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Unveiling the Layers of Woman's Heart -PannaNaik, A Legendary American

Gujarati Diaspora Writer

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Abstract

Born in 1933 in Mumbai and living in the United States for more than fifty years, the most celebrated Gujarati diaspora writer, PannaNaik has carved a niche in Gujarati diaspora literature by writing several volumes of trail blazing poetry and short stories with the sole purpose of imparting a distinct voice to feminine heart. She is highly recognized by Gujarati literary establishments in India as well as in the United States. She synthesized the Indian and modern cultures with a modern sensitivity and revealed the anguish of contemporary life through her

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works. Her consciousness of being a woman and her feminine emotions incessantly dominate her poetry and short stories.

The present paper is an attempt to divulge the inner recesses of feminine heart and her desires to lead a life of her own choice even in an unknown country and her free will to choose a path that is less trodden. The focus is on bringing to light the immense contribution of PannaNaik whounceasingly voiced the issues related to feminine manas (temperament) for more than four decades through various forms of Gujarati literature.

KEYWORDS: manas(temperament), Gulmohar, Ratrani, Champa, Chameli, Parijat, Borsali, kevdoo, kadamb and Mogro (Jasmine), GauriVrat(a fast performed by maidens to appease Goddess Parvati), Toya(Still),MaruSharir(My Body),mehendi.

Introduction

PannaNaik, a resident of United States since her marriage in 1960, started writing poetry as late in 1972. She is a living writer and has published nine volumes of poetry till date. She also translated her own poetry into English that appeared in *Massachusetts Review*, *Chandrabhaga*, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, and *In Their Own Voice: The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Woman Poets*. An emeritus librarian at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries, PannaNaik holds three Masters Degrees (MA in Gujarati and Sanskrit literature from University of Bombay, MS in Library Science from Drexel University in Philadelphia and MS in South Asian Studies from University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia). She also taught two courses in Gujarati at the University of Pennsylvania to second generation Indian Americans who were eager to know about their cultural heritage and roots.

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The most established writer PannaNaik openly declared her relationship with Washington DC's Chief Financial Officer Natwar Gandhi in 2013. Talking about her association with Natwar, Panna says, *"I cannot express how happy I am, that someone loves me even at this age. I will only say that god has really blessed me. I am proud that I can attract a man even at this age."* (80 years) Natwar Gandhi tendered his resignation as CFO of Washington DC with a declaration that he wishes to start a new chapter in his life with PannaNaik. After the death of PannaNaik's husband in 2011 and Natwar Gandhi's wife Nalini in 2009, Natwar admitted in 2013 that his new love is PannaNaik, an Indian writer who is already known to his family for many years. Panna shares and discusses everything under the sun with Natwar and considers him a lover as well as her friend. She even dedicated her collection of poems, *Attrakshar* to Natwar. She remembers her first meeting with him in 1976 when her first anthology of poems was published in Washington. It was poet Suresh Dalal who introduced the two. In the first meeting only, Panna could realize the poetic side of Natwar. She strongly believes that love knows no age bar. She considers her extremely fortunate to have found love at this point of life. She feels that one must move on and values will evolve with time.

In her poems, Panna effectively used a nonmetric style of poetry. In them, she expressed the anguish of her unfulfilled motherhood and the pain of the contemporary life. She is always conscious of being a woman who wishes to live life on her own terms.

PannaNaik's Literary Collection

PannaNaik has produced eight poetry collections: *Pravesh (1975)*, *Philadelphia (1981)*, *Nisbat (1984)*, *Arasparas (1989)*, *AavanJavan (1991)*, *Rang Jharukhe (2004)*, *Cherry Blossom (2004)* and *Attar Akshar (2010)*. Her sole short story collection *Flamingo* was published in 2003. She also has to her credit a variety of essays which are yet to be compiled. She is pivotal in dealing with feminine issues related to nostalgia, homesickness, alienation and the inner environment of female mind that is battling to find expression. Her easy, flowing and forceful style of writing has fascinated literary giants of the 21st century. Panna's poems express the inner agony of woman, who is forced to adjust in a world that is devoid of warmth, true love and compassion.

Nostalgia: A Prominent Theme of Panna's Poems

The Indian diaspora has been transformed in recent years and the issues of displacement, migration, cross- fertilization of ideas and the upheaval of varied cultural practices are being viewed as inevitable part of modernism. The drift of people towards globalization, cultural exchanges, economic progress and social identity has created mental crisis among the people and challenged the basic purpose of life to acquire inner happiness of heart and soul. Panna's poems commendably reveal the distressed heart that longs to adjust in the newly created situation. In a poem entitled *The Living Room*, Panna divulges her feelings in the following words:

I reorganize my living room
asking each piece
where it would like to be placed.
I give a new spot to the sofa and the lamp,

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change the drapes, and
replace the old rug with a wall-to-wall carpet.

The living room with its new décor

looks precise and proper.

When everything is thus in place

I begin to wonder!

where among these things

should I place myself?

Through several poems focused on nostalgic feelings, Panna compares herself with a fish aimlessly searching for an abode in the midst of abounding sea. She talks about the initial years when letters, invitations and celebrations from her relatives reached her in plenty and which gave her reason to visit India quite often. Subsequently with the death of her parents, there arose the inevitability for her to adjust in the foreign land. Remembering her mother, Panna cites the illustration of withering *Tulsi* plant grown in the courtyard of her house in India longing to hear the sound of footsteps of her mother.

Panna compares the natural environment of America with that of India emphasizing the fact that one does not find the flowers of *Dahlia*, *Gulmohar*, *Ratrani*, *Champa*, *Chameli*, *Parijat*, *Borsali*, *kevdo* and *Mogro* (Jasmine) in Philadelphia; the flowers of Maple, daffodils, tulips, petunia and impatiens are grown in plenty here. Also the trees of banana and *kadamb* have no place in this land; only the trees of pine, spruce and dogwood abound here. Panna expresses her

deep agony saying that the colourful flowers and trees in Philadelphia seem to her transitory and devoid of intoxicating fragrance while she is fascinated by enthralling aroma of immense variety of flora in India.

Panna incessantly pines for the opulent and convivial culture of her native land where there is a deep bonding among family members and there is an air of compassion blowing cheerfully everywhere. Panna yearns for that ardour in Philadelphia which she experienced in India; she longs for that very affection in the midst of which she has grown into an adult; she craves for that attachment which she felt in a large joint family of more than twenty five members of her family. Everything appears vacant, pensive and odourless in this new land called Philadelphia.

In her anthology of poetry *Philadelphia [1980]* and *Nisbat [1988]*, Panna touches a chord of curious amalgamation of Indian and American cultures with a tinge of modern sensitivity. She considers America accountable for her becoming a poet. She pointedly reveals the solitariness of people of modern era. Her poems are soaked in the agony of an individual trying to carve a place in the fast-growing world of materialism. Panna writes in her poem *Ceiling*:

Lying in bed
staring at the ceiling
I felt like reaching out:
it seemed so close.
After an unsuccessful attempt,
I put chair upon chair upon chair
on my bed, stood atop this pyramid

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like an acrobat

but still could not touch the surface

that had seemed so close.

I cannot figure out

whether the ceiling is much too high

or my arms much too short.

Revelation of Woman's Heart: The Nub of Panna's Poems

Panna's poems are the repository of women's bold attitude towards the world; they exhibit her inner desire to live liberally like men. Her poems do not depict hypocritical stance of women; on the contrary, they express open, independent and audacious bearing of women. Panna emphasizes the inner happiness of women; her wish to attain perfection; her searching of contentment even in the midst of a close net family structure. Such poems are the reflection of diaspora women struggling for attaining mental peace and striving to get complete satisfaction in life irrespective of the family bondage she is compelled to resist.

It is noteworthy that some of the poems of Panna are purely subjective; they reveal her own pain and dejection, her personal agonies and discontentment. But she has done it intrepidly without any kind of reluctance. Her poem *Toya(Still)* is a bold description of her disgruntled married life. She says that when she was single, she performed *GauriVrat* as per the

instructions of her mother; wore *mehandi* on her hands, kept fast for five days, poured water in *Tulsiplant*, lightened *diya* and prayed for a good husband; *still*, why is her bedroom engulfed in fire? (53) Another poem *MaruSharir*(My Body) presents the intense agony of her pallid married life in which she describes the scene of her bedroom where her husband seems to her an outsider and she is compelled to undergo physical torture that her husband calls love. She explains how she battles to get up from the bed but of no avail; her body hurls down on the insipid bed. (55) Panna furthers the agonized state of her mind in the poem *SatheToya*(Together Still), emphasizing the fact that in spite of being married, they seem stranger to each other. Though they are treading on the same path, yet their footsteps appear charbroiled. It is only to tally with the social configuration and avoid societal infamy that they wear a veil of a happy married couple. Her poem *Sweater* depicts her mental state in which she remarks that her husband and she are designed from different wool with different texture; she longs to redesign the sweater without impairing the sheen of the original texture. The same idea is recurrent in her poem *Debt*:

You and I
two separate bodies
but a single soul –
a million efforts have been made
to see this ideal come alive
but somehow deep somewhere
rings a perennial echo
of separateness
of each other's non-acceptance.

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We are nothing else –
just two pages of a book
facing each other
bound but separate
just sewn together by predestined debts
of mortal ties

Conclusion

PannaNaik, an erudite American Gujarati diaspora writer, having commendable grip over English language, prefers to write poems, stories and essays in Gujarati language. She lays bare her heart while talking about the dreary life of American woman always craving for company of a loving heart and longing for togetherness which she, in spite of several efforts, fails to acquire. The self-centered and materialistic life of America leaves the woman in a pathetic state of mind and she is compelled to search affection in a partner other than her own. The modern gadgets of communication prove miserably ineffective in diminishing the wide gulf created between the couples who live frosty life centering on their own selves. Though the alien land ceaselessly torments them, yet they make interminable efforts to adjust there. But in this attempt, the bonding of selfless ties of their native place lingers in their minds and they find themselves engulfed by a band of emotionally detached partners who hardly understand their feminine surge of emotions battling to surface and reveal their agonized hearts. Panna's poems bring to light the desire of fulfillment of the feminine aspirations and the hurdles in accomplishing her dreams.

Her poems are the true revelation of her heart aiming to impart equal status to woman as that of man so that she can also live her life with her head held high.

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