the migration under scrutiny was not done in accordance with nature's demands, but was based on humans' whims, which is a probable reason why the migration was not a smooth one. Secondly, while doing it, the people did not listen to the other voice of water, which would have demanded a flexible approach towards identities along with the migration. Gautam's migrations, besides being devoid of religious extremism and jingoism, also incorporate a fluvial and frequent change of identity which renders his migrations smooth.

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