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Representation of the Female Psyche: The Champa of *Aag Ka Darya*

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Champa is the main female character in *Aag Ka Darya*. Champa is a complicated and multi-faceted character and it is her journey or quest that helps in understanding her personality. Her journey—spanning centuries in the quest of knowledge, freedom, love and power—is shown through a series of rebirths in various time periods in Indian history. She has been referred to as Champak, Champavati and Champa at different times. However her journey is not an isolated subjective phenomenon; rather she is part of the flowing river of time or what has been referred to as *Aag Ka Darya* or the river of fire. The novel opens with the scene of Gautam swimming across a river. The river of fire is representative of time that carries in its drift and spate human lives and human history and its waters are creative and destructive. She floats along the river of time along with other companions who drift in and out of her many lives, such as Kamal, Hari Shankar, Tehmina, Talat, etc. The symbolic river is always in the background whether it is the Champak of Shravasti or the Champavati who sits beside the river as Kamal deserts her

or the Champa Ahmad who watches the boats on the Gomti river in Lucknow. Her journey begins with her encounter with Buddhism. Her meeting with Suman, a Buddhist nun who was born a princess, makes Champak question Suman about her choices.

Suman had renounced her royal life at the age of eighteen to join the Buddhist Sangh. She was twenty years old when Buddha gained enlightenment. It was eighty years since Buddha passed away. At eighteen years word of Suman's beauty had spread far and wide. Now a ninety-eight-year-old woman was sitting before her dressed in coarse saffron coloured clothes. What did she get by renouncing the world? A thief seemed to question Champak thus—'If I renounce the world will I get peace? And if I do not get peace even by that, then?'

Champak's questioning leads her on a long journey where rather than renounce life she wants to live it and find the purpose of her existence. By representing icons of great women in epics, a restrictive, traditional world is shown in which Champak is born. Though the *Mahabharata* presents noble women like Gandhari who blinded herself because her husband was blind and Anusuyya who got a second wife for her own husband yet the prevailing attitude towards women is one of contempt and distrust. It is this inequality that Champak tries to oppose as her personality emerges.

The first meeting between Champak and Gautam Nilambar is very significant considering that Gautam is an ascetic, writer, and artist who breaks all the rules of his ashram to be with her. However, the love between them is unrequited and the relationship that they share spans several centuries and births. Love rather than being a quest to unite becomes a canvas on which the inequalities between Gautam and Champak are displayed. Though the sexual side of their relationship never develops till the end, their relationship is constant. Champa's other romantic

and sexual encounters may be failures or successes but her relationship with Gautam continues interminably. They first meet each other at a dance and the dance is symbolic of the twists and turns of their relationship down the centuries. He quietly leaves his ashram and goes to the *mahua* garden where the royal court has set up a stage and dance and music are being enjoyed. He joins the dancers and dances beside Champak. For Gautam Champak is symbolic of womanhood and he equates her with various goddesses and the dance with a celestial dance:

Life is the greatest truth. Creation is the greatest reality. Hold shakti as sacred which is the mother of creation. Revere the goddess who is a mother—Uma-Gauri-Laxmi and whose other name is Asha—whose name is Kamala—who can be compared to lotus flowers. She is pleasant like the Champa flowers, she is a mother like the earth, a mother like the river. A mother is forebearing. A woman is forebearing because she is a mother. Champak is forebearing. Revere her. Worship her and bow before her...²

Champak in the earliest phase of the novel is for Gautam the embodiment of essential mythical womanhood. But while the dance goes on he falls asleep and in the morning the royal camp moves on. Champak as she passes by finds him asleep. The author's intention appears to have been to bring Gautam in touch with a dream-like reverie of perfect love but which he loses when he falls asleep. Champak arrogantly condemns Gautam who is fast asleep in the garden thus and then moves on:

The one who is awake one day will fall asleep and the one who is asleep shall awake one day.³

The underlying meaning of these lines is revealed as Champak and Gautam continue to meet and separate in different periods. It also augurs that their love cannot be fulfilled till they can understand each other and Champa can create a place of value for herself in the patriarchic

set-up which continues to dictate and confine women in a narrow world view.

The second meeting between Gautam and Champa is after a certain period of time and circumstances for both have changed. After her hometown Ayodhya was raided, she was captured along with the other girls of the household and forcibly married off to an officer in Chandragupta Maurya's court, who is twice her age and old and unsightly. But Champak is conscious of the word *pativrata* so she cannot now accept Gautam even if she wants to. Gautam who had escaped from the life of an ascetic and joined the theatre group in order to be with Champak returns once more to his old life. Champak repeats lines that she had uttered earlier:

The one who is awake one day will fall asleep and the one who is asleep shall awake one day.⁴

This awakening and slumbering and vice versa is symbolic of a woman's quest or journey from a lower consciousness to a higher consciousness that is analogous to the development of character in a *bildungsroman* novel. Champa's character begins to take a definite shape when she, in the form of Champavati, meets her lover in the form of Kamaluddin in another birth. Here Champavati is a native girl from Ayodhya and Kamaluddin is an Arab soldier in the Mughal courts who sings praises of the valour and learning of the Mughal courts. Champavati is against war and desires that Kamal should give up war but he only laughs at her beliefs and moves on. A procession of wandering monks passes by; this is used repetitively in the novel as perhaps a representation of Champa's spiritual quest.

But the ideas that are dear to Champak are expressive of the female view of the world, which stands for harmony, love and peace. The very fact that Champak is on a journey

of personal and spiritual growth is revealed when she retorts at his mockery of her interests saying:

What else should we do...should we play chess in palaces like your princesses of Jaunpur?

He replies ironically:

Of course...and our palaces have, besides chess, countless books, but you are yourself so learned⁵

This is a comment on Champavati's inadequacies in the eyes of Kamaluddin and which required more understanding and effort on her part. This is also the reason why she is unable to stop him and is left weeping on the shore of the river as he rides away into a haze of dust.

A comparison is brought about between the two men's (Gautam Nilambar and Kamaluddin) attitude towards women. While Gautam worshipped Champa in one birth, Kamaluddin is worshipped by her in another birth. Kamaluddin remembers all the women he loved while he travelled across the Arab world. He found that though they were sold, held captive by men, dominated by them and treated as having no identity or voice, they were icons celebrated and worshipped by poets. However, in Hindustan he found that women devotees sang *bhajans* in praise of Krishna showing that man had to acquire the stature of God to be worshipped by women. As can be perceived on the departure of Kamaluddin, Champavati's social status is revealed when she returns to her small tightly enclosed home. Ironically enough, the statue of Goddess Kali is placed on a small shelf and represents Champavati's limited and restricted world:

On a shelf near the door a small statue of Bhavani was kept before which the smoke from an incense stick was rising in a thin quivering stream. Champa watched this peaceful atmosphere from the doorway and after drying her tears came into the door.⁶

Gautam Nilambar meets Champa again as a courtesan in the period of the British rule in India where he is a clerk under the British officer Cyril. The position that Champa acquires is of great respectability and learning and though Gautam thought that she was in a degraded position, a courtesan of those times, she enjoyed the admiration and respect of men. By being in the role of a courtesan, Champa escapes the stranglehold of social tradition which she experienced in earlier births and which made her subservient to men. She has the freedom to develop her personality in which ever direction she chooses. However, her love for Gautam remains unrequited as Gautam refuses to be held back by her charms. He leaves Lucknow as a youth and returns to it as an old man. The period of Gautam's return is after the revolt of 1857 and both he and Champa have aged. But the aftermath of the revolt has ruined her and she becomes a beggar whom the lordly Gautam meets after a number of decades. It is clear that Champa is not spared suffering and agony in this birth too as she spreads her hands before Gautam begging for a few coins.

While Champa may have recognized him as her past love, she makes no demands of him and only blesses him. Gautam's musings at that moment reflect a typically patriarchal way of perceiving women. He muses thus:

Where does Beauty go after it slides off the face of a lovely woman? Does old age turn women into a different species? Why are old men venerated and women ridiculed as hags? Why didn't I run after her and ask her to sit beside me in this carriage and take her home?

Through Gautam's mindset the author shows the patriarchal attitude towards women that it is not the inner beauty of a woman that matters but her external appearance. However, Champa's personality undergoes greater changes and develops more complexities as she reappears in the pre-independence era of 1941. She

experiences a sense of freedom that she had never experienced in previous births and this freedom can be understood as a freedom to love any man she chooses:

Suddenly something strange happened. Champa felt an inexplicable elation. There was freedom in the wind, joyous contentment was palpable in the rustling of the leaves. Did others also experience this sense of liberation? Poor Tehmina, for instance, or foolish Gautam?⁸

Champa is romantically involved with Amir Reza (Tehmina's fiancé), Cyril Ashley, Gautam (who is involved with Shanta), and Bill Craig (who Shanta intends to marry after her divorce). But in all these episodes Champa does not see herself as flighty and she tells Gautam that it was not Cyril who deserted her but she who refused him. Gautam's ironical comment on Champa's indecisiveness reveals Champa's irrepressible desire for freedom:

'It seems to have become your pastime, refusing offers of marriage.'

'He wanted to divorce his wife and marry me, but I am not a home-breaker so I said, no.'

'Home-breaker, you mean,' he said gently, 'I'm sorry, I didn't know that. So once again you sacrificed your personal happiness for the sake of another woman. Tell me, then why are you trying to entice poor Bill?'⁹

To this Champa replies that she is jealous of Gautam's relationship with Shanta and therefore out of jealousy, she wants to hurt Shanta. Champa is part of a complicated web of relationships for though there is a subtle bond between her and Gautam is romantically involved with Shanta, a married woman and his cousin. He wants Shanta to be free of her unhappy marriage and be free to marry Bill Craig. Just as Champa cannot understand how Gautam can tolerate the fact that Shanta actually loves another man, so also Gautam cannot understand why she cannot commit herself to any man. But Gautam also affirms his complicated bond with Champa towards the end of the novel when the

group of students is separating after having completed their education at Cambridge.

Gautam said, 'Two distinct worlds are present in me all the time. One of them includes these people,' he pointed towards the room with its photographs and books, 'in the other there are only you and me, by ourselves. Both worlds are connected to each other through a bridge. What'll happen when this flimsy bridge breaks down?'¹⁰

Champa's personality finds wholeness only when she is back to the place where she had started her journey, a small town called Moradabad. When Kamal travels from Pakistan to Moradabad to meet Champa, his illusions about himself and his progress are shattered. He realizes that the Champa whom he thought was always far behind him was way ahead for she had found what her heart was seeking:

Kamal had seen Champa today perched on another rung of her ladder, against another backdrop, another set, another set of props. At least this was her real milieu. He closed his eyes. The Champa of Lucknow, Paris, Cambridge and London, and now the Champa of this joyless, half-lit house in Moradabad. The sadder and wiser, the serene Champa of new India.¹¹

References

1. Hyder, Qurratulain, 2003, *Aag Ka Darya*, Educational Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 82.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
7. Hyder, Qurratulain, 1998, 1999, 2002, *River of Fire*, Women Unlimited, New Delhi p. 178.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 266-67.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 342.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 401.