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Women Negotiating Space: Punjabi Diasporic Literature

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Abstract:

All through literature we find that women who have recognized oppression in the domestic sphere may choose to register their protest in varied ways. The means of protest reflect on the codified gender roles in a particular society. My paper Negotiating Space: Punjabi Diasporic Literature is an attempt to bring out the different ways in which diasporic Punjabi women characters register their responses in the domestic sphere of a polygamus/ adulterous marriage and how in an alien land finding themselves desolate and lonely having cut asunder the umbilical cord they try to negotiate their way through life, by comparing two short stories written in Punjabi by Veena Verma. Their ways of protest also give us an insight into the Punjabi diaspora which continues to be as feudal and conservative in the country of their adoption as it was in its ancestral land.

Keywords:

Punjabi Women, Diaspora, Oppression, Protest, Negotiation.

During the twentieth century, people from several communities immigrated to UK, amongst them are the Punjabi's from India and Pakistan. They carried with them their literary talents and several of them have taken to writing in the English language while others have expressed themselves in their native language. These writers have absorbed what they have seen in England and reflected it in their works. Among these writers are Harjeet Atwal, Amarjeet Chandan, and Shiv Charan Gill to name a few. Veena Verma, whose two short stories are the focus of my paper, is also a Diasporic writer of South Asian origin in UK. Like most Diasporic writers, Veena Verma, who is now a resident of England, has retained her touch with the native world and nuances of her childhood. Born and brought up in Buladha in Bhatinda district of Punjab, Veena now works as a Care Manager in a Social Service Department in London. Her deep insight into the human psyche, sharpened perhaps by the nature of her job and her experiences in life, is strongly reflected in her fiction. Her collection of short stories 'Mul-di-Teevi' as well as 'Farangian di Nooh' evoke a vivid picture of the social fabric of Punjab and the Punjabi community settled in England. Having grown up in Punjab, she had lived through the conventional socio-ethical mores of the society of the homeland. Now settled in England as a divorced woman, choosing to stay single and independent, she has also experienced what she describes as the hypocritical patriarchal mores of the Punjabi Diaspora.

Her works bring to life the social milieu of Punjab, the upwardly mobile Punjabi society, which has propelled people to foreign shores lured by the lucre and glamour of the west, and simultaneously satirizes the same society especially the Diaspora for having become a generation of flotsam, "the nowhere men" in their new world. Such is

the lure of the glitz, glamour and the promise of a comfortable life style in these countries that thousands leave the warm hearth of home in search of jobs abroad flush with Dollar and Euro dreams. So much so that it is said that in certain areas of Punjab when a mother is about to deliver she looks west wards in the belief that it would ensure that her child would make it there one day and parents happily marry off their daughters to anyone who bears the least semblance to a human form, under the illusion that it spells economic security, liberation and progress for their daughters. The reality however is quite to the contrary. Many of the men end up doing menial jobs all over the continent, devoid of any kind of dignity and the women are faced with the same patriarchal oppression as they face at 'home' and are subject to abuse and exploitation even in their new 'world'. The reason being that the diasporic dissemination creates an imaginary homeland in the psyche of these people and they carry their nostalgic experiences and their identity in the homeland to the diasporic land. As a result, it is only the physical location that changes and not their being. So, the India that they carry in their minds leads to the formation of the same patriarchal hegemonic values in the so-called progressive lands. Jasbir Jain rightly points out that Diaspora has the "ambiguous status of being both an ambassador and a refugee"

Veena Verma's short stories portray the subjugation of the marginalized members of the Indian diasporic society in the UK, be they women, children or at times even men. In all her works one discerns a deep concern for the oppressed, especially for women who are marginalized not only at the social level which has been the trend so far in Punjabi fiction, and also she shows their responses to patriarchy in an alien land which manifest at the psychological level.

All through literature we find that women who have recognized oppression in the domestic sphere may choose to register their protest in varied ways. Written way back in the fourth century B.C., Aristophanes's characters in 'Lysistrata' decide to deny sexual access to their husbands, in recent times, Manju Kapoor's protagonist in 'Chocolate' decides to transgress sexually. The varied means of protest reflect on the codified gender roles in a particular society. My paper "Negotiating Space: Punjabi Diasporic Literature" is an attempt to bring out the different ways in which diasporic Punjabi women characters register their responses in the domestic sphere of a polygamous/adulterous marriage and how in an alien land, finding themselves desolate and lonely having cut asunder the umbilical cord, they try to negotiate their way through life, by comparing two short stories written in Punjabi by Veena Verma. Their ways of protest also give us an insight into the Punjabi diaspora which continues to be as feudal and conservative in the country of their adoption as it was in its ancestral land.

Whilst some of Verma's women are unable to step out of their gender role and become passive, hapless victims, there are others who do undergo agony but then fight back to overcome the odds and create an identity for themselves. Two such women are Mrs Kaur in *Khund Khadisni* and Shanti Devi in *Farangian-di-Nooh*. I intend to compare and contrast these two protagonists who are victims of patriarchy in their new homeland. Lured by the mirage of a better future in foreign lands the girls are married off by their respective families to first generation immigrants to England. The two women however face oppression and domestic violence in a foreign land and have no one to stand by them in their hour of need.

Mrs Kaur's place in the family is challenged when her husband gets a second wife from India. This new bride Naseeb is almost half his age and the pretext for marriage is the barrenness of Kaur. Kaur accepting the new wife, justifies the continuance of her presence in the house to herself and to others, and even defends her husband's actions; the true custodian of Indian values and culture in a foreign land she states that she herself was blighted and the second marriage was only for the sake of progeny and that the husband never intentionally discriminated between the two wives. She devotes herself entirely to the needs of the family-working through the day in a factory and looking after the 'other' woman's children at night. Thus, Kaur carves out her space and place in the family.

Carrying the paraphernalia of the values of the country of her origin Kaur firmly believes that a woman's identity is through her children and even offers a piece of advice to the social worker Madhu, who is her counsellor, to get married quickly and to bear three or four children, before she is too old, as merely speaking in English (*angrezi vich gitpit* as she calls it) would not make her an Englishwoman and that she still is a part of the diasporic community bound by the shackles of the conservative Indian code. However, the death of her husband brings out Kaur's simmering anger and sense of injustice in the form of erratic behaviour- she starts banging her head against the bed post, at times deliberately slips in the bathroom, threatens to commit suicide every now and then, unnecessarily calls out to the children every few minutes to take her to the wash room, begins to scream in the middle of the night and so on and so forth. She profusely showers curses and abuses, makes life a veritable hell for the rival woman and her daughters. She even accuses the 'other woman' for having "consumed" the husband and for having "eaten up" the house.

We realize that her earlier unruffled demeanour was actually only a façade and a way of negotiating her trauma to survive within the parameters of the prescribed family bonds and to retain her own mental equilibrium. The gross injustice that life has meted out to her leads to a deep sense of nothingness in her existence. Mrs Kaur's husband had neither consulted her nor taken her into confidence when he had remarried, 'treated her like cattle' as she herself puts it. And although she does assert that he was a reasonable man and tried to be fair to both of them yet one can sense her insecurity and distress in the realization that age and barrenness had weighed heavily against her and made the other woman, 'darling' while she herself remained 'Dhanwant kaur'.

Though she worked in a factory and was economically independent, yet she never considered moving out of marriage as an option. That choice did not exist at all because her life is governed by the leitmotif '*log kee kehange*' (what will the people say). This public opinion is the driving force behind every action and overrides all other aspirations and desires in the Punjabi community. As such the only course available to her was to endure. In *Women and Madness* Phyllis Chesler notes that "women are motherless children in patriarchal society". By this she means that women have had neither power nor wealth to hand on to their daughters. They are dependent on men as the children are on women. The most that they can do is to teach their daughters the tricks of surviving in patriarchy by pleasing men. Mrs Kaur's life is lived on a somewhat similar principle. She iterates that men are like balloons and the slightest of breeze blows them away. The onus lies on the woman to keep them in a tight knot. She says she herself did her best to ensure this. While her husband was alive Mrs Kaur endured to the best of her ability the fate meted out to her in order to maintain her place

and space in the house, tolerated the rival woman in her life, even suffered physical atrocities at the hands of her husband, but, “did not leave the house”.

Helpless before patriarchy she vents out her fury at this other woman after her husband’s death. This woman now becomes for her a living symbol of her husband’s treachery as also of patriarchal oppression. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Mad Woman in the Attic* state that internalization is the outcome of a failure to offer potential resistance to the patriarchal and exploitative forces. The subject then suppresses the frustration and seeks refuge in tormenting the self- body and mind. Mrs Kaur’s tantrums are the result of suppression and endurance she has undergone, a manifestation of the suppressed/ dormant anger that lay buried for all these years under the rubble of daily life and conventional socio-ethical mores.

This was one shade of response to patriarchy, while the second story *Farangian di-Nooh* that I deal with unfolds a response which is quite to the contrary. In the story *Farangian di-Nooh* literally translated as the “Daughter-in-law of the Foreigners”, Shanti Devi is also a victim of Domestic violence and deceitful patriarchal mores. The permissiveness and ‘freedom’ of the brave new world sucks Shanti’s husband like several other Indian men into the mires of depravity and lasciviousness. Married, with three children, Shanti like Kaur initially pretends that it does not bother her and deliberately turns a blind eye to it. But things do not stop here adding insult to injury the husband begins to abuse her physically as well. At the outset Shanti does not protest but when it becomes a repeated affair she one fine day calls the police and has him arrested, stating that she feared that he would kill her and the children. She provides the police with sufficient proof that he had tried to do so on other occasions as well. As expected the husband resorts to shedding crocodile tears and makes false pleas and promises, but she is not taken in by the hysteria and nor does she succumb before the emotional pressure from his relatives. The relatives then threaten to ostracize her but Shanti stands her ground and when they try to push her into moving to another city she does not buckle under pressure. The sacrosanct Indian social norms are invoked, Shanti is told to be ashamed of herself and the cornered woman can do nothing but threaten them with law. The relatives then try to intimidate her by slandering and maligning her reputation in the society. Shanti resolutely turns a deaf ear to everything directing her energies towards carving a stable and peaceful life for her children. It is here, at this juncture that the germ of a person determined to live and choose her life with dignity, integrity and pride is born.

Shanti’s travails however do not end with the separation from her husband. It is actually the beginning of a new ordeal. At every step she is faced with the fate of a single woman. She learns to fend herself against the chauvinists who consider a single woman as ‘available’. She is not passive in her rebellion rather gives these men a piece of her mind so that they are under no misconception and stay clear of her. When Mohinder, a colleague, tries to cosy up to her she bluntly tells him to first learn the basic etiquette of interacting with a woman. She is equally protective about her children as well and never lets anyone abuse or indict them. When her Indian neighbour accuses her children of theft she not only defends them but tells the neighbour to get a DNA Test for his children. Shanti lives by the principle of ‘Live and let live’ and though she’s aware of what is happening around her she generally keeps to herself and doesn’t poke her nose in other people’s affairs but in return she expects the same from them. Young, beautiful, single and to top it a brave woman she becomes an enigma for people. In a society

ridden with dogmas Shanti tries to steer her life without bothering about '*Loki kee kehange*'.

Shanti is a woman driven by a desire to live life. She turns to the more positive aspects of the ethos and value system of the New World and learns to value life, her own self, her own identity and her happiness. The English Law protects the woman; she uses it to her advantage and buys her freedom from the brute that her husband is. Her movement out into this new world does not stop here; she believes in widening her horizon and even marries her daughter to a Muslim boy whom she loves. She recognizes that the old dogmas do not hold good in this world and objecting would only lead to losing the children. She trains herself not to rot or pine for a man who never cared for her rather believes in moving on. Aware of the discriminating and self-aggrandizing hypocritical patriarchal mores of the Asian community where men can never be friends she decidedly keeps them at bay while at the same time forms a silent bond with John Smith her colleague at the Hospital and after taking pre-mature retirement both become partners in life as well as in the Store that they together open.

In the first story we find that Mrs Kaur had no children and leaving the house in some ways would have been much easier for her but she refuses to open her eyes to the new world. She knows that merely being provided for is not the meaning of life yet she bows down before the social norms and negotiates trauma within those norms. She rationalizes her husband's rejection to continue living within the mores of the patriarchal society, but her subterranean discontent manifests to unjustly victimize another marginalized member of the society. The victim thus in the process becomes the oppressor. Her psychological state is a touching examination of the conflict of a woman torn asunder by the juxtaposition of contradictory emotions.

In contrast Shanti Devi has three children who could actually have become a deterrent to her moving out yet she decides to take life by horns and live it to the full and on her own terms. The lone warrior bearing the yoke of the rigid Asian Community, a Broken Home, an alien land and loneliness does not ever give in to the Cinderella Syndrome and wages her battle through life and wins it. In the character of Shanti Devi we have portrayed for us the psyche of a bold and rebellious woman, in an adopted land, with its attendant dilemmas and challenges, who struggles to carve out a niche for herself in the new world. For Shanti, to borrow the words of Homi Bhabha, "to be unhomed is not to be homeless".

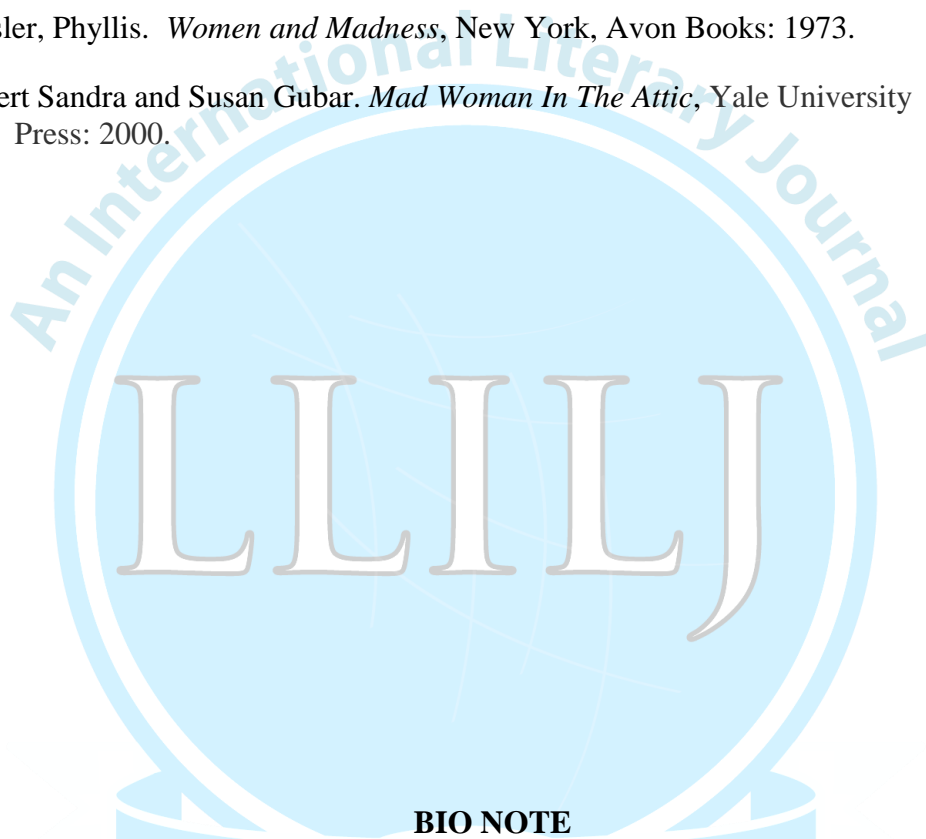
Shanti is a woman driven by a desire to live life. She turns to the more positive aspects of the ethos and value system of the New World and learns to value life, value her own self, her own identity and her happiness. She negotiates life with an internal strength which the patriarchal society is unable to break and she stands up to injustice with sterling courage thus creating a better future for herself and her children. So what we find is that Shanti is able to break the barriers of the land as she moves out to conquer the new world and evolves into a new self, whereas Kaur striving to live up to the image of 'the angel in the house' is unable to break free of the claustrophobic and destructive codes of the so highly glorified ethnicity of the existence of the homeland even in dislocation nor is she able to assimilate the positive aspects of the ethos and value system of the new culture, her journey is inward, she internalizes the trauma and it leads to rupturing of the self. The two stories clearly delineate that Veena Verma firmly believes that mere geographical movement is not the key to progress and modernity in

the real sense of the term. Women even when they get dislocated from 'home' into the 'world' are faced with similar conditions- 'oppression' and 'subjugation' and wherever they exist they need to struggle to find their space. The new world necessitates that they transcend the cultural border, sift the husk from the kernel imbibe, whatever is good and reject the rest to move towards a more constructive existence.

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BIO NOTE

Madhuri Chawla is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Dyal Singh Evening College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest are Gender Studies and Diaspora Studies. She has published research articles in Journals and books, and articles of general interest in leading National Dailies. She also translates from Punjabi to English and has participated in several workshops organized by Sahitya Akademi, British Council and others. She has a book on translation and her translations have been published in various Anthologies and Journals as well. She has also presented Papers at several National and International Conferences.

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