

My elder son will go to America to pursue his studies. He is not such a fool as to keep himself buried in books forever. Perhaps he'll fall in love with some junior librarian in his university and then perhaps they'll get married, whether we are able to participate in the wedding or not. . . . As a matter of fact I am only aware of my father's surname since it happens to be my surname too . . .

The *mohajir* elders grapple for anchors in their attempt to come to terms with their fate as *mohajirs*. These anchors become available to them only at the intellectual and philosophical level. As they seek an answer to the gnawing question- For how long shall we remain *mohajirs* - they tend to seek refuge in:

In truth, we are all *mohajirs*.

During the British Raj, our elders used to flaunt their ribbons for the ranks of Jamadar or Subedar with

great pride. Now our youngsters have got so many opportunities to demonstrate their talents.

Or, take this:

. . . He was a Hindu judge by the name of Chandani. After Independence, all his relatives had crossed over to Hindustan but he had stayed here, insisting that Sindhudesh was his real home. . . . In that whole gathering he was the only one who did into look a native. And at that time, it seemed as if the old man was serving out the collective sentences of all the punishments he had meted out in his court. I started wondering what *he* was doing here when one by one, even his gods had left this place. And once he had decided to stay on, he should have evinced faith in his new life, read the Kalma, worshipped Allah to ensure his redemption and spent the rest of his days in peace. . . one word out of his mouth and he

would be nabbed as an alien in his own Sindhudesh!

Deewane Maulvi Sahab wonders – where all the Hindus have disappeared but then feels very happy with the thought that by and by all of them have embraced Islam. He stops to invoke Allah's blessings of the boundless wealth of abiding faith upon the whole world . . .

Sleepwalkers as an ironic statement on a monolithic society accommodates themes of nativity, rootlessness, meta-physical reconciliation and adaptation in an otherwise hostile environment. *Mohajirs* in Pakistan will ever remain *mohajirs*. History and politics will further perpetuate the stigmatised nomenclature.

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Patriarchal Distortions in Folklore

For once the blurb does not exaggerate. Pankaj Singh's *Re-presenting Woman: Tradition, Legend and Panjabi Drama* is what the blurb says it is: "a pioneer study on Panjabi legends and drama from the gender perspective."

The study of gender in folklore started receiving attention only in the nineteen eighties. Studies of folk narratives are also hard to come by, particularly in India and this book is to my mind the first sustained interrogation of some popular traditional narratives of Punjab and it shows how patriarchal bias has led to the marginalization and misrepresentation of women in them. It is at the same time a close examination of how Panjabi dramatists have tried to *re-create* these narratives and *re-present* women along

more just, realistic and humanistic lines. Gender, as the author shows, is central to the examination of the past and by undertaking this study of Punjabi legends from the gender perspective she has opened up a new and fruitful territory for research into the folk narratives of the country and their contemporary reincarnations in a literary form in different languages of the country.

The book is based on the premise that the past of a society exercises a powerful hold over the present through the use of myth, legends and history. Myths, Pankaj Singh reminds us, "reflect, sustain and regulate the moral and cultural code of a living society" (2). Likewise, a legend is also a cultural construct which "gets privileged as the

collective wisdom of the ages . . . and becomes a pervasive element in the consciousness of a society. . . . Transmitted from generation to generation myths and legends on the one hand contribute to the continuity of a culture and on the other hand become instruments of control by encouraging conformity to the accepted social norms and discouraging occurrence of social deviance. Thus myth and legend become embodiments of dogma, preached not by sermonising but by storytelling, and function as 'illustrative media'" (4).

History too, despite its claim to objectivity, depends on "a continual selection and interpretation," which can never be value-free. "Myth, legend and history," she concludes, "are not neutral but politically motivated narratives,

- *Re-presenting Woman:*
- *Tradition, Legend and Panjabi Drama*
- by Pankaj K. Singh
- Indian Institute of Advanced Study
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controlled and structured by the powers that be [in this case patriarchy] to promote and perpetuate their domination and ideology" (6). Because of their potential to enforce control and also because the legends chosen for study in the book are culturally alive and vibrate in the Punjabi consciousness it becomes important that these traditional narratives are scrutinized and redefined and reinterpreted.

Pankaj Singh chooses four traditional narratives—two love legends, *Hir Ranjha* and *Mirza Saheban* and two legends of morality as she calls them, *Puran Bhagat* and *Raja Rasalu*, all of which are popular in Punjab. Before zeroing in on the legends, however, the author carefully prepares the ground for her probe.

After briefly talking about the aesthetic advantage of using traditional literary narratives in drama she goes on to talk of the almost symbiotic relationship between tradition and modernity and of the social responsibility of the writer to consciously probe the past. This involves confronting "questions of power, freedom, justice, self and choice" which as she rightly says, "may appear as self-evident but which need to be examined afresh" (8).

In a brief overview of how the past was used by the playwrights in Hindi and Punjabi she points out that it was used by dramatists in pre-independence India to infuse a sense of cultural nationalism. They presented role models of endurance, self-sacrifice, courage and resistance. In contrast the post-independence drama both in Hindi and Punjabi critiques tradition. She finds that except Bhisham Sahni's *Madhavi* Hindi dramatists largely ignore "the existential predicament of women in a world of male dominance" (11). Post-independence Punjabi drama, on the other hand, shows a marked inclination to "review and reconstruct" popular legends.

In the last section of Chapter I she briefly discusses the contemporary

Indian playwrights' quest for an idiom that is appropriate for what she, following Catherine Belsey, calls an "interrogative text." She adds that these playwrights have found indigenous forms and conventions more suitable for their purpose. The resources derived from both classical drama and the rich folk theatre are plentiful and Punjabi drama makes eclectic use of several of these home-grown elements such as the *sutradhara*, folk singers, or a *Dhadi*, non-corporeal chorus or Voice, songs and at times dances.

The remaining three chapters are concerned with the presentation of women in legends and their re-creations in pre- and post-independence Punjabi drama. The second chapter entitled 'Representing Nationalism: Myth, Legend and Drama in the Pre-Independence Phase' offers an account of how women were viewed in early Punjabi drama. While the drama of social reform took some note of the excesses committed against women characters, the nationalistic discourse tended to idealize them. Among others she mentions Brij Lal Shastri's *Savitri* (1925) and *Sukanya* (1925) and *Puran Natak* (1920). The last play foregrounds the mother-son bond so characteristic of the nationalistic ethos whereas *Puran Singh's Puran Nath Jogi* (1925) idealizes Ichharan as a mother, and motherly love. Ironically, this glorification of motherhood in the service of nationalism tended to deflect attention from the real woman as and for herself and "reaffirmed even more subtly the exploitative and restrictive role as prescribed by patriarchy, namely as a giver, provider but never a seeker for herself" (43).

Pankaj Singh's examination of traditional narratives selected by her begins in chapter III. She varies her strategy to deal with the two groups of legends, namely love legends and legends of morality. The logic of love demands that women play a major role in them, which is what *Hir* and *Saheban*

do in the love legends. However, this chapter dealing with these legends is entitled 'Recasting Women' suggesting that in the traditional legends women were cast in a patriarchal mould and recasting them was essential in the interest of justice, dignity and humanity. In the legends of morality, women are not given a central place and even in their subsidiary role are presented demeaningly. This calls for an interrogation of the legends themselves. Hence chapter IV dealing with *Puran Bhagat* and *Raja Rasalu* bears the title 'Interrogating Legends'. Each of these chapters is divided into two parts. The first part gives an analysis of the legend that helps the author to illustrate the distorting effect of patriarchy. This is followed by a discussion of the dramatic re-creations of these legends.

For *Hir Ranjha* she concentrates on the best-known version of the legend, called *Hir Waris* (after the name of the author Waris Shah), which is an acknowledged classic of Punjabi literature and quotes chapter and verse to show how patriarchal blinkers have led Waris Shah to arbitrarily privilege *Ranjha* and denigrate and subjugate *Hir* and other women characters. *Hir* it is who suggests that they run away but *Ranjha* turns down her suggestion saying that love has no charm if won with stealing and elopement and ironically blames her for cheating him: "You made me tend buffaloes." There is in fact a misogynistic strain in him, which is amazing in a lover. He quotes from the Quran saying: "God Himself hath said in the holy Quran: 'Verily your deceit is great.' . . . Satan is the Lord of evil spirits and women, the word of boys, hemp smokers and bhang smokers cannot be trusted . . ." (Quoted on p. 58). He is particularly harsh to women while talking to *Sehti* and holds *Eve* responsible for *Adam's* expulsion and later rhetorically asks: "When have they ever been faithful to anyone?" *Sehti* is presented as "the loudest and most aggressive voice contesting the idle

boastful imposter Ranjha" (62) but Waris Shah makes her regret her behaviour and offer an apology to him. Singh also points out the patriarchal bias of Waris Shah himself. Women, he says, are deceitful. The other words associated by him with them are "pretence" and "fraud". Moreover, she points out, that Waris Shah does not seem moved by Hir's suffering. "Her forced marriage to Saida and her poisoning by her own family, are just reported in a matter-of-fact manner, unaccompanied by any indictment of these cruel, unfair acts of social injustice and deception, or by any words of compassion for their victim Hir" (65). Pankaj Singh's conclusion is damning: "His indifference to women's agony and his sweeping denigration of women certainly make the celebration of this 'classic' questionable" (65). The inverted commas enclosing the word classic are hers. With this her demolition of *Hir Waris* is complete. Here we see Pankaj Singh at her iconoclastic best.

In order to minimize the possibility of disagreement she quotes from the original Punjabi and then adds an English translation, either the one given by the well-known translator of Hir, Charles Frederic Usborne or R. C. Temple's translation or her own for the benefit of those unfamiliar with the language. This is sound scholarship. The question, however, remains: how do we account for the discrepancy between the immense popularity of the legend and Waris Shah's gender-biased presentation of it? Pankaj Singh's text provides little help in this respect.

Now about the dramatic re-creations of the legend. According to Singh possibly the best dramatization of the legend is by Shiela Bhatia for whom the legend is the tragedy of a woman "in a male-oriented world." In her play *Hir* is "poisoned not by uncle Kaido but by her mother to save her from being lynched by society." Unfortunately this version is not available even with the author herself. Of the four available re-creations of the legend, two from the pen of Harsaran Singh *Hir da Dukhant* (1982)

and *Hir Ranjha* (1990), focus on a subject ignored by the legend, namely Hir's suffering and the dilemma of a choice between her lover and her husband both of whom fail her. Aulakh's *Bal Nath de Tille te* (1978) is also a vindication of woman but this vindication innovatively comes from the lips of Ranjha himself who has been recast in the mould of a responsible man, "sad, sober and full of humility." These three reworkings are more realistic and have an obvious contemporary relevance.

Pankaj Singh's discussion of *Mirza Saheban* in Piloo's fragmentary version places the legend also firmly in the patriarchal mould. But I think the voice of patriarchy is not as strident in this legend and in this version as it was in *Hir Waris*. Mirza's overblown male ego in not heeding Saheban's repeated pleas to run away from their pursuers and take her to Danabad comes out several times in the narrative. And Pankaj Singh is right in pointing out that Piloo underplays Mirza's blind ego by stressing the role of destiny in the tragedy of the lovers. But it must be remembered that the poet does not absolve Mirza altogether:

"Mirza mara Malikul-Maut de,
kuchh mara unhon ghuman."

"Partly the Lord of Death and partly
pride slew Mirza."

This is an acknowledgement of reality, which is characteristic of the entire legend. Also, I think even Piloo's patch version speaks with more than one voice. The voice of patriarch is loud and clear. Woman is a piece of property meant to be disposed of at the will of the father and symbolizes family *izzat*. Also both Mirza's mother and father speak disparagingly of women, which are not countered in the text. But it is difficult to agree with her view that the tragedy could have been averted if Mirza had heeded Saheban's advice. Knowing the temper of the Syals and the tribal code of family honour, the tragedy could only have been delayed, but not averted.

The conflict in the mind of Sheban built into the legend clearly lends itself to dramatization more than does *Hir Ranjha*. Pankaj Singh examines 6 dramatisations of the legend, all of which make an effort to free Saheban from the patriarchal charge of betrayal, though with varying degrees of effectiveness. These include Balwant Gargi's *Mirza Saheban* (performed 1976; pub. 1984) in which Gargi tries to externalise Saheban's conflict and establish her innocence by insisting that she was a victim of that unfortunate moment of life when any decision taken by her would have spelt tragedy for her" (Quoted on p. 84); Ajmer Singh Aulakh's one-act poetic play *Mirze de Maut* [*The Death of Mirza*] (1978); and Joginder Bahrla's *Saheban* (1975; pub. 1990) which uses Hir's grave as a backdrop for most of the action and also her spectral presence to indict patriarchy. Another interesting innovation is the use of a Voice which "acts as a Chorus to sum up or comment on the action and to include excerpts from the legend" (98). Any student of Indian drama is bound to be pleasantly surprised at the innovative use of the resources of the theatre to enhance the effectiveness of these plays.

The gender bias in the legends of morality, namely in *Puran Bhagat* and *Raja Rasalu* is even more blatant and leads the author to interrogate the narratives themselves. Pankaj Singh examines two sources, *Kissa Puran Bhagat* by the 19th century poet Kadaryar whose version is the first and also the most celebrated one of the legend and the version as told by some Jats of Patiala included in R. C. Temple's anthology *The Legends of the Punjab* (1884) and finds both loaded against women. There are three principal women in *Puran Bhagat*, Ichharan, King Salwan's wife and Puran's mother, Luna, Salwan's second and young wife, and finally Sundaran, the beautiful queen who lives alone and to whom Guru Gorakhnath sends Puran to beg food from. All these women are presented negatively, with Luna faring

the worst of all. She is stigmatised as a cruel, revengeful temptress, a "virtual female ogre," and is held responsible for all of Puran's woes. On the other hand King Salwan who marries a woman of the age of his daughter and who actually orders Puran's mutilation remains above criticism. And his cruelty and injustice are condoned as the writ of destiny.

Likewise Puran's half-brother Raja Rasalu is kept above blame. No blame attaches to him for marrying the infant daughter of Sarkap, Kokilan. The jealous Rasalu kills Kokilan's lover (who is a man of her own age) and has his wife feed on his heart but he is again not blamed either for his cruelty or revenge. In fact the latter act is considered a fit punishment for Kokilan's 'errant' conduct. The inescapable conclusion is that the so-called tales of morality are discourses of misogyny. The author rightly concludes that behind such misogynistic presentation is the ever-present fear of the female.

Pankaj Singh discusses the re-creations of these two legends by Shiv Kumar, Kapur Singh Ghuman, Manjit Pal Kaur and Atamjit. These plays retrieve the misrepresented women, re-situate them at the centre of the plays and restructure the events. Shiv Kumar's *Luna* (1965) which has become a classic not only turns the Puran legend into Luna's legend but also foregrounds Ichharan's humiliation at her husband's second marriage. Manjit Pal Kaur's *Sundaran* (first staged 1991) that celebrates Sundaran's love for Puran rises above the binary opposition of the oppressor and the oppressed and presents the idea of complementarity of man and woman. This is a feminist position which the author seems to favour for she refers to it again in the Afterword.

The author's recognition that the cultural past will continue to be re-interpreted and re-presented is indicated by the last sentence of Chapter IV: "And the experimentation with the narratives of the past goes on . . ."

Can men write feminist texts? Pankaj Singh raises this question in the Afterword. Since most of the re-creations of legends discussed here are by male playwrights—all except Manjit Pal Kaur, Pankaj Singh concedes that "Panjabi drama truly reflects the androgynous nature of human creativity," but she has her own reservations. For she believes that there is an undeniable difference in the response of the male and female writers and that the "male playwrights' feminist inclinations derive from their humanistic vision and hence they do not contest patriarchy per se." This is an assertion, not an argument. I personally feel that the subject is far too important and complex to be decided either way summarily or on the basis of insufficient evidence.

While on the subject of contemporary re-creations of legends, I should like to mention the rewriting and representation of the Gujarati/Rajasthani legend of Jasman Odan in the India festival at London in 1982 by Shanta Gandhi (a former Professor of Ancient Indian Drama and Folk Theatre at NSD). The book containing the older version and her revised version as also some other details of her experimentation was published by Radhakrishna Prakashan in Hindi in 1984. The legend tells the story of a beautiful working class woman belonging to the *od* caste of pond diggers who move from place to place in search of work. She tamely accepts marriage to a deformed husband chosen by her parents, spurns the advances of a lustful king and finally commits sati when the king has her husband killed before her eyes. In Shanta Gandhi's rewriting, however, we meet a transformed Jasman. Her marriage is a kind of *swayamvara* for she has met her husband earlier and appreciates the artist in him. And she does not commit sati as in the traditional version but is shown to collapse at the murder of her husband. With these and other changes the legend becomes a potential vehicle for progressive ideas about labour-capitalist relations, woman's indepen-

dence and an instrument of social change.

Writing in 1984 Shanta Gandhi says that the new Jasman had gone round the cities only and that the real test of her acceptability, which would mean the acceptance of new values sought to be broadcast through it, would come when she was accepted by village audiences. The same logic could be applied to the re-creations of Punjabi legends discussed here. We have no idea how the dramatizations were accepted by the audiences and who constituted the audiences. Like Shanta Gandhi, Pankaj Singh is aware of the need for an appropriate idiom for re-presenting legends. But as Shanta Gandhi says reaching a wider audience is one thing, the acceptance of the new values quite another. Pankaj Singh too is conscious of this but unsure of the reasons for the gap between the sweeping power of legends over audiences which drama comparatively lacks. She raises questions about it in the Afterword without attempting to give a definite answer. The wider acceptability of the dramatized legends is a subject that deserves a closer enquiry.

This is a bold and subversive book which is backed by unobtrusive scholarship and which has been written with intense conviction. It offers an additional bonus in the form of several photographs of productions of some of the re-created legends and two interviews, with Balwant Gargi and Manjit Pal Kaur. A professor of English the author is as much at home in Punjabi drama as in Western drama.

This multidimensional book will be of interest to a variety of readers, those engaged in the study of folklore, gender issues and drama, and indeed to all those who are not afraid of looking at the unpleasant aspects of our cultural past.

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