

WOMEN IN PUNJABI DIASPORA: A STUDY OF IQBAL**RAMOOWALIA'S *THE DEATH OF A PASSPORT***

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The controversial and ground-breaking feminist movement went through a scorching struggle in order to achieve complete metamorphosis from the women's movement of the 1960s. Having laid its contribution amongst various political ideologies, it travelled into the complex realm of literature. Initially, the feminist movement began in the western states where it realized the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as a vital instrument to combat and question the extent of their authority and their coherence. During the forthcoming decade, the feminist ideologies captured more attention when the movement began to criticize the several aspects of the predominant patriarchal regulations along with asserting the feminist individuality. However, it was during the 1980s that feminism acquired a strong hold over the literary field. It switched its focus from attacking the dominant male outlook of the world and aimed to reconstruct the lost or suppressed records of female experience. Elaine Showalter, for instance described the change in the late twentieth century as a shift of attention from 'androtexs' to 'gynotexs'. Therefore, the feminist movement significantly altered the course of general perception which earlier fell under the monopoly of patriarchal norms. However, it has undergone several altercations since its inception. Many researchers and scholars studied its ideals and extended the range of feminist studies even further. Chandra Talpade

Mohanty, an Indian-American critic added another dimension to the study of feminism through her influential essay *Under Western Eyes*. She foregrounds a critical set of limitations which reflect the fissures amidst the concept of Western feminism. Her critique received consequence amongst her contemporaries and therefore became a significant piece of critical writing for the study of transnational feminism. Mohanty asserts, “Clearly Western feminist discourse and political practice is neither singular nor homogeneous in its goals, interests, or analyses” (Mohanty 52). Her assertion apparently depicts the intent with which she critiques the approach of Western feminism towards the third world women and simultaneously addresses the sensitive notion by defining the very idea of the “third world”. Mohanty states, “From its analytic value as a category of exploitative economic exchange in both traditional and contemporary Marxisms to its use by feminist women of color in the U.S. to describe the appropriation of their experiences and struggles by hegemonic white women’s movements, colonization has been used to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the “third world””(52). Her observations build a strong context for various diasporic studies as her argument is centralized around exploring the heterogeneity of the feminist struggle with respect to different locations of the ‘third world’. Through her article Mohanty takes a leap from post-colonial feminism, in order to study it’s another crucial branch, transnational feminism. Her essay outlines the major limitation within the theory of Western feminist discourse where she points out the lack of attention directed towards the suffering of third world women within the same theory. Mohanty describes how Western feminism generalizes the experiences of all the women of South Asia, Africa, East Asia and perceive them as a homogenous whole, thereby overlooking the diversity within their separate causes of anguish. The Western theory has reduced all women of the third

world into a single, collective other. According to Western scholars, an average third world woman happens to be sexually constrained, uneducated, often ignorant of her own subjugation, bound by family and traditions and victimized. As a result, she becomes a binary of the Western woman who is educated, modern and authoritative. Therefore, “Western feminist scholarship cannot avoid the challenge of situating itself and examining its role in such a global economic and political framework. To do any less would be to ignore the complex interconnections between first and third world economies and the profound effect of this on the lives of women in all countries” (Mohanty 54). Her essay brings into focus the plight of such women and she demands equal and separate attention for each different group of third world women in order to examine the extent of each of their discrete battles. Therefore, “Under Western Eyes” acts as an appropriate piece of context for studying the condition of Indian diasporic women, situated overseas. The conflicts of their transnational position when studied in accordance with their post-colonial identity opens an entirely new dimension to the study of feminism vis-à-vis the nuances related to their migration. Many scholars such as Audre Lorde, Ethel Crowley etc. have also brought focus upon similar concerns. Apart from these theorists a great deal of Indian diasporic writers has also foregrounded the plight of migrated Indian women.

Amongst several other Indian diasporic groups, the Punjabi diaspora has acquired a prominent space overseas. For a community of sixteen million, the proportion of overseas *Punjabis* is strikingly high, far above any other group, except *Gujratis* and *Mirpuris*. No other province has exported so many of its people abroad, especially during the past three decades. Thus, many prestigious theorists studied the distinct reasons which nudged countless Punjabi families towards migration. Darshan Singh Tatla emerged as an influential writer in the field of Punjabi and Sikh migrant studies. He analyzed the displacement patterns of these communities

and laid down an extensive and rich study through his text, *The Sikh Diaspora: A Search for Statehood*. He follows a chronological approach in deconstructing the entangled issues which led to the commencement of the mass movement from Punjab. Tatla further states, “Almost a million Punjabis currently live abroad; a majority emigrated voluntarily, a small minority were “pushed” by political events and most recently several thousands fled to escape state violence. Although many countries have Sikh communities, Britain, Canada and the United States account for three-quarters of Sikh emigrants” (Tatla 61). Therefore, just as other global diasporas, the widespread Punjabi diasporic community has also come forward with their distinct set of writings to express their interests. Writers of the Punjabi diaspora have come forward with the description of the brutal challenges which they confronted during their own journey. Amidst the wide umbrella of diasporic literature, Punjabi diasporic fiction holds a significant position, as far as dealing with various issues of conflicted migrant sensibilities is concerned. Tatla’s observations provide an essential historical context while reading the works of Punjabi diasporic fiction. The reader is able to comprehend the issues of disjunction, disillusionment, disharmony, incompatibility, self-deprecation, self-loathing etc. while placing them in accordance within an appropriate contextual framework. The issue of longing for one’s homeland due to recurring nostalgia has been an evident key element in depicting the plight of an emigrant’s diasporic experience amidst Punjabi Diasporic Literature. The theme of loneliness, detachment and loss of ethnicity are deeply rooted in their works of fiction. Consequently, the varied experiences of the central women characters are eclipsed through the reminiscences of their home which induces lamentation at its loss. The present paper takes into account the hardships endured by women, who migrated from certain third world countries carrying hopes of settling in Western countries

and Iqbal Ramoowalia's protagonist Seema, in *The Death of a Passport* presents the farthest extent of this excruciating journey.

The text lays focus on the struggle of a disowned female emigrant in the state of Canada, who endures her ex-husband's indifference and the agonized separation from her child while the author explores the farthest extent of a third world women amidst the Western world where she's subjected to severe exploitation as well as abuse. Initially, her skirmish can be studied by analyzing the fierce battle that Seema has to withstand due to her "illegal" status. However, her excruciating journey towards attaining an autonomous living came with a great amount of suffering. This odyssey began the moment she stepped out of the meaningless relationship that Seema was enduring with Anmol. It was Anmol's extreme indifference which forced her to move out in order to search for a livelihood of her own in an environment which was completely alien to her. Her strife symbolizes the suffering of a child who has been thrown into a sea which serves as a home for several mammals with terrifying depth, when she did not know how to swim. She constantly had to keep trying to push herself up in order to breathe and stay alive. Significantly, every now and then Seema provides the reader with some moving reflections that she draws while living in a host society. She remarks, "The mental agony? Who cares to read the mental trauma unless you open yourself up!" (Ramoowalia 47). Her affirmation not only brings forth the internal trauma that she suffers from but also accounts for the social indifference which host societies exert upon an immigrant. Her statement also foregrounds the silent gap which remains absolute between the 'other' woman and the host society. This in turn, further problematizes their relationship. Seema affirms how the migrant keeps on striving for social acceptance, however, it is rarely attained. Her position as an 'average third world' woman who hopes to achieve settlement in Canada someday, pushes her at the farthest corner of the margin.

The ruthless instances of discrimination and sexual abuse which she endures, confirm the prevalence of several theories put forward by certain transnationalist theorists such as Mohanty, Lorde, Crowley etc.

Following the course of hiding her real identity, Seema became an easy target for those who wished to take advantage of her delicate condition. Initially, she was subjected to avoid communication with people and step aside from any kind of association in order to safeguard herself from arrest. Afterwards she became a victim of sexual abuse, not just once but several times. The scorching events of exploitation at various instances, mark the extent of Seema's helplessness which arises out of her gender. Towards the end, she was sexually assaulted by the restaurant owner who employed Seema at her own risk as a receptionist. Nevertheless, as she left the place, she asked Sodhi to convey a message to Patricia which said, "Just go to the restaurant and tell Patricia what condition I'm in... Also assure her that her name didn't figure at any stage". The fact that she was not exposing Patricia for the harassment can be understood by considering that Patricia still held the money that Seema earned from working at her restaurant. She suppressed her anguish, buried her grief and gathered courage yet again in order to survive in Toronto. Her gender became her most ruthless enemy. Ajeet, the priest, Patricia, Rajan, Sodhi, all of them exploited her sexually as well as emotionally. Through these unfortunate happenings, the author brings out the danger and vulnerability that a third world female emigrant withstands. Here the metaphor of the "female Buddha" drawn by Seema becomes rather eloquent and essentially meaningful. The metaphor symbolizes her as a "female Buddha" and obtains more significance when the ferocity of her struggle is taken into consideration. Her character bears all kind of ordeals which a sage undergoes. She reflects patience, competence as well as humility while she was dealing with unfavorable circumstances. The metaphor also brings out the fact that

her journey has been as excruciating as a sage's penance. The arduousness of her circumstances also ensures the same.

Works Cited

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