

Agency and Identity in the Tale of the Phoenix

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Abstract

Dalip Kaur Tiwana is a celebrated author who speaks for the downtrodden, she gives voice to woman characters who articulate their experiences through the texts she writes, she also gives a perspective of women through the men in her novels, how men perceive women in her time. She brings forth the structured violence, physical and psychological, existing in Indian society in the post-independence world. She makes the reader familiar with the inner world, the psyche of a woman, the firsthand experience of what it means to be a woman. The paper focuses on her novel *The Tale of the Phoenix*, which was originally published in Punjabi in 1993 as *Katha Kuknoos Di*, later translated in English in 2008. The objective of the paper is to interrogate the agency women have in this novel and how the idea of identity has been invested within the women characters by the author, by questioning ideas of marriage, family etc.

Keywords: *Patriarchy, feminism, agency, culture, identity, violence.*

Punjabi novel came into being with the works of Bhai Vir Singh (1872-1957), Nanak Singh (1897-1971), Charan Singh Shaheed (1891-1935), Joshua Fazal Din (1903-1973), Mohan Singh Vaid (1881-

1936) among others who wrote fiction. Dalip Kaur Tiwana (1935- 2020) is considered a pioneer of Punjabi novels written by a woman. She enjoys the same status in Punjabi fiction which the late Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) enjoyed in Punjabi poetry. Punjabi novel is one of the recent genre as compared to other regional Indian novels like Hindi, Bengali. Tiwana started writing post-independence in the 1960s, when the word “feminism” was in the nascent stage in India, and to establish herself as a novelist and a story writer among the male authors during such times was a great deal. She has written more than thirty novels, several poems and short stories, for which she has won both regional and national awards, including Sahitya Akademi Award (1971) and the Padam Shri (2004). She is a celebrated author who speaks for the downtrodden, the rustic folk, she not only gives voice to woman characters who articulate their experiences through the texts she writes, but she also gives a perspective of women through the men in her novels, how men perceive women in her time. She brings forth the structured violence, physical and psychological, existing in Indian society in the post-independence world. For her protagonists, the validation from society, a sense of belonging mattered the most. She

makes the reader familiar with the inner world, the psyche of a woman, the firsthand experience of what it means to be a woman for which she is even called the “Jane Austen of Punjabi letters”. Most of her novels portray the evils of patriarchal society where women are not more than commodities, they are emotionally, psychologically and physically abused. The paper focuses on her novel *The Tale of the Phoenix*, which was originally published in Punjabi in 1993 as *Katha Kuknoos Di* and won the Nanjanagudu Thirumalamba Award, 1994 in Karnataka, it was later translated in English in 2008. The objective of the paper is to interrogate the agency women have in this novel and how the idea of identity has been invested within the women characters by the author, by questioning ideas of marriage, family etc. For this purpose the paper is divided in two parts, the first part is the close reading of the novel and the second part outlines some of the theoretical perspectives.

The novel presents to us the life of Nirmal, a male living in London for several years, and his perspective towards the women in his life. The protagonist thinks of his teacher as a strong female figure and is unaware of his own wife and daughter. Elizabeth Siler calls “time as a river” in the novel and “transcendence” as a key to understand it (7). This novel is a journey of a woman, Bharati- a single mother, a teacher, a divorcee and a survivor of an abusive relationship- reaching the end, that is moksha, the release from the inevitable flow of the river, the release from the bonds of earth which practically involves the self-inflicted torture and justification of the meanness, abusiveness of people around her implying that control of one’s life is not

possible and the only way to survive is by surrendering control. How far is this idea, this spiritual take justified when this woman questions the idea of identity/selfhood and have no answers to what her identity pertains to, and on the other hand comes out as a very strong female figure when she plays the role of a teacher, mother for the characters around her. Is she ever happy, does she ever act on her will? Nirmal, who suffers from identity crisis himself, moved to England but his heart lies in Patiala, Punjab, he is unaware of the life and feelings of his own wife but praises his Madam Bharati a lot, wishing his daughter to be like her. The novel begins with his mother talking about transcendence and concept of rebirth, “... we like some people and dislike others without any reason? It’s all because of our previous birth” “... you’d know a good wife will find her husband in the next life” (Tiwana,12). His wife Kalyani also has similar perspective towards life- “Transcend all relationships and act without attachment to the fruits of your actions” (Tiwana,13). He fails to understand her and thinks of her as clever and naive at the same time assuming it as the continuation of their past, he compares her smile to that of Mona Lisa- “there is self-assurance, detachment, irony, helplessness, or all of these fused together in that very smile” (Tiwana,12). Her mother committed suicide and he doesn’t even know the cause behind it, she loved someone before marriage but he left her for some another woman so she decided to marry Nirmal, the choice of her parents, to her all men appear same and thus their conjugal relationship doesn’t bring any joy as she internalized these feelings of attachment having no space in her life any longer. She makes sure she fulfills all her

duties as a wife, as a daughter-in-law and as a mother, as if there is nothing more to her. On the other hand, there is madam Bharati who was Nirmal's teacher during his college life and he admired her deeply. She is the epitome of sacrifices, her identity is mediated through complying to what others tell/ask her to do, be it her siblings, her mother, her aunt Gautami, her students. She doesn't articulate what she wants, the idea of making others happy is happiness for her, no matter how miserable that makes her life. She drowns herself in work and gives everything to her family which involves her brother Ravi, sister Guddi, her mother and her aunt Gautami. She is the sole bread earner in the family, she educated and got her younger siblings married before her and when both of them moved to England leaving her behind she decided not to marry to take care of her mother and aunt calling off her engagement with Karaminder who kept waiting for her all this while, he left for England too. The major influence in this woman's life is aunt Gautami, a Brahmin child widow who spent all her life in practicing spirituality. She tells her mythological stories to teach her the concept of soul (atman), fate, life as a cycle of births, all the suffering of one's life are the result of past life's actions, one should clear our debts in this life, which she takes very seriously all her life. In Bharati's life, her aunt acts a tool to further the patriarchal agenda, she becomes her mentor and teaches her about the so called culture which she comes from and teaches her subjugation. Whenever Nirmal visits Bharati in Punjab or she writes to Nirmal all she talks about is her siblings and their families, she keeps sending them letters, gifts to which they seldom respond and rather get irritated by her actions. Even

after her mother's death she transfers all the money and property left in her name to Ravi and Guddi, she never thinks of herself or her future, her siblings give meaning to her life. She wonders about the meaning of life and writes to Nirmal in one of her letters sharing her conversation with aunt Gautami where she asks her how to reach one's true self, Gautami reads out a marked passage from one of her books, "When the individual does not recognize the Real due to ignorance, and links the Atman with his body, senses, or intellect, he feels limited, transitory and miserable. That is why a person keeps moving in cycles of births and deaths. The circle of transmigration is based on doctrine of karma. There is only one way out of this world of flux and karma- by achieving moksha" (Tiwana,41). One should resort to prayers and life of sacrifices to reach this moksha.

Gautami asks her to get married as she is turning old, Bharati questions the institution of marriage, why is it necessary, and how she finds it strange that if she refuses to get married people assume she's incapable of getting a spouse and automatically assume themselves as patrons of her life. Gautami calls marriage as a sacred ritual to continue the lineage, thus a way of paying their ancestral debt, she should free her so she can die in peace fulfilling all her duties of this life. "After conducting death rituals, the male head prays to his ancestors to grant him a heroic son. A person who withdraws from marriage is like a coward who runs away from the battlefield" (Tiwana.43). She calls woman as unclaimed land, threatening Bharati that after her death she'd be all alone so she should marry as soon as possible. "To guarantee the reproduction of a given

culture, various requirements... have instated sexual reproduction within the confines of a heterosexually-based system of marriage which requires a reproduction of human beings in certain gendered modes which ... guarantee the eventual reproduction in that kinship system” (Butler, 524). Aunt Gautami without even realizing tied Bharati in these cultural bonds, and forced her to marry in order to attain ‘moksha’, she wants her to marry and perpetuate these bonds through her child.

Frightened by her remarks, Bharati gives in and marries the next man she comes across, the history professor, already a married man, who left his parents and child bride in the village coming to town in search of a better life. Nirmal gets perturbed hearing about her marriage at this age as she is past thirty-five. He talks to Ravi over phone and receives a typical patriarchal response from him, “... we cannot imagine how a woman without a past or future would spend her time. She who has nothing but to await except her death, what would give meaning to her life? She whom no one needs, how would the day dawn for her? Even her night would be empty of dreams, traversing the distance from meaning to meaninglessness, which of the departed would she call to mind?” (Tiwana,46). Bharati was also ashamed of this marriage and thus kept it as a small ceremony and Professor Syal moved in with them. Her face never glowed like a newlywed. Her husband is supposedly having an affair with another woman Maya and he gets frustrated when Bharati confronts him about the same, “why can’t a man love more than one woman? After all, who is to decide whether a relationship is valid or illicit?” (Tiwana,58). The life of the strongest woman of Nirmal’s

life crumbled down in seconds, she lost her confidence, her sense of living, the meaning she was looking out to fulfill the void left by her siblings and her mother. Aunt Gautami fully aware of the situation called it her fate and advised her to have a child in order to save her marriage and also gives her false hope that he’ll return to her when he is clearly someone not to be trusted. “A man is like a horse who never gets sullied. In the evening, even birds return to their nests. God will grant him wisdom. Be patient. There is no need to pay too much attention to what menfolk say or do... It’s all a play of karma, the rights and wrongs of our past lives- there is little in man’s control” (Tiwana,60). Tiwana doesn’t realize the regressive use of scriptures in the context, this concept of past deeds, ‘moksha’ should be equally applicable to men and women in the novel, why is it only catering to women and perpetuating through women?

Bharati takes her words on face value even when she knows she is not stable to have a child in her life, she furthers this abusive relationship by getting pregnant, for what good reason? Moksha. Her husband wants to get out of the shackles of marriage and complains to her breaking her confidence and self-esteem more and more by saying how she’s so perfect and that makes everyone around her so miserable, “you only know how to live for others and not for yourself. In this way you make a martyr of yourself and keep finding fault in others... you are very egoistic... one who doesn’t do any wrong cannot pardon others for their misdeeds” (Tiwana,61). He wants to run away from her, she should abort the child and in case she doesn’t obey him he’ll take a divorce. She gets frightened by the idea of him leaving, she feared society’s

ostracism and also loneliness, she still wanted to be with this man. She gives birth to a daughter, Nirja, Syal abandons his wife and daughter ultimately and leaves for England, even in this situation the money is arranged by Bharati. When will this woman stop this nonsense for heaven's sake? She wishes him nothing but happiness and expects him to return to them. She's unable to see the wrong doings of her loved ones, or she deliberately does so because doesn't want to be defeated, only she knows. The idea of a failed marriage is so frowned upon that she thinks about dying, she writes to Nirmal in one of her letters "I began to understand why Sylvia Plath committed Suicide. Perhaps she was unable to accept her defeat. I too didn't want to fail" (Tiwana,65). Syal clears his debt by sending her double the amount of money she arranged for him, he marries an American woman later, he's a materialistic man who shifts from one woman to another in order to fulfill his pursuits. Frustrated by the situation she lashes out on her daughter, venting out her anger on a baby what does that makes her? She realizes how weak she has become, meanwhile aunt Gautami asks her time and again to resort to prayers and god. She ultimately finds seclusion and meaning of her life in motherhood, her daughter gives meaning to her life, she cannot die because she has her now.

Nirmal always wanted his daughter to be like madam Bharati, he asks her to spend time with her in India to learn from her, he keeps on building a fantasy around his teacher creating a persona which she fails to match time and again, he fails to see the reality of her life which later leads to Nirmal questioning his own life and thought process. Even when Neha was a child she

could see through her life and questions her father why she is the only one in her family taking up all the responsibilities not the others. She chose to give her a book *The Ultimate Freedom*, it made Nirmal think why she chose that particular book, she feels Bharati has imprisoned herself in many tight circles or is it a mere coincidence. He is typical controlling father figure who fears that his daughter will end up marrying someone of her choice, like someone from Pakistan. Neha also questions marriage to which his father responds that it is an arrangement by our parents or us, his wife Kalyani calls it a sacred bond, she feels it is neither but a mutual desire to live together and when it feels like a burden or compulsion one should end it. He couldn't accept her daughters having such western ideas, "... spend a year with Madam Bharati...", "... know and understand the meaning of being a woman" (Tiwana,67). Be a woman, be like Bharati, don't think, don't have opinions. Her father's worst nightmare comes true when she tells her she wants to marry a Pakistani guy, how can she marry as per her choice, he brings up religious differences and asks her will she able to tolerate another woman in her life because as Muslim men are allowed to have four wives as per Islam. Neha gets aggravated and questions her parents' conjugal relationship how he knows nothing about his wife and all the "concessions" Kalyani makes for him. She asks him why he thinks his wife never says or complains about anything, it is not because of him, but because of her contented nature. Nirmal feels like he has been sleepwalking all his life. Seeing madam's conditions he comes to the conclusion that he is very lucky to have a wife like her, because in his eyes his

madam used to be so strong, so intelligent, how can she let things like these happen to her. Is madam a strong woman after all or is she selfish to never realize how much Karaminder loved her and Nirmal as well, she never asked for help, never considered them her own, how selfish is that? Only Aunt Gautami's death led her to the realization that she should stop caring for others now.

Roopinder Singh in his book review poses similar questions, "Dalip Kaur Tiwana pens down a dark tale, but there is a strong spiritual content in it, both in the way Bharati lives, as well as in the teachings enunciated by Aunt Gautami. The women are strong, become role models and seem self-sufficient, but are they really? Why did Bharati marry so late? Is she as unselfish as Nirmal believes her to be? Are even these seemingly strong single women seeking what they give others—strength and support? Is the world of the non-resident Indians one of success in lands of opportunity or one where they still yearn to be in the land of wide meadows and the times of warm friendships?" Every woman here has a certain role to play in a certain male's life, it seems there is nothing more to it, it's just a gendered performance materialized by the culture they're part of. A woman is a historical idea, perpetuated through culture, history, "... to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman', to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project" (Butler, 522). Throughout the novel the women are performing their roles as mother, as sister, as wives, as daughters. There is a complete

lack of agency. Beauvoir theorizes the body as "physiologically, psychologically, socially and culturally defined. Bodily agency is affected by biological/ biochemical facts, but these are not brute (natural) facts, but are influenced by the society they are part of" (Stavro, 5). The women here have no will of their own, their idea of selfhood/ identity is limited to their gendered roles, they do what the people around tell them and they never question the status quo. Tiwana resorts to the ancient scriptures without realizing the potentiality of them to be subversive in nature (Raymond Williams). If these ideas of selfhood, identity are so gender neutral, they should be equally applicable to men and women. Instead of offering any solution to the situation, women here just accept their fate and convince each other for the same. The idea is to realize the potentiality of cultural subversion in the narrative, which seems to be missing here. The culture portrayed in the novel is predominantly patriarchal, the meaning of life of these women is derived from it, in order to bring a change in the lives of these women, they have to question their reality, "culturally subversive styles have significant ideological implications, since in the course of contestatory meaning-making practices they instigate a particular transformation of reality, or validate a version of reality relevant to the subculture's position" (Katarzyna, 51).

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