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NEW SIGNATURES: SELECT POEMS OF SURJEET KALSEY AND LAKSHMI GILL

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ABSTRACT

Surjeet Kalsey was born in India. She relocated to Canada in 1974 and currently live in British Columbia. Kalsey is a poet and short story writer, editor, translator and counselor. With most of her writings appearing in Indian and Canadian publications readers can easily venture out and explore the diversity of Surjeet Kalsey's works. Lakshmi Gill of Punjabi/ Spanish parentage came to Canada in 1964 as a graduate student at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. She had previously received her B.A from the U.S. She did her doctoral work at the University of Brunswick . This article aims at bringing to the fore the miserable plight of immigrants (their consciousness about gender and race), their dislike for the land where they have migrated, the longing to return to their home land, their sense of alienation in patriarchal social ethos in select poems of Surjeet Kalsey and Lakshmi Gill. Even in alien land women have not got freedom, they suffer at every hand. Their suffering and miserable plight have found creative expression in the select poems of Kalsey and Gill.

Keywords: immigrant, gender , race.

Discussion

Keeping in view the readers who have little or no acquaintance with these poets, it is pertinent to give a brief biographical details of these poets. Surjeet Kalsey was born in India in 1944. She migrated to Canada in 1974 and currently lives in Burnaby, British Columbia. Since Surjeet Kalsey is a poet and short-story writer, editor, appearing in Indian and Canadian publications, we can easily venture out and explore the diversity of Surjeet Kalsey's work. Kalsey received her Master's Degree in English and Punjabi literature from Punjab University, Chandigarh, and a Master's in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. Surjeet's master's thesis was titled 'Karma Shakti Therapy: An Indigenous Healing Model.' She has edited and translated books and poetry. One translation appeared in the Punjabi issue of *Contemporary Literature in Translation* (1977). Surjeet has also edited and translated an anthology of poetry, *Glimpses of Twentieth Century Punjabi Poetry* (1992). Kalsey's poems and short stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines. She has also written, translated and directed plays on violence against women. Kalsey has translated the P

Punjabi play, written by Ajmer Rode, *Ik Kurhi Ik Sapna*, in English *One Girl One Dream*, which was published in *Toronto South Asian Review* in early 80s. *One Girl One Dream* is the first Indo-Canadian play written on women's issues. Kalsey modified its script to reflect the prevailing problems in Indo-Canadian community in the eighties. It is a psychological play in which a young woman from rural Punjab dreams of beautiful life abroad but loses her mental balance as she endures a violent husband in Canada. Kalsey has

published books in both English and Punjabi - a book of poetry in Punjabi, *Paunan Nal Guftagoo* (1979), and *Speaking to the Winds* (1982) and *Footprints in Silence* (1988) in English. She has also written *Behind the Palace Doors* (1999), *Women, Words and Shakti* (1999), *Glimpses of Punjabi Poetry, an anthology in English Translation* (1993), *Saffron Leaves: an anthology of Canadian Punjabi Literature* (1992), *Modern Punjabi Poetry: an anthology* (1978), *Sat Paryan (Distant Women)* (1994), a collection of short stories.

Surjeet has taught at the Vancouver Community College since 2001. She also works as a counsellor for battered women and continues to write. Many of the works by Kalsey reflect women's issues in Indo-Canadian life. Violence against women and violence within the family are but a few of the issues that emerge in her plays, poetry and short stories. Although little has been written about Surjeet Kalsey, she delivers a powerful spirit in poems such as '*Disowning Oneself*' where she speaks of the struggle of women and their desire to be free. Tree and leaf analogies in Surjeet's poems describe emotions such as bliss and jealousy and portray the struggle of women.

Not only Indo-Canadian women have to struggle within their own homes and communities for basic freedoms, but they also have to deal with racism. This comes across vividly in '*Saffron Leaves*', in which Kalsey talks about race relations and diversity. Although Kalsey writes much about women disowning themselves and struggling in the world, she holds out hope. '*Vision*' is a powerful poem about the strength and power of women to change much of what's wrong with the world, unlike '*Se/ection*' in which she speaks of the infanticide of female babies. Thus Kalsey is a champion of women's and children's right.

Lakshmi Gill is of East Indian / Spanish parentage. She came to Canada in 1964 as a graduate student at UBC, Vancouver. She had previously received her B.A. (English) from the U.S. She had done all her course work for the Ph.D. at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton when her father's death terminated her studies. She has taught at Notre Dame University of Nelson and Mt. Allison University (English Department), and the University of Victoria and UBC's English Language Institute. Now, she teaches ESL in Vancouver. Her collection of poems are *Returning the Empties* Toronto: TSAR Publication (1998), *The Third Infinitive* Toronto: TSAR Publication (1993), *N oven a to St. Jude Thaddeus*. Fredericton: Fiddlehead Press, (1979), *Mind Walls* Fredericton: Fiddlehead Press, (1970). *During Rain, I Plant Chrysanthemums* Toronto: Ryerson Press (1966).

The poems chosen for our analyses are taken from two celebrated anthologies- *Shakti's Words* and *The Geography of Voice* and a renowned book of poem written by Lakshmi Gill, *Returning the Empties* (1998). The poems of Surjeet Kalsey, which we have dealt with are '*I want my Chaos Back*', '*A Women with a Hole in Her Heart*' from *The Geography of Voice* and '*Migratory Birds*', '*Siddhartha Does Penance Once Again*', '*Transcending A Statue*', '*She and He 2*', from *Shakti's Words: An Anthology of South Asian Canadian Women Poets*, and of Lakshmi Gill's '*Letter to a Prospective Immigrant*', '*Out of Canada*' from *The Geography of Voice* and '*At a Dinner Party*', '*Confrontations*' from *Shakti's Words* and '*Legacy*' and '*Pleas*' from *Returning the Empties*.

The immigrants who live in Canada can be labelled as belonging to a racial minority group which feels homeless, rootless, suffer from a sense of alienation and fear of losing its identity. Hence the predominant theme is one of the essential despair and loneliness, keenly felt and poignantly expressed by the immigrant poets. The feeling of bareness and homelessness is one of the dominant characteristics of their poems.

Kalsey in her poem '*I Want My Chaos Back*' (28 August 1983, Harbourfront, Toronto), reflects the gnawing pain of hopelessness, homelessness and barrenness. She says:

today I am three thousand miles away  
from throbbing bubbling figurines of  
my flesh ... how much I miss their presence  
... how much ... the very thought of not being  
with them makes my heart droop. (57)

The poet misses the love and warmth of her near and dear ones and feels sad. She also misses the confusing sounds of her two passions: children and creativity. In the alien land in unfamiliar and unhappy surrounding she feels losing her creativity. She wants her chaos back. The title of the poem '*I Want My Chaos Back*' reflects the poets earning for her chaos. The poem '*A Woman with a Hole in Her Heart*' throws light on the pitiable condition of the women. It brings into light the oppressive effects of patriarchy. In this patriarchy society

females are looked down and are dominated by male members. Here no one wants a female child. Male is adored and worshiped. Surjeet Kalsey holds that women are always held responsible for the wrong done by others and are falsely blamed.

The title of the poem '*Migratory Birds*' is very significant. It signifies great depth of emotion and meaning. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word 'migrate' as moving from one place to another especially from one country to settle in another. In the poem '*Migratory Birds*', Surjeet Kalsey compares herself and the like of hers (other migrants) with migratory birds. The poem carries hidden pains and emotions beautifully. Migratory birds change habitation seasonally and sometimes after the change of season return back to their original habitation. They never forget or give up their original habitation; the place where they had migrated is comfortable and nourishing but they never forget their place of origin and familiar surroundings. Thus by comparing herself with migratory birds the poet tries to indicate some hidden attachment and emotion that forces the migratory birds to return to their original place. Birds migrate seasonally. They migrate for some time/ season and return back. But the poet expresses pain for the immigrants who are unable to return to the place of their origin. She feels as some inherent factor forces the immigrants against the emotions and prohibiting their return to their homeland.

When one arrives in new land, one has a sense of wonder and adventure at the sight and feel of a landscape people and society so different from what one has been accustomed to. There is also a sense of isolation and fear, and intense nostalgia. In the poem '*Transcending a Statue*' a sense of wonder and surprise, a sense of nostalgia, so much a part of the immigrant psyche is vividly illustrated in the poet's evocation of the Canadian ethos: its eography, climate, its culture, a sense of desolation perceive even more sharply when juxtaposed against the home environment. The poem shows the problems which the immigrants face.

In the poem '*Siddhartha Does Penance Once Again*', Surjeet Kalsey recreates the spiritual myth in terms of the immigrants journey away from home, this time towards materialistic values. In this poem Kalsey uses the Buddha allusion for the immigrant experience.

The western civilisation is pervasively patriarchal. It is male-centred and male controlled, and is organised and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic and social. Women themselves are taught the process of their being socialised, to internalise the reigning patriarchal ideology that is the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority. Women live the life of others; they are governed and dominated by male. They follow tradition. Surjeet Kalsey in the poem '*She and He~2*' brings forward the mental and physical torture and pain, which the female undergo in a male dominated world.

Lakshmi Gill through the poem '*At a Dinner Party*' reflects on the life of immigrants who have nothing of joy and happiness left for them. They have become a machine with no feelings, emotion and love for others. They only live and earn their living. There is nothing new for them.

'*Letter to a Prospective Immigrant*' brings forward Lakshmi Gill's feelings and her dislike for the land where she has migrated. It reflects the poet's views about Canada. She calls Canada, "Canada the Cold?" and assures the immigrants that it is not a myth. It is true and prepares them for the land where they have decided to migrate:

Don't come naked

In ten years your proud figure  
will bend like natives hunched under coats. (45)

The last lines of the poem are very touching as it shows the miserable life of the immigrants and a life where there is no joy left for them:

Joy? There is no joy, just a long dull ache  
icehot (not event pain) of want  
They need an orgy, communion, sacrifice, expiation  
If you can bring blessings, come then  
(don't expect blessings in return);  
hell does not give  
But takes. (45)

'*Out of Canada*' is a significant poem in the sense that it explores the metaphysical dimension of diaspora, the psychic and moral dilemma, the belief in life after death and the longing to die in one's own land. '*Pleas*', is a very striking poem on the condition of a woman, who suffers at every hand. The society is guided by male and they work according to their own will, it is the female who has to follow him, to sacrifice herself. '*Legacy*' is a very reflective poem. It brings forward the injustice done to the immigrants, who suffer due to their race, that is 'black'. They suffer a lot due to racism. Gill puts forward the problems, which she faces due to her "black" race.

"She's not white,"  
complained the Asian Student  
to my department head  
"Why is she teaching English?"  
Unable to teach anything else,  
I may have to stop teaching  
Unable to speak anything else  
I may have to stop speaking  
Student's got my tongue. (19)

Both the poets are preoccupied with their past and their effort is to recreate the life of the community native to them. Their works deal with the themes that are predominant in Canadian literature. For these poets the past is valuable to give meaning to the present. It is worthy of reclamation, through recreation. They attempt to do this without sentimentalizing, and without negating the past. However, for Kalsey the past is a tragic vision - of repudiation and regret, of violence and decay, and the only message she projects, as important, is of perseverance - of carrying on.

These poets reflect the changing texture of Canadian literature, vitally contributing, to its widening horizon, where there is no 'mainstream' and no 'canon'. These poets do write about specific ethnic communities quite often, but resist any attempt to be "labelled" as ethnic or immigrant writers. They make one realise that Canadian literature is irrevocably international in content and concern and as Michael Thorpe puts it: "Such a recognition may help to dissolve the soft apartheid of multiculturalism and alert readers to not only diverse cultural riches but real and potentially diverse cultural differences." (1992: 123).

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