

## Many-layered Statement on Punjabi at

Novel is the form to which one resorts when one is in an expansive mood. Episodes and characters make it readable and enjoyable but the psychic tensions and cerebral conflicts reveal the author's point of view. In *Passage to Punjab*, the narrator is at once the persona of the author and a character in his own right. In the otherwise calm academic world of the university at Patiala, there is suddenly a sort of a storm in the tea-cup. Professor Paul Tar of California State College has come there as a visiting professor in the company of his wife Rynn Tar who is a painter. Both of them prefer to stay in the neighbourhood of the narrator in the city rather than on the university campus.

In a short while, a charmed circle is formed wherein the American couple, their impulsive car driver Hakim Singh and their shrewd cook Bishan, on the one hand, and the narrator, Dr. Jog, his wife Indu and their son Rahul along with 'the older colleague' Razdan and the intellectual Palli (alias Lalli), on the other, move about with ease and abandon. There is a sort of euphoria that grips the minds of the Tars as well as the three-some university men for quite sometime. The rapport is so perfect that they appear to be kindred souls. In the heyday of their bonhomie, they plan a visit to Fatehgarh, a typical Malwa village not far from Patiala. Their stay for two days and two nights at the place provides the foreigners with a lot of material on Punjabi folklore but for others it is a sort of the search for their roots. Indeed new vistas of understanding are opened for all of them.

Som Ranchan has presented in this novel a pageant of Punjabi culture with aplomb. The attempt is not deliberate but the natural corollary of the fictive discourse. There has been an attempt to defamiliarize the familiar sights and sounds of the countryside with a view to reassuring oneself about one's rich

heritage. In a way the presence of the American couple acts as a catalyst to bring together even the apparently discordant elements in Punjabi folk culture. The martial spirit of the people has been highlighted in the game of *Kabadadi*, whereas the Punjabi psyche finds its expression in *tappas*, *bolees* and *mohias*. *Giddha*, the folk dance of the village belles, depicts their aspirations, longings and wistfulness, apart from the no holds bar attitude to the libidinous urges. The author has done the pioneering task of translating into English the Punjabi Haiko, *tappa*. Indeed the focus has all along been on the elemental human passions that weave the warp and woof of the people residing in the countryside.

This novel is reminiscent of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* wherein the caves episode serves as a watershed in regard to the relationship of the English and the Indians. In Ranchan's novel too the Americans and the Indians fall intellectually apart after their visit to Fatehgarh. This falling apart is further accentuated when the war between India and Pakistan erupts in September 1965 on the Kashmir issue. During this agonising period, a sort of high drama is enacted in the minds of the Americans (Tar and Rynn Tar) and the Indians (Jog, the narrator, and Razdan). The American couple leave for Delhi during the war days as per instructions from their embassy. Their coming back to the university at the end of the war brings in all the persons concerned a sort of delirious delight. This euphoria is short-lived as there occurs a sea-change in their relationship with one another. Ultimately they part not as friends but as estranged persons.

Like the two orbits in the same hemisphere, the votaries of American ethos (the façade of liberal-mindedness for camouflaging imperialistic and racist mindset) and those of Indian ethos (emotional sincerity, abiding camaraderie and misplaced ebullience) just rub

each other, sometimes on the wrong side, but they never come down to a head-on collision. This coming together and then drifting apart sets the rhythm of the narrative. With the passage of time, the human drama, the personal likes and dislikes, recedes into the background and the discussions acquire political overtones. Like the Greek chorus, the newspaper clippings (of the *Time*) regarding the day-to-day happenings of the war, pronounce what has already happened backstage. Nothing is allowed to happen on the stage that is gory and macabre. In a way this narrative mode fits well in the structure of the novel and, at the same time, it lends the work an aura of authenticity.

The novel, as Lionel Trilling puts it, is "a perpetual quest for reality". In recent years Indian English novel has assumed more realistic and less idealistic tenor. Art unfolds the emergence of self as a historical entity and highlights aesthetically designed conjunction between the self and society. A sense of identity is a perennial sustaining creative force in a writer. In *Passage to Punjab* there is a quest for a personal testament that would hopefully encourage the countrymen "to take a searching look at so much they consider natural and take for granted". In the very beginning of the novel, Ranchan says—"This is not intended as a story, and if it reads like one at places, so be it." The primary motive appears to be the quest for identity, personal as well as social. Indeed a writer's quest for identity is a meaningful pursuit but it is also fraught with serious implications. Unless he has a clear sense of his identity, both individual and national, and his work rooted to the soil, the literary offshoot is bound to be superficial and arbitrary. In *Passage to Punjab*, the novelist has succeeded to a remarkable degree in his attempt to assert his identity, both as an individual and an Indian.

● *Passage to Punjab*  
 ● by Som Ranchan  
 ● Indian Publishers Distributors, Delhi  
 ● pp. 199 Rs. 250 1998  
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From the pen of a poet who emerged on the literary scene in 1960 with his debut collection of poems, *The Splintered Mirror*, this well-integrated fictional work is a small wonder. It seeks not mere actuality but 'real reality'—*The rejection is not absolute but relative as the Zen teacher throws out a future teacher who is yet not ready, but does not rule out the coming of awareness.* It has the potential of setting a new trend in the Indian English literary world of today. During the 'turbulent decade', *Punjabiat* had been identified with terrorism, whereas in reality 'not to be terrorized' is the leitmotif of the Punjabi culture. This is

indeed the implied significance of this non-fictional novel.

*Passage to Punjab* emphasizes the narrator's personality and readability. The "first-person narrator-participant" is an actor in the development of the plot. This further narrows the perspective on events, because the narrator's own behaviour affects his interpretation of actions. On the contrary, "the third person voice" does not permit of any direct account of the inner states of the characters under observation, except in terms of surmise. Third-person narration, however, does not mean that the story is presented from a point of view

outside the fiction. Mitchell Leaska suggests that "perhaps the surest index to discovering the author's choice of vantage point is to consider the character on whom he focuses the reader's attention and on that character's relationship to the action of the story". In this novel Dr. Jog's voice is the narrative voice, besides its role in determining the point of view of the novelist. The narrative texture is further tightened as there is no gap between the duration of the events and the duration of the narrative.

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## Rebirthing the Self Anew

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Calcutta, India. She lives in California and is a teacher of creative writing. *Sister of My Heart* is her third book, the previous two being the award winning collection of short stories, titled *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and the novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). As characteristic of many diasporic writers, Divakaruni continues to engage in her fictions with the country she has left behind. Yet, unlike those who shape their identity through a sense of exile and loss, Divakaruni's fictional reconstruction of typical Indian cultural realities offers valid alternative perspectives and the forging of a healing and liberating sense of self.

*Sister of My Heart* begins in India and ends in America, with the implication of another beginning. It has grown out of Divakaruni's short story entitled, *Ultrasound*. At the core of this conspicuously women centred novel is the author's deep feminist concern with Indian women whose lives are circumscribed by the prescriptions of traditional society. The plot revolves around its two narrators, Anjoo and Sudha who are cousins, born on the same day, in a conventional Indian, upper caste family in Calcutta. They are so close to each other that Anjoo calls Sudha her "other half. The sister of my

heart." Since their fathers were reportedly killed in an adventure "undertaken before their birth, they are brought up by their widowed mothers and aunt, whom they jointly consider as their "three mothers." The narrative technique of alternate chapters being devoted to Sudha and Anjoo's self-narration provides the intimate details of their emerging thoughts, emotions and desires during their childhood, adolescence and after marriage. The novel is divided into two parts. The first part ends with their marriages. The second part begins with Sudha in her marital home in rural Bengal and Anjoo moving shortly to America, to join her immigrant husband, Sunil. They keep in touch, with a close concern for each other, but their contrasting lifestyles begin to reflect the differences between the two cultures.

The first part of the novel introduces a questioning spotlight on certain aspects of Indian conventions, through an undercurrent of gentle sarcasm and humour. Among Sudha and Anjoo, Sudha is the beautiful and dutiful daughter whereas Anjoo is the intelligent one who wants a career in college. The ache for "something I wanted but didn't know a name for," had been with her from the start when she yearned to read books by Sylvia

● *Sister of My Heart*  
● by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni  
● London: Penguin Books, 1999, pp. 347.  
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Plath and Kate Chopin with their "smell of distance, of new thinking." In her discussions with Sudha, she points out the absurdity of girls being brought up with so many restrictions, like "prize cows" for marriage. She laughs with Sudha about the prevalent notion of "Pati Param Guru" which means that "the husband is the supreme lord." She questions the relevance of the common blessing showered on brides, wishing for them "a hundred sons."

The novel explores the theme of survival through self-plot formation. We notice that as the plot unfolds, it gradually reveals the metaphoric rebirthing of "The Princess in the Palace of Snakes" into the "Queen of Swords." Significantly, these are also the titles of the first and second parts of the novel and are derived from the stories connected to them. Divakaruni has meaningfully used the Indian tradition of storytelling by retelling these tales within the novel. Sudha finds a similarity between her own state of mind before marriage with that of the princess because of her innocent unawareness within a protected but restrictive environment. She likens her own falling in love with Ashok Ghosh, with the awakening of the princess by the prince. However, as the novel progresses, Sudha's life starts diverging