

Construction of Gender - Historical Narrative vis-a-vis the Women oriented Novels of Bhai Vir Singh

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Abstract

Both history and literature are fashioned by events in the life of not just men but both men and women. If history is the record of their lives, literature is its reflection.

This research paper is an attempt to examine the absence of gender as a meaningful category in mainstream historical narrative of medieval/late medieval period and compare it with the kind of voice it finds in contemporary Punjabi literature. Through an analysis of Bhai Vir Singh's novels *Sundri*, *Bijai Singh* and *Satwant Kaur*, which are widely read Punjabi novels, I have made an attempt to draw attention to the fact that though history as a discipline has not been very fair to its women by having confined them to the periphery of historical discourse, a peep into other sources can sometimes enlighten us to their constructive contribution. Such sources, despite being outside the realm of formal history, not only give us an insight into the past but also help us to resuscitate the lives of women who were very much a part of the flow of events we call history.

Keywords: Gender, Historical Exclusion, Literary Traditions, Social Realism, Historical Narrative, Equality, Patriarchal Structure.

Introduction

The dimension of gender has always been in the periphery of our historical past and any endeavour to explore the history of women is to encounter large areas of neglect, silence and exclusions.¹ Generations of scholars whether of the indigenous tradition of history writing or part of the European orientalist tradition have little or nothing to say about the lives of women which has perpetuated many misconceptions, ambiguities and undervaluation of their roles. This has been a universal phenomenon. The well known *Annales School* with its insistence on 'total history' has also discussed women primarily as brides, wives and mothers.²

Objective of the Study

History as a discipline has by and large not been very fair to its women. This has been a subject of discussion among scholars and researchers. This paper is an attempt to examine the absence of gender in mainstream historical narrative of Medieval and later Medieval period and compare it with the kind of voice it finds in Punjabi novel of the same time.

Main Text of the Study

The best way to understand the spirit of any civilization and to gauge its strengths and weaknesses is to study the history of its women.³ An analysis of why certain events were recorded may help us to understand certain cultures in more depth but that should not lead us to believe that what has not been recorded was not important. Although one fails to understand how the inclusion of women could have changed the narrative of historical writing but the focus has always been on men's leadership, men as heads of families, households, kingdoms and communities.

One of the problems of women's history has been that so much of its output has concerned areas like family, philanthropy and religion which can easily be shrugged off by historians as a minority pursuit with no bearing on social processes.

As far as Medieval and later Medieval period is concerned, apart from a few women whose socio-cultural roles have been documented, a



Gauri Sharma

Professor,
Dept. of Evening Studies,
MDRC,
Panjab University, Chandigarh,
India

vast majority of scholars have confined themselves to writing about women in the context of *pardah*, *polygamy*, *concubinage* and the *harem* leading us to believe that women in the pre modern phase had no history.

In view of their historical exclusion we need to look to other sources and one of them is literature of an age ; and gender we know has often been constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed through literature and therefore it becomes a valuable source for us to fall back on.

Punjabi novel has been one of the most potent medium of the language where writers have been reflecting an image of the society in which they lived often accepting, appreciating and even criticizing certain classes for their views on others

Bhai Vir Singh (1872-1957) who played a very important role in the renewal of Punjabi literary traditions belonged to an age of ferment. The age that saw the destruction of the Sikh sovereignty in Punjab in the wake of its annexation by the British in 1849, the decline of the Sikh aristocracy and the gradual emergence of the urban middle class aroused among Sikhs a concern for redefining the boundaries of their social structure. In fact there is no aspect of Punjabi /Sikh culture that has not been touched, highlighted and illuminated through his writings.

The novel '*Sundri*' which happens to be one of the most widely read novel in Punjabi, was written in the backdrop of the Singh Sabha Movement, primarily with the purpose of creating a strong Sikh identity. Bhai Vir Singh wanted to reorient the Sikh community by helping them assimilate modern influences with historical and cultural heritage. *Sundri* is the story of a young girl, Surasti who lives in a safe haven with her family but is unfortunately captured by a Mughal nawab who refuses to let go of her. The family begs and implores for her return which is refused by the nawab and when she is finally rescued the family returns her to the nawab to avoid his anger. When later in life Surasti, gets an opportunity to return home she refuses to go back to her family and joins her brother in his adventures against the enemy to uphold her dignity. The novel ends up being a manifestation of the author's aspiration of what an ideal Sikh woman should be.

In fact two other novels by Bhai Vir Singh-- *Bijai Singh* (1899) and *Satwant Kaur*, 1900 (1st Part) having similar ideological agendas and historical contexts became a trilogy presenting women as paradigms of moral strength and spiritual sensitivity. Bhai Vir Singh presents through these novels women as models of courage, fortitude and human dignity.

While *Bijai Singh* chronicles the trials and tribulations of Bijai Singh and his wife Sheel Kaur at the hands of a host of historical characters like Mir Mannu, the narrative weaves in and out of their various bouts of captivity and separation. Sheel Kaur becomes the object of Mughal lust and is hideously tortured but she emerges as a strong woman who is ready to see her husband and son killed but not ready to forsake her faith. Referencing her predicament the author cautions the reader to beware of being lured by

others. Through the protagonist Bhai Vir Singh tries to remind Sikh women that they should protect their honour. The novel ends with the death of Bijai Singh and Sheel Kaur collapsing and dying with her husband.

The third novel *Satwant Kaur* is the story of Satwant who like Sundri is captured by a Muslim soldier and is sold to servitude in Kabul where she becomes a private servant of a Khan's wife Fatima, who relies excessively on Satwant in just every way. When the Khan who is an abusive alcoholic tries to kill his wife, Satwant Kaur attacks him and saves the Fatima. Ultimately, the courageous Satwant saves Khan's life and transforms him into a reformed and doting husband. Bhai Vir Singh tries to put men to shame by her strength of character. The story proceeds to narrate that the Amir of Kabul is impressed by Satwant and wants to marry her on her conversion to Islam. Satwant escapes and reaches Fatima and becomes her protector and instructor in Sikhism. Finally, the novel ends with Satwant Kaur coming back to Punjab and dedicating her life to celibacy and community service.

Coming back to the historical narrative, we have historians talking of women being inferior and subordinate to men, leading lives of perpetual dependence as daughters, wives and mothers. Patriarchy, having been firmly established in our system, the customs and traditions that were reinforced became attempts to work out what was believed to be a perfect social order.⁵ In fact the condition of women can best be described in what Emily Dickinson says in one of her poems

"They put me in a closet because they liked me still."⁶

As a result Indian women began perceiving themselves as helpless in untangling themselves from the existing social roles and expectations - hence we have the Rigvedic concept of '*Sahdharmini* (equal partner) being replaced by *Pativrata Dharma* (the duties of a chaste wife) who fulfills her husband's wishes without questioning them.⁷ We therefore have the evils of *sati*, *child marriage* and *ill treatment of widows* becoming acceptable in the historical context of these practices.

In Bhai Vir Singh's novels the historical landscape is the 18th century when society still rested on two basic principles that-

1. Women are subordinate of men, and
2. The family's honour lies in actions of women therefore to ensure that families are not dishonoured. Society placed restrictions on women's mobility by subjugating and segregating them from the activities of men, both physically and symbolically, in the form of 'Purdah'.

The female protagonist of Bhai Vir Singh's novel *Sundri* came from the same social set up. Hence we have Surasti being captured, the family pleading the nawab who had captured her to free her and save the family from ignominy and on refusal meekly accepting their fate and when finally rescued, keeping the family honour in mind, are even ready to send her back.

The novel 'Sundri' here becomes an instrument of '*Social Realism*' attempting to point to the malaise in society and the social forces that surround and influence an individual's thought process. However, as the story progresses the same Surasti, now Sundri, becomes a model of courage, fortitude and dignity.⁸ the author trying to suggest that every woman is *Shakti*, but she cannot become *Shakti* unless she realizes the potential. When the protagonist is faced with the choice of returning home or leading a difficult life with her brother she chooses the latter questioning herself "why don't women ever join action to uphold righteousness. If they haven't so far, why should I not be the first one?"⁹

Whereas historical records speak of the subordinate position of women, Vir Singh's heroines are defiant and often acquire leadership roles. The protagonist in Sundri rides horses, is trained in the use of weapons and attacks opponents. The fact that the novelist Vir Singh assigns heroic roles to a woman is significant for it repeats the Sikh precept of equality between men and women. However, the novelist does not delink himself from adhering to gender specific roles and the heroine performing domestic chores like cooking, cleaning and nursing.

Although Guru Nanak Dev's attitude towards women was much more liberal than his contemporaries, he never discarded the values of the patriarchal structure but yes, within that structure he created a very large space for women. The often quoted verse where he says

"So kyon manda akhiye Jit janme rajan"

This is a testimony of the author's desire to change society's perception of women. But Guru Nanak Dev also believed that a woman's place was in the home. Keeping this parameter in mind Sundri does not fit into this model for she chooses not to be in the safe haven of her home. However, it must be kept in mind that in the wake of socio-religious reform movements in the 19th century the image of the suppressed and subjugated women was undergoing a paradigm shift and Vir Singh attempts to reflect that through his novels.

Although a fictional character, Sundri emerges as a paragon of a saintly woman whose courage and sacrifice culminates in her martyrdom. In the novel her last words to the jatha are

"Dear brothers please keep my submissions in mind. You must always uphold the dignity of women."¹⁰

Through Sundri Bhai Vir Singh tries to suggest the need for emancipation of women because there are repeated persuasions for them to reform themselves and abstain from rituals. The novelist also tries to draw overt comparisons between Sundri's courageous devotion and the moral deficiency of her Hindu and Muslim counterparts. There is perhaps an effort through Sundri's evolution to set an example before women to leave their submissive roots and embrace a Sikh future.

The same is the case with the other two novels where Sheel Kaur in Bijai Singh and Satwant Kaur emerge as strong female characters and the author applauds their spiritual strength and devotion

to their cause. The author also makes an attempt to suggest the resistance of women to patriarchal norms put before them. However, one thing that is significant is that once these women left their patriarchal structures, they could not go back to leading the life of a traditional householder. The three options before them being death, martyrdom and seva. Sundri, of course, had transcended the stage of ordinary existence and refused to go back. Sheel Kaur and Satwant Kaur choose death or community service thereby suggesting defiance to societal expectations. Even when judged by modern standards, these women emerge as well rounded and an inspiration to both men and women. The author even went as far as often portraying the heroines in his three novels as more capable of spiritual enlightenment than their male counterparts.¹¹

More importantly in the description of *Sundri*, *Satwant Kaur* and *Sheel Kaur*, Bhai Vir Singh was able to draw attention to the troubled lives of ordinary women who do not find any place in the historical narrative. Yet such works, despite being outside the realm of formal history, not only give us an insight into the past but help us to comprehend the lives of subaltern women in the later medieval period. The paucity of historical information on women of this age enhances the sociological importance of such works. Moreover, Vir Singh admitted that these novels were based on the *PanthPrakash*, the *Khalsatawarikh* and the oral traditions. The contextual landscape having historical characters and connotations add to the significance of the novel.

Conclusion

History, like fiction, is fashioned by events in the life of men and women and through this interweaving of fiction and history Vir Singh drives in the point that although society in pre modern age did not undergo any drastic change – but the thought patterns had begun to change. By creating strong female role models who were paradigms of moral strength and spiritual sensitivity Vir Singh was successful in conveying to the reader the important role women could play in reforming society and restoring the ethical values of the Gurus.

It comes to a logical conclusion, therefore, that women despite their invisibility in historical discourse or at the most confined to the margins were definitely a part of the flow of events that we call history. It is upto us whether we choose to see history through the eyes of those who were in control of the flow or through the eyes of those who were part of the flow. Novels like *Sundri*, *Bijai Singh* and *Satwant Kaur* coerce its readers to question the absence of gender within the discipline of history and have their voices restored for not only have women enriched history but they were as much a part and parcel of social processes as men and therefore equally capable of influencing and changing social patterns.

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