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PANNA NAYAK'S SHORT STORIES—VOICING THE UNVOICED FEMININE HEART

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ABSTRACT

Panna Nayak, a booming voice in Gujarati diasporic literature has to her credit a collection of overpowering short stories that speaks volumes of a feminine heart. Her chief purpose is to expound a bold expression of inner feelings of a woman craving for true love and warmth from her partner.

The present paper focusses on Panna's inimitable art of writing short stories centred on the problems associated with Indian women residing in America. Her paramount interest lies in giving expression to a woman's heart wishing to live life on her own terms. She emphatically voices the subtle feminine emotions and challenges the thinking of society that expects woman to behave in a particular way.

**Key Words:** bindi, saree, diaspora, Flamingo, Punjabi dress, black girl, duplicity

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INTRODUCTION

Residing in US since 1960, Panna Nayak was born on 28<sup>th</sup> January, 1933 in the metropolitan city of Mumbai. Her fame as a renowned American Gujarati diasporic writer is attributable to her poignant short stories, distinctive essays and inspiring poetry written with a great zeal and audacity. Her works chiefly centre on the inner working of woman's heart striving to sculpt a place of her own in the fast growing materialistic world replete with ideology of people considering money above human emotions. Panna has to her credit eight volumes of Gujarati poetry; few of them translated into English. Her short stories are published in several anthologies; the recent among them is *Flamingo* published in the year 2003.

The purpose of the present paper is to divulge deep into the feminine mind and her inner conflicts keeping in view three short stories penned by Panna – '*Not Guilty*', '*Lady with a Dot*' and '*Thank you, Mrs Desai*.'

'Not Guilty'

Panna's short story '*Not Guilty*' reveals the traditional mind-set of society that sets specific codes to be followed by women whereas the same codes are relaxed in case of men. The story includes scattered incidents, witty dialogues and touching scenes written with a purpose of influencing the minds of the readers. It aims at giving the message to the society that the behaviour that is viewed with a critical eye in case of a woman, is seen in much diluted strain in case of a man.

In '*Not Guilty*', Panna talks about the experience of a student called Falguni who writes an imaginary story and shows it to her professor of creative writing Dr. Joshi to evaluate it. The story written by Falguni is

about a woman called Chitra who stays with her husband Nilesh and ten years old daughter Ritu. Chitra develops extra marital relationship with a man called Jitendra whom she met few years back. Jitendra remembers his life at the American university where he studied Economics and remained surrounded by young students and brilliant colleagues. His routine involved seminars, paper presentations, two months research during summer and one month stay at Pune with his mother.

While working as a Professor of Economics and having reached the age of forty, still a bachelor, Jitendra chances to see Chitra who comes to the Cafeteria of Faculty Club to dine with Dr. Francal, Professor of Sociology. Chitra is clad in a silk saree, blouse stretched till elbow, has short hair and wears light make-up. Her manner is extremely pleasing and impressive. She notices the presence of Jitendra who has also come to dine there. Dr. Francal introduces Chitra to Jitendra and informs him that Chitra comes here every Friday to attend her class on "Gender and Identity".

One Friday, Jitendra finds Chitra dining alone; he goes nearer and inquires about her companion Dr. Francal. After replying to his query, she requests him to join her for lunch. Jitendra sits at the table with Chitra. During the conversation, Chitra tells him that she is married to Nilesh and has a ten years old daughter Ritu. She further informs him that she runs an institute called "Saheli" established with a purpose of extending financial and professional help to women.

Gradually, it turns out to be a routine that every Friday, both Jitendra and Chitra meet at the Cafeteria. Jitendra starts feeling a pull towards Chitra. He enjoys her company and keeps waiting for the Fridays when he can spend some time with her. One Friday, Chitra's class gets cancelled. Jitendra catches the opportunity and invites Chitra to his home. She agrees and both reach Jitendra's home. After reaching home, both stand in the kitchen for some time and then go to the bedroom. Jitendra is conscious that Chitra is Indian and married. But Chitra has something else in her mind; she asks Jitendra, "*Would you not like to remove your suit? It will get spoiled.*"(122) That was the first Friday. Jitendra is thrilled and after Chitra leaves, he marks "No.1" on that Friday in the calendar. Such meetings become more frequent and whenever it is possible, both meet at Jitendra's house. Like this, 36 Fridays pass. Jitendra feels that Chitra must be feeling guilty for her relationship with him. He asks her, "*Do you love your husband Nilesh?*" She answers, "*Yes. Are you surprised?*"(123) The next moment, she hugs Jitendra. He realizes that she feels a great warmth in his company, so she comes to his house every week. Now Jitendra decides that when Chitra comes next Friday, he will tell her that he wishes to put an end to the relationship. The story ends with Jitendra gazing at the calendar. Falguni asks Professor Joshi whether he liked the story. The Professor comments that there is something missing in the story. He asks her, "*How would it be if you replace married woman with a single woman and a single man with a married man?*"(124)

The story puts emphasis on the societal culture that allows a married man to have a relationship with a woman outside marriage but in case of a married woman, such a relationship is strictly prohibited. Panna describes the American culture in the story that considers hugging or hand-shaking of man and woman not unethical. She focusses on the mutual warmth that Jitendra and Chitra derive in the company of each other and not on their physical relationship. Through the story, Panna concentrates on the psyche of American woman who wishes to live life happily on her own terms.

#### **'Lady with a Dot'**

It is a story about a couple Rajiv and Alpa who go to their friend's house in two separate cars to attend a party on Saturday. It is decided that after taking dinner, Rajiv will go home immediately whereas Alpa would help in finishing the chores at the host's house before returning to her house. It is 11.30 p.m. when Alpa starts for her house. While going, she remembers that she has to buy some milk for morning. She goes to 24 hours open supermarket "Shop Right". Before entering the store, she removes *bindi* from her forehead, for she knows that the American teenagers have a dislike for *bindi*. After picking up few bottles of milk from the store, she reaches near the counter to make the payment. The boy at the counter satirically asks her, "*What happened to your bloody dot? No bleeding forehead?*" (143) Alpa feels hurt; she does not answer and goes straight towards her car. After reaching home, she narrates the entire incident to her husband. She expects

consoling words from him. But contrary to her expectation, Rajiv scolds her saying, "In Rome you should do what Romans do".(144) She asks him, "Should I then not wear saree in America?"(144) Rajiv advises her to wear clothes that Americans wear and not the ones she likes.

At night, Alpa is upset; she is unable to sleep; the incident of super market overpowers her. She murmurs,

"I am an Indian staying in America. But it does not mean that Americans will decide what I should be wearing. We Indian women like to wear saree, Punjabi dress and also *bindi*. These all epitomize the glory of India. In America, if I find someone wearing saree among the whites, I feel a pull towards her". (145)

After some time, Alpa falls asleep. She gets a wild dream that night. She sees herself coming out of the supermarket with a bag in hand and a purse on the shoulder. Suddenly a teenager crosses her. The bag drops down. As she bends to take her bag, another teenager pulls her saree and mockingly asks her, "How do you wrap this thing which hangs like a shower curtain?"(146) She shouts aloud but nobody comes to her rescue. She feels horrified as she wakes up suddenly from sleep.

Alpa decides to wear jeans and T shirt on job as well as while going to the supermarket. One day, while returning from the office, she stops at a shop to buy Pizza and then heads towards her house. She suddenly remembers that she is yet to buy Coca Cola. She plans to buy Coca Cola from the store "Shop Right" on her way to the house. She keeps wondering whether the boy who commented on her *bindi* during her previous visit to the store would be there. She enters the shop and goes near the Coke section. She finds the same boy arranging the bottles there. While Alpa takes the bottle of Coca Cola, the boy comments, "You look sexy in your office clothes"(147) Alpa feels like slapping the boy. But she controls herself and decides to teach him a lesson. She asks the boy whether he would like to spend some nice time with her. The boy is shocked; he asks her whether she isn't married. She plainly replies that her husband is not at home.

Alpa takes the bottles of Coca Cola and moves towards her car. She sees the boy following her. Alpa tells the boy that she has dropped her key somewhere in the trunk. She bends down, opens the box of Pizza, takes out the chili powder and throws it into the eyes of the boy. The boy cries in pain and starts cursing Alpa. She angrily retorts, "That's what a sexy woman with bloody dot do." (147) She then quickly starts for home.

'*The Lady with a Dot*' is a story of woman's courage, audacity and fortitude. Panna describes Alpa as an archetype of Indian woman who helps her host in winding up the work after the party gets over. She also takes care of the household purchases; deals with the American traders; faces the difficulties owing to her Indian outfit – saree and *bindi* which she considers to be the icons of Indian culture. She confronts all the impediments that come her way and bravely faces them. She shows her valour by throwing chili powder in the eyes of the depraved boy to teach him a lesson. It is this aspect of a bold Indian diasporic woman that Panna projects through the story '*The Lady with a Dot*'.

#### **'Thank You, Mrs. Desai'**

The story talks about a couple – Girish and Shobha Desai living in America. Though both are working, Shobha shoulders the additional responsibility of managing the household. Girish is a dominating husband and expects his wife to do all the domestic chores. Once Shobha tells her husband about the necessity of renovation of the house. Girish annoyingly asks her to call the person herself who could do the task. After consultation with her neighbour Roberta, Shobha calls a handyman named John Carpenter who agrees to work at \$200 per day. Shobha decides to begin the work on week-end so that Girish can remain present in the house. On Saturday, John comes in his red van and begins the work. As the handyman was working, Girish disgustingly tells Shobha:

"This handyman of yours is black. How come you have allowed this 'kallu' (black) in the house? If he steals something, then? If he takes advantage of my absence and flirts, then?" (154)

Shobha tries to convince Girish that all black people are not bad. She tells him that Roberta has recommended him and that is why she has hired him. Girish is not satisfied with her argument. John works silently; returns to

his van at 1 p.m.; eats sandwich with coke. After taking his meal, he again goes back to his work. John is tall with flat nose, thick lips and bright eyes. He does his job perfectly well.

One Sunday evening, Girish and Shobha go to a graduation dinner party; drinks are served; followed by a variety of delicious food items. After returning home, Shobha feels uncomfortable; she falls ill. On the following day, she takes leave from office. Finding Shobha at home, John expresses his concern about her health. He quickly goes to the drug store to get medicine for her. She feels better after taking the medicine.

During lunch time, Shobha asks John to sit in the kitchen to take his meal instead of having it in the van. John agrees to do so. Both begin to talk. During the course of their conversation, John narrates his personal life story to Shobha. He tells her that his family came here from Africa as slaves. His ancestors worked on Cotton plantations in North Carolina. He came to Philadelphia in search of work and learnt the work of handyman. He then fell in love with a black girl, Dona, married her and had a son Jack and daughter Janet. Dona turned Muslim; left John and went to Virginia State along with children. John visits Virginia once a month to meet his children. Now he stays with a girl called Teresa. Previously she was a drug addict but now she is becoming "clean" in his company.

While narrating his life history, John asks Shobha whether Mr. Desai hates him because he is black. Shobha tries to defend her husband and immediately changes the topic. The days pass; some work yet to be finished. She extends her leave for a week. One day John asks Shobha whether she would like to accompany him to "Home Depot", the place where one gets all the items related to construction. Shobha agrees. As they reach the Home Depot, she is overwhelmed to see a variety of things. She purchases some switches, iron, blinds and such other things. She tells John that he will have to help her fix all these in her house. John agrees to do so. While returning home, John stops his van near a shop and buys some coffee and pastries. Both of them sit in the van and eat. Shobha is moved at John's gesture; she asks him, "Who taught you all this? I am so touched". John answers, "You deserve it, Mrs. Desai." (157)

When Shobha further extends her leave, her husband Girish sarcastically comments, "It appears you feel quite comfortable with John." (157) Shobha gets irritated but avoids answering his question. John teaches Shobha how switches are fixed, blinds are hung, carpet is shampooed, painting is done and many such things. Shobha is so impressed with expertise of John that she suggests him that he should start the coaching class to teach all this.

On the last day, Shobha hands over a cheque to John; hugs him and says, "You are a good worker and a very nice person." (157) John feels very happy; he tells Shobha to call him anytime she needs him. John sits in his red van and moves on. Shobha watches him going. She suddenly realizes that he has forgotten his jacket. She looks at newly painted kitchen of hers and remembers all that John had taught her. Then she goes near the iron table and starts ironing John's jacket. While doing so, she says to herself, "Thank you, John carpenter." (158)

Suddenly Girish enters home with tearful eyes. Shobha asks the reason for his nervousness. He takes out a letter from his pocket and hands over to Shobha. The letter said, "Girish is suspended from service for the offence of flirting with a black girl." (158)

"Thank you, Mrs. Desai" is a story revealing the inner psyche of woman. She undertakes all the responsibilities assigned to her in a good spirit and tries to accomplish them with the best of her abilities. The only thing she desires is the recognition of her work; some warm words from her partner. But instead she is taunted and mistreated. The irony of the situation is that the matter for which Girish raises finger against Shobha; he in fact commits the offence and faces punishment.

### **Panna's Women Characters**

Evaluating Panna's women characters from American diasporic point of view, it is evident that her women characters adopt divergent societal norms and long for loving, affectionate and caring man; but the instances are many when their desires are not fulfilled. In order to compensate the loss, they search for some kind of affection outside their marital relationship. Panna points out that the couple that appears to be "made for each other" outwardly is many a times hollow, empty and shattered from inside. It is this unpleasant reality

that she divulges by means of her stories. The dissatisfied diasporic woman does not hesitate to find an alternative in another man. She engages herself in the relationship with other men for which she does not feel guilty too. At the same time, she looks after the comfort of her husband and children. Panna paints the Gujarati diasporic woman as one who is influenced by western culture; accedes to what she likes and chooses such principles of life that make her happy. The irony is that Indian woman residing in America lives a life of duplicity where she is continually wearing the mask of contentment, satisfaction and fulfillment but the reality is just the contrary. In the plea of attaining happiness, she tries new ways. The environment, incidents and circumstances narrated by Panna in her stories acquaints the reader of the dependency of American Indian diasporic woman.

**Conclusion**

Panna's women characters adjust themselves with the environment of America and endeavour to adopt the norms of society. They wear western outfits while going to office but take delight in wearing traditional saree on the Indian gatherings. Such women of Gujarati diaspora impart a cutting edge to Gujarati story tradition as they present a distinct and progressive world of contemporary American society. As an American Gujarati diaspora story teller, Panna Nayak's skill of fusing subject matter, characterization, appropriate environment, poignant language, subtle dialogues and remarkable narrative skill gives a new stance to the reader's thinking regarding women.

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