Contours of Resistance: The Postcolonial Female Subject and the Diaspora in the Punjabi Short Story

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Abstract

Diaspora literature and theory offer significant critiques of traditional ideas regarding nation-states, identities and dominant cultures. While it is true that the literature of the diaspora has been receiving increasing attention as of late, it is worth noting that works written in the diasporans' native languages are generally not included in wider discussions about the more complex issues related to the diaspora. As an initial corrective for this deficiency, this article explores selected stories in Punjabi, paying special attention to issues relevant to the lives and experiences of women in diaspora. Diasporic conditions, as most of these stories seem to assert, can be painful for women, but even while negotiating within a diverse system of values, many of them eventually discover possibilities for independence and growth. Such personal improvements are attainable due to their newfound economic liberation, but hard-won economic independence comes with a price. The inclusivity implied by identitary hyphens (i.e. Chinese-American; Mexican-American, etc.), so celebrated in diaspora writings in English, are almost as a rule missing in the fictional accounts studied here. In these accounts, an essential feature of diasporic subjectivity is the double sense of "Otherness" strongly felt by people who, having extricated themselves from the cultural demands of their original group, are not unchallenged members of the dominant culture.

Keywords: patriarchal, Punjabi diaspora; short stories; sexuality; Veena Verma

> The artist in isolation, the artist wounded, is now a diasporic body politic collectively wounded. Built into the aesthetic is the idea of the human as being worthy of consideration. – Vijay Mishra (2007, p. 149)

Mostly due to its troubled colonial past, the Indian state of Punjab[1] has been a witness to the extensive migration of its denizens, especially to Europe and North America. That exodus has complex histories and routes, and from the late nineteenth century on it has occurred in distinct waves. Starting in the 1980s,[2] a thriving body of creative literature in Punjabi, written by persons of Indian origin settled primarily in England, the United States and Canada, bears witness to the multifarious experiences of a migrant generation. Having moved predominantly from rural areas in Punjab, these writers often evince a strong attachment to the places from which they've migrated. These works, as a category of Punjabi literature, are undoubtedly a transient phenomenon, as it is unlikely that subsequent generations of diasporic Punjabis will be interested in adopting the language for their creative endeavours. Moreover, succeeding generations might not be interested in reading literature in the language of their forebears. The readership for these diaspora writings, tellingly, will be confined to the Indian Punjab.

This corpus is distinguished by a rich literary output by female writers; thus, one encounters, among other things, a strong preoccupation with issues associated with the lives, feelings, problems and hopes of Punjabi women, especially those seen as diasporic. A conspicuous detail in this creative output is that male writers seem equally concerned with the problems encountered by women in diaspora, reminding one of the assertion that "Diasporas and their creative outputs are one of the prime sites from which a new humanism might be imagined" (Kalra et al., 2005, p. 31). These writers aspire to take full stock of the complex ways in which the lives of migrants are shaped by the diasporic experience, and it is strongly tinged with a desire for a better deal for all the precariat of a world marked by inequality.

The linguistic divide of academic, and even day-to-day, life, unfortunately, has resulted in a strange separation of domains, as far as discussions about Punjabi diaspora literature are concerned. As a result, it is very rare (in spite of the growing interest in writings from and about diaspora) to come across analyses of diaspora literatures produced in Indian regional languages in departments of English. In the humanities, as a consequence, very broad areas of diasporic experience remain underrepresented. Although academic discussions revolve chiefly around diaspora literature in English, writers in Punjabi and other Indian languages fill some gaps in our knowledge of the experience of migration that literature in English does not. Translations, of course, can go a long way in making known diaspora writings to readers from other languages, though the business of translation hitherto has failed to keep pace with the fast flow of works in Punjabi.[3]

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[1] The present-day Punjab is a truncated version of the erstwhile province of Punjab in the Mogul and British eras. The partition of India in 1947 left a significant area of Punjab within Pakistan. Demarcation of the state on linguistic basis in 1966, when a new state of Haryana was carved and some hill regions were transferred to Himachal Pradesh from Punjab, further curtailed its area.

[2] Punjabis abroad had started giving vent to their feelings in the written form as early as the first decades of the twentieth century. The multi-lingual journal Gadar, beginning its publication in 1913 in United States, had articles and poems about love of the motherland and anti-colonialism in Urdu, Punjabi and some other Indian languages.

[3] Two significant translations of Punjabi short stories about diaspora came out in the initial years of the century: *From Across the Shores: Punjabi Short Stories by Asians in Britain* (2002) edited and translated by Rana Nayar, and *Between Two Worlds: Punjabi Short Stories* (2004) translated by Rita Chaudhry and Harbir Singh Manku.

Those who write creative works in English about the Indian diaspora are almost entirely city-based or are first or second-generation migrants. In contrast, diasporic writers who choose an Indian language as their creative medium are almost entirely from the migrant generation and, as observed earlier, largely from rural regions. As such, nostalgia for the places they've left behind is rather pronounced in them, as they appear to be more closely connected to the society and culture – the "soil" – of their "home" than diaspora writers in English. In fact, Indian diasporic writers in English omit many of the themes, feelings and experiences of diasporic life, a life of work in factories, economic and sexual exploitation, insecurity that comes with illegal status, forced marriages and so on.

The very choice – which is rarely a choice – of a language for creative expression is often an outcome of the socio-ideological situatedness of a person. Rana Nayar's contention, in his introduction to *From Across the Shores: Punjabi Short Stories by Asians in Britain*, that it is a conscious "decision" by diasporic authors from Punjab to write in Punjabi, because writing in English would be an "abject surrender" to "the dreaded alien culture" (2008, p. xiii) is, to say the least, debatable.

The short story remains the favoured mode of imaginative writing for diasporic authors in Punjabi, though other literary forms like the novel, poetry and plays have also been used as modes of creative expression by many of them.[4] The form of the short story seems especially suited to explore diasporic issues. None of these authors, understandably, writes full-time. So, constraints of time and suitability of the form make the short story the preferred form of expression. Some stories are quite short, clinching their issues in four or five pages; many others, as in the case of Veena Verma,[5] can be fairly long. And realism is the preferred context. What surprises about most of these stories is the way they seem to posit libratory vistas in terms of sexuality – outlooks perceptibly free from predatory and disciplinary directives. Yet, cut loose from conventional sexual norms, support structures like the traditional extended family system fade and, as a result, relationships suffer. This generally harms women and children. Many of the women characters presented in these tales, however, manage to establish subversive positions from where they challenge and, at times, manage to erode the discriminatory systems around them. This is because the diasporic space allows the development of an oppositional selfhood, though we come across a few stories where women are presented as defenceless, unfortunate victims as well.

The Male in the Stories

A majority of these stories, understandably, are about "life led outside the habitual order", as Edward Said labels it (p. 186). Beyond the pale of their habitual order lies a place where discrimination in the workplace, in the streets and even at the hands of the authorities is common. For instance, the short story "Ustare" [Razors] by Tarsem Nilgiri, a Punjabi-British writer, is about the sexual harassment and exploitation faced by Indian women in a factory.

[4] As a genre, short story in Punjabi emerged in early twentieth century under the influence of British literature. Subsequently, owing largely to the propagandist distribution of Russian literature in Indian languages at highly economical prices in the decades of the Cold War, writers like Tolstoy, Gorky, Turgenev and Chekhov not only left their deep imprint on the tradition of fiction in Punjabi, but also continue to influence the present-day literary production in the language.

[5] A word about the moorings of the authors whose stories are under discussion: Veena Verma, Tarsem Nilgiri, Baldev Singh and Shivcharan Gill had migrated to England; Amarjit Chahal and Surjit Kalsey to Canada; and Parvez Sandhu to the United States.

The sexually coloured remarks and behaviour of Chris Smith, a foreman in the factory, are unbearable for Mrs Bhagarth who is victimized not only by Smith but also by some of her Indian female co-workers. Mrs Bhagarth feels humiliated by the taunts directed at her physical appearance and ashamed at the behaviour of her fellow-workers, who appear to be overly receptive to the advances of Smith.

The power structure at the factory comes out as naked and ominous: another worker in the factory, one later learns, had been dismissed for objecting to Smith's advances, and Mrs Bhagarth, bowing to the pressure exerted by her husband, did not testify, as she had promised, against that injustice. When it is her own turn to complain against the atmosphere of sexism and discrimination in the factory, the manager's response "This is a free country where everyone's free to make or break relations with others"[6] (Nilgiri, 2015, p. 48) comes out as inadequate and naïve. The story implies, among other things, that it is the insecurity of the coloured workers and the request for immoral favours that create a humiliating atmosphere for the female workers, often taking a toll on their dignity. The crushing, racialized power structure operates "in and through bodies" (Brah, 1996, p. 3).

References to age, complexion and bodily shape, which are scattered throughout the narrative, may also be perceived as signs of the individual's debasement in modern industrial cultures, as they bring added issues to the atmosphere of racial and colour discrimination, sexism and exploitation. The story, nevertheless, hints at the weaknesses of the traditional structures of patriarchal systems in yet another way: the reaction of the "wronged" husbands speaks volumes about male anxieties regarding female sexuality in the changing economic and employment scenarios.

Punjabi diasporic writers are acutely aware of Indian women's newly-acquired sense of economic independence, especially in Europe and North America. When writing about British South Asians, Rusi Jaspal observes that migration "allowed individuals to imagine a more positively evaluated identity position, underpinned by feelings of self-esteem, distinctiveness and self-efficacy, the very principles of identity that were susceptible to threat in the homeland" (p. 93). It is quite interesting to see the varied responses to women's increasing economic independence in the stories under consideration: while most of the women characters seem to celebrate this by interpreting it as an attainment of agency, men with patriarchal mindsets are portrayed as increasingly insecure at the prospect of changing gender equations in new socio-economic realities.

The story "Doosri Maa" [Another facet of mother] by Baldev Singh sets the tone by talking about the transformation brought about in an elderly woman by financial independence (2011, pp.156–161). The narrator's mother, who used to be docile, traditional and dependent on others, acquires agency and becomes capable of taking decisions about her life once she starts receiving a regular pension.

The easing of economic worries, in "Chudail" [Witch], another story by Baldev Singh, makes a married couple in their sixties experience a new vigour in their relationship. Pritam Singh's romantic affection is returned by his wife Bhagwanti in the form of a warm embrace. Suddenly horrified by his wife's expression of desire, the patriarch in Pritam Singh begins to insult her: "Hussy . . . Witch . . . You should be ashamed of yourself – you have grey hair now . . . God knows what pranks you might have been playing in the factory!" (Singh, 2015, p. 79). By all

[6] Translations of titles and quotations from Punjabi are mine.

appearances, this story is about patriarchal ideology, a system of economic oppression whose waning hold on the wife produces anxiety for the husband that is trapped in it. Pritam Singh might have been liberated from economic insecurity, but he still remains confined in an orthodox mindset, expressing annoyance with any manifestation of female sexuality. Thus, the story provides sharp insight into the way patriarchy can disturb even moments of intimacy, resulting in paranoid male insecurity vis-à-vis female desire.

It is not only gender but also age that is directed as a weapon against Bhagwanti. The husband's reaction, like a flash of lightning, exposes the asymmetrical power-structure of a marital relationship and the ideological imprisonment of unsuspecting human beings condemned to lead restricted lives. Evidently, women in many of these stories seem to be fighting on multiple fronts: while negotiating life in complex diasporic environments, they must combat sundry modalities of patriarchy, some of which may operate deviously through their association with, among other things, "home and hearth."

Another story that touches upon male insecurities and altered gender roles in diaspora is "Pachhon Di Vaa" [The western airs] by Shivcharan Gill (2015). The orthodox Khushi Muhammad finds his deepest convictions threatened by and is paranoid about Western culture. His wife, whom he was reluctant to bring to England from Pakistan, insists on working while the husband is dead set against the idea. The social significance of the story lies in the manner in which it presents the dilemmas of human beings caught in the clash of disparate mores and value-systems.

An especially poignant narrative about the agony of women left behind by their husbands is "Mukhda Chann Varga" [A face as beautiful as the moon] by Amarjit Chahal, a story about the mayhem caused in marital relations by migration. The husbands, in search of livelihood and better opportunities, have to move out to countries in the West or the Gulf, leaving behind their wives and families. Back home, the feudal patriarchal mindset, not taking stock of the estrangement caused by the husband's departure, is unwavering in its disregard for the emotional-physical needs of women.

The characteristics of this story's marital relationship are revealed obliquely and astutely, using the folk patriarchal/feudal metaphor of woman as agricultural land that belongs to the person in actual possession of her as a "resource". One is reminded of the ecofeminist concept, which questions and debunks precisely this "sense of entitlement" (Rangarajan, 2014, p. 566). Reared with a patriarchal mindset, the son (Jagjit) is arrogant enough to pass judgment on and admonish his mother, never considering the fact that her husband has always remained away/abroad. The shrewd, ironic edge of the story comes from the suggestion that the very Meetu whom Jagjit detests for having an illicit relation with his mother might be Jagjit's biological father. At the same time, Jagjit the husband is totally oblivious to the emotional needs of his wife. The very first sentence of the story is a folk-humorous erotic saying which comes charged with a strong note of pathos surrounding the unavoidable feelings of estrangement: "If the husband and the wife meet each other after a month, they feel like newly-weds" (Chahal, 2011, p. 103).[7] It would be hard to find a more vehement story about the pain lurking beneath the term "grass widow" (a woman whose husband is away often or for a

[7] The cultural context of the Punjabi language term muklaava makes this opening sentence rich in tragic irony – almost everywhere in India, people used to get married quite young. But the bride was sent to live with her husband and in-laws only after puberty: *muklaava* (or *gauna*) was the term denoting the occasion.

prolonged period). The agonies of parting are not only applicable to those who depart: more often than not, they are more acute in those left behind.

Stories by Women: Beyond Sorrow

Turning to the stories by female writers in the Punjabi diaspora, the reader will notice an increase in the number of women's issues and a difference in their treatment. From a female perspective, some of the diasporic literature in Punjabi by male authors, despite (or possibly because of) their noble intentions (reflected in their concern for women's safety and well-being), may appear somewhat paternalistic. Not discounting the significantly valuable contribution made by the male authors to this body of literature, the fact remains that a female perspective may drastically reformulate the problems, issues and experiences of people in diasporas. Female sexuality in particular (though we have seen a candid treatment of this aspect in stories by Baldev Singh and Amarjit Chahal), finds bold and convincing representation mainly in writers like Veena Verma. The same might be said about the feelings of loneliness that women who are kept confined at home often encounter.

A story by Surjit Kalsey "Dukhwa Kaase Kahun . . ." [To whom shall I tell my sorrow?] is about the anguish of diasporic women, who are often victimised by male insecurity and patriarchal hypocrisy. Raaji, a young, neglected wife, receives a call from a stranger who enquires about her well-being. This is obviously a case where someone has dialled a wrong number, but the elderly woman from the other side talks so affectionately that Raaji cannot bring herself to point out the mistake. The stranger, in fact, is trying to console some other young woman whose plight, the reader gathers, is not very different from Raaji's and many others like her: "Raaji used to get phone calls from her friends, distantly-related cousins, sisters-in-law, and other women acquainted with her, but each one of them would have some deep pain within her which they would try to share with Raaji . . ." (Kalsey, 2011, p. 102). The story also makes a brief, though piercing, reference to the mechanized existence of Raaji's husband who, like many others, makes an excuse of "overtime" at the factory while actually visiting prostitutes. The tone of this narrative, along with its gist, may seem unduly depressing, but it makes some important points about one sordid aspect of diasporic existence in certain situations. The story is notable, too, for the dual aspects of family for women, especially in diaspora: one has to concede the cogency of Avtar Brah's assertion about family being "an area of acute ambivalence for women" (1996, p. 76). Trapped in an iniquitous relationship, Raaji suffers, but she is doubly a victim because the supportive family framework is missing altogether in her case. The idea of female-bonding, what Pramod Nayar, in the context of African fiction terms "a community-building among women through the mother-tongue" (2002, p. 140), is touched upon here, but in the isolating environment of the migrant generation, such a community remains unfeasible for a woman like Raaji. There are many other stories, however, that build upon the premise of females sharing their experiences and emotions, thereby forging a resistive solidarity against patriarchal oppression.

Alternative sexuality is an area which writers in Punjabi are extremely reluctant to talk about. So, while it is refreshing, on the one hand, to see Parvez Sandhu in "Saunkan" [Rival] (2011) daring to talk about queerness, on the other the reader is struck by its ambiguously patronizing tone. Neena, the protagonist, is a young, neglected wife who is initially beguiled by fanciful notions about romance and marriage. She gets a jolt when she finds out that her husband Dalip is in a homosexual relationship with Jimmy, a man whom she had taken to be just her husband's close friend. There is a palpable irony in the title "Saunkan" as the term traditionally means "another wife of one's husband." The story loses some of its liberating power when the author

attributes the husband's queerness to social dysfunction: as a young boy he was sexually abused by his stepmother. Moreover, the way Dalip's sexuality is revealed towards the end of the story (though hints are dropped along the way) is also somewhat problematic. The story's end produces a twofold shock: first, the revelation that Neena has a rival, and second the disclosure about her husband's sexual orientation. Nevertheless, Dalip's portrayal is nuanced – he does not stand out as a caricature, a pitfall that many of the works in the traditional mould from the subcontinent seldom escape.

Veena Verma, one of the most acclaimed Punjabi diaspora writers, focuses primarily on the problems of migrant-generation women. She often talks about the forms of exploitation to which women are subjected, their struggle to have control over their lives and bodies, and the problematics of female desire in diasporic situations. One of her stories, "Ikk See Mein" [Once there used to be a me] (2012a), portrays diasporic women's lives of misery and also the fracturing of their identities. Even though her stories circulate chiefly around diasporic people from the Indian Punjab, some of her stories do attempt to talk about characters of Pakistani origin (in stories like "Taiyyaba" [2015, pp. 165-178], "Marya Chooha" ["A dead mouse", 2015, pp. 179-192] and "Bigaani Agg" ["Alien hearth", 2012b, pp. 156–174]): the fate of those characters usually turns out to be even bleaker than that of their Indian counterparts. There is the sense that the author is on slippery ground as she describes circumstances pertaining to Pakistan. Cut off from the support-structure of the family system, many of her characters, usually female, find themselves adrift, helpless and vulnerable.

These women are often exploited – financially as well as sexually – and have almost no one with whom they might share their miseries. Their plight, interestingly, is not very different from that of "black women with no institutionalized 'other' that [they] may discriminate against, exploit, or oppress" (1984, hooks, p. 67). Very often, the exploiters turn out to be men in whom they had put their trust or people who hide their designs under the façade of goodness or respectability. Verma's stories, in their fierce denunciation of the orthodox mindset, strongly remind one of Alice Walker's work regarding the exploitation of black women, primarily at the hands of their "own people". There is a subtle conditioning through which the members of one's racial or cultural group start to view their own people "as the white society views them, namely as non-productive, unreliable, weak" (Simson, 2009, p. 229).

The process of crossing over to new cultures and lands is often traumatic and leaves its scars on the souls and bodies of human beings. Jonathan Gil Harris's reflections, in a related context, about the alterations bodies may undergo as they move through the changing physical and cultural environments (2015, p. 1; pp. 232-33), may be taken as a pointer towards the strange rites of passage migrant journeys require. Verma's story "Ghalat Aurat" ["Wrong woman"] (2012aa, pp. 28-52), is about the body- and soul-wrenching experiences of illegal migrants in scenarios that seem to be the rule rather than the exception. The story concerns the horrifying reality of organized gangs in the business of human trafficking and their exploitation of defenceless human beings caught in circumstances beyond their control.

In this story, young Manjit and her child are made to take the route of illegal migration in order to join Manjit's husband in Germany. The kind of brutalization human beings, especially women, are subjected to in such crossings becomes obvious when Manjit's husband is unable to recognize her – so much has she changed through her ordeal at the hands of goons involved in human trafficking. Many others who manage to cross over successfully may not be that lucky. "Room-Mate", also by Verma, is about a relationship where the main character despairs at the unreasonable prospect of finding a soul-mate in a marital union arranged across cultural

differences. Rajni, who has married a British resident, becomes rebellious as she is profoundly uncomfortable with her dependence on another – even though that other, Aman (despite being snobbish because he is a British citizen), reveals himself as a caring person. One detects an odd intransigence on Rajni's part in her salvo at Aman:

> I am tired of acting at loving you, Aman . . . I am mentally alone. This British life has failed to fill the vacuum in my soul. I feel that we are two separate cultures who got linked owing to the mistakes made by our parents [in arranging the marriage of Rajni and Aman] . . . Neither of us is getting any justice. (Verma, 2015, p. 157)

The narrator blames the cultural gap between the two "roommates" who fail to become marital partners (though, strangely again, Aman seems willing to make the effort and accuses Rajni of not returning his love!). Through Rajni, who is frustrated at not achieving emotional fulfilment in her marital relationship, the author points towards the malaise of relations arranged like business deals in the hope of migrating to greener pastures.

"Rajai" ["The quilt"] (2012aaa, pp. 11-27), another story by Verma, is darker still. When Banso, a young mother of two kids, is sent to England to join her husband (without the latter's knowledge), she discovers to her horror that her husband is living with, and married to, another woman, a white one. Banso and the kids have nobody to turn to in an alien landscape. Given shelter by an elderly ex-service man "Fauji" (literally, "army man"), at his modest home, Banso decides to go on living with him (the generic "Fauji" serves the function of a proper name in the story) as his wife.

The relationship is Platonic, as Fauji informs Banso about his impotence caused by an injury during the war: the valorisation of a non-sexual relationship reflects a deep distrust of male sexuality (and, of physical desire in general) in this context. The construction of Fauji in the story exploits the traditional ideological associations around army men – saviours, self-sacrificing, noble beings. Fauji goes as far as attempting to find a suitable partner for Banso, and downplays his nobility by attributing his gentility to his impotence. His deficiency seems to relate him to the maternal principle, which strikes a chord with Banso, making Fauji a larger-than-life figure. One gets the feeling that this ideal figure is constructed as a revulsion against the marauding sexuality associated with males in so many diaspora writings in Punjabi. The title, with its specific cultural associations, makes for a potent symbol that has echoes in Punjabi folklore.

After Fauji's death, the quilt, which had sheltered a discarded Banso and her kids at his place, remains, with its metonymic associations, a cherished object with her. She refuses to part from it, though to her daughter-in-law it may appear soiled. Banso's assertion of the quilt's value for her – "Rabb di bukkal, the embrace of God" – has its moorings in romantic folk tales and songs of Punjab, most notably "Kulli yaar di Surag da jhoota, agg laavan mahalan nu – the humble abode of the friend is Heaven; I don't care for palaces" (This latter verse "Kulli . . ." keeps on recurring as a leitmotif in Verma's writings and is explicitly quoted in the story "Bloody Bitch" [2019, p. 332]). Verma's stories are unusually rich in sprinklings of folk sayings, proverbs, snatches of folk songs, and so on, which at times provide lighter moments in the otherwise dark narratives. The story thus gives a utopian vision of an all-transcending love that becomes the be-all and end-all of Banso's existence.

Another surprising element in the story is wife-bashing by an otherwise idealized Satbir, Banso's son, who hits out at his white wife whenever he feels that his mother is not being taken

proper care of. One gets another demonstration of the deeply ingrained nature of the patriarchal structures of domination in Verma's delineation of the male psyche (though the story's implicit approbation of violence this time is disturbing).

Towards Counter-Hegemony

One of Veena Verma's stories, in particular, focuses on the formation of new ideals, bridges and alliances while looking more towards the future than the past. In "Firangiyan Di Nuhn" [Daughter-in-law of the white people], Shanti, a middle-aged woman who has a white boyfriend, praises white culture and its values while strongly condemning what she takes to be the orthodoxies, petty jealousies and exploitative attitudes of "her own" people, that is, people of Asian origin:

> I worked for the white for twenty-five years – and I like these people. They do not discriminate against anyone on the basis of caste or religion; there is no dowry system. . . . We have a lot to learn from them. They tell the truth right to your face – they do not stab you in the back. (2012a, p. 275)

Shanti, though illiterate, is astute enough to realize the need to have a critical outlook on the values associated with the home-nation, as well as the need to broaden one's perspective in the light of a new cultural environment. While there may be no reason to disagree with Jane Beswick's view that diasporas are "no longer simply viewed as a striving for the past since they are also confronting the future to establish a new sense of place, belonging and role" (2011, p. 135), negotiating a new sense of belonging is memorably termed "homing desire" by Brah (1996, p. 189).

Gerd Baumann's useful terms "integration into" and "integration with" serve to distinguish between two different types of relationships the diasporics can have with the dominant host culture: "'integration into' means submitting to a predefined whole … 'integration with' would be a dialogic process of adjustment between hegemonics and diasporics'" (2011, p. 47). "Integration with" would, therefore, be an ideal wherein there is negotiation with the culture of the host nation, while not entirely abdicating the alterity of one's self-definition(s). At the same time, Verma's stories do not contain unalloyed or uncritical praise for the contemporary white European cultural ethos. One character in "Ikk See Mein" is quite forthright in the assessment of that culture:

> In these Western countries, our souls get wrenched through their racist and colour discrimination against us. The licentiousness here is shocking. The Whites hate us – we know that; but the doings of our own people in this advanced country make us hang our heads in shame. (2012a, p. 126)

Another of Verma's stories, "Mr. Right" (2019a, pp. 257-269), fits into the radical feminist mould, being the tale of a young woman's declaration of independence and her deep distrust of the very institution of marriage. This institution is seen here as enforcing an exploitative and mutually destructive relationship. Her "Tun Kaun Hain?" [Who are you?] is about a woman who has separated from the orthodox, stereotypical notions that describe the female as a vulnerable toy-thing whose emotional nature can be used to control and exploit her. Kiran's emotional independence and plain talk have the power to shake her suitor, a man whose liberal pretentions are unable to hide his deeply ingrained patriarchal biases. She is direct:

> No, you have not misled me. I am not an infant. If you have been using me, I also have been using you. You haven't forced yourself on me. Everything happened with my consent. . . I am an adult, and am responsible for my actions. I am not blaming you. (2012b, p. 30)

In this fiercely independent protagonist, diaspora and hybridity have a significant role in constituting "a subject beyond the traditional divide of gender" (Kalra et al., 2005, p. 51). Another instance of this we find in Jello, the central character in "Mein Jeena Chahundi Han" ["I want to live"] (2019, pp. 125-144), who as a child had witnessed her widowed mother's sexual exploitation by her brothers-in-law. As a young wife, she had seen her own brother-in-law killing his wife and getting away with it. Now as a middle-aged woman, she refuses to remain silent when her son resorts to violence against his wife and reports him to the police. The women in Verma's stories often emerge stronger after their ordeals and become pillars of strength for others, evoking in the process the vision of a future where the formerly powerless, through meaningful agency, create a more egalitarian world.

Conclusion

There are intensely authentic voices in diaspora literature written in Punjabi. Admittedly, this literature is uneven in terms of literary quality, but it is difficult to agree with statements like the one from otherwise astute critic Amarjit Chandan that there is "nothing substantial in the so-called diaspora literature written in Punjabi" ("Home Verse," 2015, n.p.). Much of this literature, of course, has a sort of rawness that holds a folksy appeal, though there is an astonishing lack of discrimination in the Punjabi publication business which, to be fair, is constantly fighting battles for survival.

The entire question of literary taste and literary worth is fraught with considerations other than literary. For instance, underpinnings of race, neo-colonial attitudes, class, region, gender, ethnicity, and so on, cannot simply be wished away in literary creation, reception and evaluation. Ashcroft's probing questions about literary aesthetics, wherein he points out how "aesthetics" could be deployed as "an essential component of the discourse of exclusion" (2015, p. 412) in the context of postcoloniality (though he is talking primarily about postcolonial literature written in the English language), are extremely relevant to discussions about the place of diaspora writings in creative literature. Diaspora literature in Punjabi, in this regard, in its exploration of some crucial areas concerning human movements across societies and cultures, and especially in its treatment of issues related with women under such circumstances, makes a significant contribution to writings about migration.

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