

THE DESCENT OF THE GANGES –TRACKING THE FLOW OF THE GANGES THROUGH INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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The horrific flooding and dreadful aftermath of the recent floods in Chennai has served as an eye opener to the urgent requirement to study river systems and their activity in order that we may be able to adapt accordingly, to ensure the survival of the human species.

The Ganges is one of the mightiest and most beautiful of our Indian rivers and has played a pivotal role in Indian English Literature. This paper will purview the role of the river Ganges tracing its turbulent descent from the lofty locks of Lord Shiva in the myths and legends to the calm and placid flow through the plains, as depicted in the various literary genres and forms . The wide spectrum of its literary portrayal includes the river as a natural element and source of water, as a symbol and as a metaphor. This paper aims to study the impact of the river on living organisms , to understand the conflict between nature and man , to find ways in which negative effects can be nullified and a wonderful symbiotic relationship be established between man and river. The works that will be studied include “A Bend in the Ganges” by Manohar Malgaonkar and “Water” by Bapsi Sidhwa.

Key Words: Water, Ganges, Mythology, Woman, Predicament

I. BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

“Jal bahule srustinasa, jalabihune srustinasa
(Too much or Too little water destroys the creation)”.

This proverb in Oriya comes to mind when reflecting on the floods that ravaged Chennai during November 2015. It has been one of the most terrible onslaughts of Mother Nature that Chennai and its inhabitants have been subjected to, in recent years. The devastation and loss incurred by the people is beyond comprehension and it will take a long, long while for the trauma to end, for people to develop a sense of acceptance and come up with solutions to ensure that such a situation does not arise again. Professionals from all fields are at work to understand the nature of rivers and other water bodies. In this context, we believe studying and analyzing the role of rivers in literature will serve to provide an insight into the lives of people and their relation with the rivers. This may prove to be more useful than the statistics provided by government departments or the Non-Government Organisations. A sample study involving the understanding of one river, its character

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and its interaction with organisms in its vicinity would be an effective way to gain some in depth knowledge and the Ganges –the mightiest and most beautiful of all Indian rivers - seems to be the best choice, as it has been portrayed across a wide range in all genres and forms of Indian English Literature. Jawaharlal Nehru, in *The Discovery of India*, described the Ganges as the river of India. “The story of the Ganges, from her source to the sea, from old times to new is the story of India’s civilization and culture, . . . of the adventure of man and the quest of the mind which has so occupied India’s thinkers, of the richness and fulfillment of life as well as its denial and renunciation, of ups and downs, of growth and decay, of life and death”. [8]

II. INTRODUCTION

Origin and Movement of the River

The Ganga (g əŋgɑː) or the Ganges (g ændʒiːz) — the -es being a Greek influence— is a trans boundary river of Asia, about 2595 km long, flowing through the nations of India and Bangladesh. It has its origin in the Gangotri glacier in the Himalayan region from where it flows south and east through the towns and cities of Haridwar, Kannauj, Kanpur and Lucknow before it joins the Yamuna at the Triveni Sangam in Allahabad. It then flows through several cities prominent among them being Patna and Varanasi before reaching Bengal. Along its path it is joined by many more rivers such as Tamsa, Gomti, Son and Koshi. It then enters Bangladesh, where it is called Padma, and merges with the Meghna river before finally emptying itself into the Bay of Bengal.

The banks of the Ganges have seen the growth and flourish of many capital cities, industrial towns as well as places of worship which includes temples, churches and mosques. The attitude of the Indian towards this river takes on different forms, for example, the river is loved and called *Matha* (Mother) Ganga, it is revered as a Goddess and worshipped, it is considered sacred and holy and also as a the *papanashini* - a dip in it is said to remove all sins; whereas a burial on its banks ensures *moksha* (salvation) for a true Hindu. References to these and other associations between man and the river are available in plenty in Indian Literature and an attempt has been made to track them through this paper.

A. *The Ganges in Hindu Mythology*

The Srimad Bhagavatam, one of the oldest Hindu religious texts, has the following lines stressing the divinity of the river which is said to have descended from heaven:

Tato-[A]neka-Sahasra-Kotti-Vimaana-Aniika-Sangkula-Deva-Yaana
Avataranti-Indu-Mannddalam-Avaarya
Brahma-Sadane Nipatati [9]

Meaning

From there (i.e. from Saptarshiloka –the heavens of the seven sages)), riding on many thousand crores of Celestial Spacecrafts (i.e. through celestial passageway), ...

... (River Ganga) descends on the sphere of the Moon, and flowing unimpeded...

... Falls on the abode (world)of Lord Brahma (the Creator in the Hindu Triumvirate)

The Rig Veda, which is one of the four Vedas (the most ancient of Hindu Spiritual texts) has the word Ganga appearing twice.

According to the ‘Vishnu Purana’ (the history of Lord Vishnu, the Preserver in the Hindu triumvirate) Ganga was created from the sweat Lord Vishnu’s feet. Hence, she is also called ‘Vishnupadi’ the one flowing from the foot of Vishnu.

Another mythological tale states that Ganga is Parvataraja’s daughter, and the sister of Parvati, Lord Shiva’s consort. A popular legend cites that Ganga was devoted to Lord Krishna in heaven, which made his lover Radha jealous, who cursed Ganga to go down to flow as a river.

The contemporary poet Keki Daruwalla merges myth with the river’s movement in his poem *Vignette II* where he addresses the Ganga, pointing out to the hordes of faithful devotees going down to pray to the river, and says:

You go the rounds of the *Panchtirath*
starting from the ghat where Durga
had dropped a sword
to where she dropped an earring,
and the Panchganga Ghat where four rivers
are said to meet the Ganga,
like this river of faith going down
the stone-steps to meet the river. [2]

Daruwalla’s literary technique and style is evident in his use of wordplay where he juxtaposes the “river” of faith going down to meeting the actual “river”.

B. *The Ganges in Literature*

Literary works involving the Ganges River are as numerous as pebbles on a beach. The banks of the Ganges River served as a literary platform for writers such as Kabir, Rabindranath Tagore, Herman Hesse, Bapsi Sidhwa and many more, stoking their imagination and enabling their creation of imposing historical and mythical characters such as Ashoka and Siddhartha. The role of the Ganges in Indian literature is not just that of a setting or a background for a story, very often it undergoes transformation and becomes the very soul of the work. Indian literature whether written in regional languages or English has played an important role in celebrating the river Ganges. This is so not only due to the geographical placement of the Ganges River but by the manner in which the river has been perceived by the Indian people since ancient times.

For example, the sacred text '*Mahabharatha*' describes the Ganges as the 'best of rivers, born of all the sacred rivers'. The *RigVeda*, the earliest of the four Vedas says, "Your ancient home, your auspicious friendship, O Heroes, your wealth is on the banks of *Jahnavi* (another name of *Ganga*)". The Ganges also plays a role in the '*Ramayana*' where Lord Rama and his wife Sita perform *tapasya* along her banks.

The role of the Ganges in Indian literature varies from place to place just as the name of the river changes as it flows through the different regions of the country. Its depiction is often based on the personal relationship and interaction between the author and the river. This phenomenon is not restricted to Indian writing; examples such as the writings of Mark Twain and William Wordsworth are prevalent in American and European Literature too. It has been seen that writers incorporate their experiences, the sacred and the profane, the extraordinary and the mundane, the ecstasy and the grief combining the vagaries of man and nature in an effort to lay bare their souls and impart profound messages to reclaim the spirit of humanity.

Our study of the portrayal of the Ganges in Indian English writing reveals various images that include its depiction as the destroyer of sins, as a symbol of purity and unity, as a metaphor for woman, as deliverer and savior of the human soul.

C. The Ganges as Papanashini (Destroyer of sins)

The *Garuda Purana* (The history of Lord Vishnu's faithful eagle, Garuda) states that, "Thousands of man's sins are destroyed by the holy sight of the Ganges, and he becomes pure by the touch of the water of the Ganges, by consuming it, or just by pronouncing the word Ganges". Thus the water of the Ganges is said to have the ability to remove all sins. This is reflected not only in Indian writing but also in that of the neighbouring countries, for example, G. Mend Oyo –a legend in his own right who is credited with the revival of the almost lost Mongolian script, talks about the Mongol connection with the Ganga in his essay "*Ganga river, Ganga lake, Folktales and Poetry: the Five of us*". Here he elaborates on the tales that he had heard about the Ganga in his childhood and he makes a specific mention of the one which declares the Ganga "descending from these celestial peaks, as the holy water from the Heaven. If somebody manages to sip even a drop of the holy water of Ganga all his sins would be purified. If you manage to fetch some for your mother, it is the best service you can do for your mother to pay back everything she has done for you". [5]

D. The Ganges as a Symbol

The Ganges has been considered as a symbol of purity, unity and steadfastness in many works by Indian writers writing in English. Manohar Malgaonkar's novel 'A Bend in the Ganges' deals with the ideologies and convictions of young Indians.

A true Indian is credited with having certain principles and values entrenched within him, these are values and belief systems that have been instilled in him from childhood, for example, Indian Culture and society has espoused the practice of non-violence as an absolute compulsion. The unshaken conviction and faith in these ideologies are often compared to the uninterrupted flow of the River Ganga which is considered to be the most sacred and holy, the veritable life-blood of the Indian. Its unhindered flow from the east of the country to the west is suggestive of the characteristic of the Hindu concepts of *Vasudeiva Kutumbakkam* (the world is a family) and peaceful coexistence. The flow of the river and the personality of a true Indian are brought into comparison in the title of this book. It is impossible to imagine that a Hindu would break away from his entrenched convictions and resort to violence. The title of Malgaonkar's book refers to the distortion that would occur in the personality of the Indian when he takes to violence and this change is considered to be as sacrilegious as the mighty Ganges turning away from its route creating a bend in the normal flow resulting in the warping of the beauty of the river in a similar manner.

The novel "A Bend in the Ganges" is set in the era of British Raj and the circumstances revolving around the India's freedom struggle and the ensuing riots. It deals with the life and actions of Gian and Debi Dayal, both of whom are young spirited youths raised in the spirit of tolerance and coexistence. Their hatred towards the British and impatience with Gandhiji's principle of Non-violence causes Debi to believe that violence may yield better results. He had been a victim of British cruelty too which killed and maimed his family members. He now gets involved in terrorist activities against the British along with a number of other youngsters. Gian however remains staunchly non-violent until his brother is murdered. He then throws his principles to the winds and ends up killing his brother's murderer. The novel ends with the arrest of the two young men –one for murder and the other for terrorism.

The novel mirrors Malgaonkar's disappointment with the young Indians in the newly created Indian nation harboring racial prejudices resulting in the cruel and dastardly riots in a post- independence scenario. He is also filled with sorrow at seeing his countrymen, neither having the courage to stick to their ideologies nor the loyalty that is absolutely essential in relationships, as is evident time and again in the novel as Gian betrays, first his friend and then his love. He regrets the change in the Indians, careless with their new found freedom and feels that the unswerving bent of mind and conviction, a part and parcel of the true Indian, is being lost creating a bend in the Ganges itself, which has always stood for the truth and fidelity. [1]

This novel carries a very relevant message that in our current circumstances too it is necessary to develop an ability to see the rivers as symbols of all that is pure, good and steadfast, to take lessons from them and flow along life, living and

letting other things live. This principle holds good for ensuring the survival of all life, including that of our mighty rivers which we are today choking, with all the garbage and effluents that we continue dumping into them. It is only when our rivers run straight and clear and fast that we can be sure that our lives will flow in a similar manner too.

E. Ganges as a Metaphor for Woman and Friend

“Ganga always extends her hand (sic) unto those that are devoted to her with humbleness of heart. She unites those that are so devoted to her with every kind of happiness”. [1]

Hindus have been pantheistic since the days of yore and the rivers have been revered and worshipped as Goddesses (Matha- the Divine mother). Thus we have Ganga Matha and Matha Saraswathi and many more. Religious pictorial representations feature Ganga as a fair young goddess usually sitting on a fish, holding a small water pot in her hands. She is also referred to as the second wife of Lord Shiva, the Destroyer. According to Hindu mythology, he had agreed to hold the river Ganga in his matted locks before releasing her to the earth, thereby lessening the ferocity and intensity of her descent from heaven.

It is well known that most of the rivers in India have female names. One reason could be the fact that they share similar characteristics with the female. For example, just as it takes a river to give birth to civilizations, feed people, animals, plants and accentuate the growth of life, so also it is a woman who can give birth to another life and be the main cause for the nurturing and fostering of the living being. In fact, the Hindi language and the French language categorises rivers as belonging to the feminine gender.

The Ganga is the background against which the plot of the novel “Water” by Bhabsi Sidhwa is played out. Bapsi Sidhwa was born in 1936 in Karachi, in the current Pakistan .A childhood lived in the pre independent India was influential in shaping her vision regarding Indian Culture. Thus we have her referring to the Ganges as a healer, nurturing mother and destroyer. In the novel “Water” Sidhwa demonstrates the manner in which water gives life and also takes life. The Ganges River is also visualized as a metaphor for the soul as it travels on the journey of life.

The portrayal of the connection between women and water is unique in this novel. The story revolves around Chuhiya and Kalyani, two young widows who meet on the banks of the Ganga, after being abandoned by their families, as was the custom among conservative Hindus in the earlier part of the 19th century. The river becomes the friend and confidante of the protagonist, the six year old child widow, Chuhiya and her lovely young friend, Kalyani. They envisage the river as a mother who consoled and offered solace when needed. Kalyani is forced into prostitution as most of the young widows living in the ashrams are. Kalyani decides

to sleep with the elite class community for the sake of the survival of the ashram and herself. The filth of her business however fails to pollute her soul as she believes in the dictum of Lord Krishna to “learn to live like a lotus- untouched by the filthy water it grows in”. [10]

Sidhwa’s poignant pictures of exploited women and their life in the ashrams point to a paradox between the situation on the ground versus the belief that the Ganga and its environs are pure and sacred. The shy and delicate love that springs up between Kalyani and Narayanan is pictured against the backdrop of a calm and placid river where “a boat glided silently along the river. A gentle breeze carried to her the haunting, long-drawn-out notes of a flute”. [10] On the other hand, the rights and the bodies of the women, be it girl or child, were violated with impunity right on the banks of the holy river and no one protested. These victims had only the river as a friend that seemed to console and comfort them. Sidhwa brilliantly brings in the essence of India as a combination of the real and surreal in her description of Kalyani ending her life in the river. She writes:

“She bent to splash her face with the sacred water that flowed from Shiva’s head, and smeared it over her face and hair. She clasped her hands in prayer for a moment. Then she calmly walked into the river until her short hair floated in an inky stain on the water. Ma Ganga had claimed her daughter” [10]

Writing about Sidhwa’s “Water” Tarun Maukharji points out in his writing on “*Films, Literature and Culture*”:

“The metaphorical and metonymical use and the multilayered connotations of the river are integral to the plot. Besides reflecting the shifting moods of the characters and the twists in the narrative tandem with the changes in Nature, the river operates at once as a regenerative element as well as a purifying agent; it is the resting place for tired bodies, the last sip for the departing soul and a site of rituals for both marriage and death; it is a source of hope where Chuhya floats a boat to carry her home and of hopelessness when it bears both Kalyani and her as object of lust.” [6]

F. The Ganges Predicament

In the *Valmiki Ramayana* we get an early glimpse of the true nature of the river. Here Valmiki points out:

Kvaacit Sthimitha-Gambhiiraam Kvacid Vega-Samaakulaam
Kvacid Gambhiira Nirghossaam Kvacid Bhairava-Nihsvanaam [11]

Meaning

At some places the river is Calm and Deep, while at other places it bursts with Speed, At some places one can hear the Sound of her Deep (Silence), while at other places one can feel the Silence within her Terrible (Flow)

In recent times Anissa Janine Wardi, commenting on the link between the nature of water and the mind says “All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was....It is emotional memory what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our ‘flooding’” [3]

Commenting on the river Ganga used as a metaphor in Keki Daruwalla’s work “*The Crossing of Rivers*”, Vrindha Nabar says that the Ganga “ appears here in all its primal, religious and emotive connotations. The river’s rhythm is of life and death, of birth and rebirth, of passion and rejection”. In the first poem “Boat Ride along the Ganga” from this collection, the poet views the land from his boat and sees the haze and smoke rising from the cremation ghats. The Hindus believe that one could attain salvation if he died in Varanasi or Kashi, and was cremated on the river bank. However, Daruwalla is upset at the commercialization of ‘tradition’ where the faithful are mercilessly exploited in Varanasi, the city of Death, as he puts it. He finds it difficult to reconcile the contradiction between the purificatory property of the river and the rampant corruption that seems to coexist alongside each other on the river banks and in his essay “*The Decolonised Muse*” he says,

“At the same time one could not close one’s eyes to the filth at the ghats of Benares and the seeming chaos, the miasma of funeral pyres going up in flames a few yards from unconcerned pilgrims bathing in the river, offering obeisance to the rising sun. I accepted the notion that its swirling waters cleansed one of his sins. But I could not shut my eyes to what was happening in front of me.” [7]

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion it is imperative that we note that not much time is left for us to undo our wrongdoings. The rivers maybe our “mothers” or “sisters” yet even the most loving or affectionate relative draws a line when pushed to a corner. If not retaliation, a mere defense proposition is enough to throw all human life out of gear as was evinced by the people of Kedarnath in 2013, Kashmir in September 2014 and Chennai in November 2015.

Analyzing all these it would do us well to remember the ecologist Vandana Shiva’s words. Pointing out the importance of water and our responsibility in conserving water for the present world and the absolute necessity to preserve the rivers to avoid the future wars she says “If Ganga lives, India lives: If Ganga dies, India dies.” [4]

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