

**CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER:
THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE VS THE PUNJABI NOVEL -
A STUDY OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NORTH INDIA**

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Abstract

Research and writing on women in society has a very old history in India but most of it has remained unrevealed to the contemporary academic world. Most studies of civilizations have been an abstract structural analysis with focus on intergroup dynamics within the framework of historical currents. With a large majority of people who ever lived not leaving a documented record of their existence the treatment of human beings is often missing. Historian Anne F Scott has characterized this shortcoming in historical narrative as 'historical invisibility'.¹

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Research and writing on women in society has a very old history in India but most of it has remained unrevealed to the contemporary academic world. Most studies of civilizations have been an abstract structural analysis with focus on intergroup dynamics within the framework of historical currents. With a large majority of people who ever lived not leaving a documented record of their existence the treatment of human beings is often missing. Historian Anne F Scott has characterized this shortcoming in historical narrative as 'historical invisibility'.¹

This paper is an attempt to examine the absence of gender in mainstream historical narratives of the Medieval/ later Medieval Indian History and compare it with the kind of voice it finds in Punjabi novel of roughly the same time. Since the dimension of gender has always been in the periphery of our historical past, any endeavour to explore the history of women is to encounter areas of neglect, silences and exclusions. Generations of scholars whether they belonged to the indigenous tradition of history writing or were part of the European Orientalist tradition have little or nothing to say about the lives of women which has helped to perpetuate many ambiguities, misconceptions and undervaluation of their roles often making women objects of history rather than subjects of history.²

This has been a universal phenomenon, the well known Annales School with its insistence of "Total History" has also discussed women as solely as brides, wives and mothers.³ One cannot deny the fact that the best way to understand the spirit of any civilization and to gauge its strengths and limitations is to study the history of its women.⁴ An analysis of why certain events were recorded may help us understand cultures in more depth -- but that should not lead us to believe that what has not been written about was not important. Although one fails to understand how the inclusion of women could change the course of history but the focus has always been on men's leadership, men as heads of households, families, 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 be easily shrugged off by historians as a minority pursuit with no bearing on social processes. I would like to

mention here that as far as medieval and later medieval period is concerned (which is the period being discussed) apart from a few women whose socio-cultural roles have been documented, a vast majority of scholars have confined themselves to description of women in terms of *purdah*, *polygamy*, *concubinage* and the *harem* leading us to believe that women in the pre modern phase had no history.

When History as a discipline has not been very fair to women, we look to other sources and one of these sources is the literature of an age. Gender we know has often been constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed through literature (to meet certain social requisites) and therefore it becomes a valuable source for historians who can get considerable inputs from it and Punjabi novel has been one of the most potent mediums of the language, where there is no dearth of writers reflecting in their writings an image of the society in which they lived often accepting, appreciating, analysing and even criticizing certain classes and actions/thoughts towards others.

Vir Singh (1872-1957) who played a very important part in the shaping of Punjabi literary tradition is considered to be the father of the Punjabi novel. Bhai Vir Singh, as he came to be known, wanted to reorient the Sikh community by helping them assimilate modern influences with their historical and cultural heritage. Vir Singh we know belonged to an age of ferment, the age that saw the destruction of Sikh sovereignty in the Punjab in the wake of its annexation by the British in 1849, the decline of the Sikh aristocracy, the gradual emergence of an urban middle class that aroused among the Sikhs a concern for redefining the boundaries of their faith and social structure.

The novel *Sundri* which happens to be first and the most widely read novel in Punjabi written primarily with the purpose of creating a strong Sikh identity, ended up being a manifestation of the author's aspirations of what an ideal Sikh woman should be. Infact two other novels that followed, *Bijai Singh* (1899) and *Satwant Kaur* (1900) having similar ideological agendas and historical contexts became a trilogy presenting women as paradigms of moral strength and spiritual sensitivity. Vir Singh presents through these novels women as models of courage, fortitude and human dignity but when we go back to the contemporary historical narrative we have historians talking of women being inferior and subordinate to men and 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 at what was believed to be a perfect social order. 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"⁵*

As a result Indian women began perceiving themselves as helpless in untangling their true selves from existing social roles and expectations. Hence, we have the Rig Vedic concept of *'Sahdharmini* (or equal partner) being replaced by *'Pativrata Dharma'* or the duties of a chaste wife who fulfills all wishes of her husband without questioning them. We have the evils of sati, and child marriage, widows being treated with contempt. There is much speculation in the realm of history, on the motivation of Hindu widows committing sati, but their voices are silent.

In Vir Singh's novels, the historical landscape is the Eighteenth century, when society still rested on two basic principles-- (1) women are subordinate to men and (2) the family's honour resides in the actions of women and to ensure that families are not dishonoured, society began placing restrictions on women's mobility by segregating them from the activities of men, both physically and symbolically in the form of 'Purdah' by defining roles and putting restrictions on their movement. The female protagonist of Vir Singh's novel *Sundri* came from the same social setup. Hence we have Surasti (original name of *Sundri*) being captured, the family pleading to the Mogul nawab to free the girl, and on refusal meekly accepting their fate and when she is finally rescued, keeping the family honour in mind and to escape the nawab's wrath, they are even ready to send her back. The novel in such a case becomes an instrument of 'Social Realism' attempting to point to the malaise in society and to the social forces that surround an individual and influence his thought processes. But as the story progresses the same Surasti emerges as a model of courage, fortitude and dignity.

It is argued that the female characters (in this case the heroine *Sundri*) were constructed in accordance with the needs and perspectives of the time of her creation and through these women the writer addresses the rebellion that each woman undertakes against their subordinate position in society.⁶ The author, as if trying to suggest that every woman is *Shakti* but she cannot become a *Shakti* unless and until she realised her potential.⁷ When Surasti is faced with a choice of returning home or leading a hazardous life with her brother, she kind of questions herself. *'Why don't women ever join action to uphold righteousness. If they have not so far why should I not be the first one.....'*⁸ Very often the literature of the period was highly regulatory in its approach to women seeking to set up almost impossible ideals and then berating them for not fulfilling the same.⁹

Whereas historical records speak of subordinate position of women, Vir Singh's heroines are defiant. They not only acquire leadership roles but are an inspiration for both men and women. *Sundri* for instance rides horses, is trained in the use of weapons and at one point even attacks a Turk with a dagger. The fact that the novelist assigns a heroic role to a woman is significant for it reiterates the Sikh precept of equality between

men and women. Moreover, the author does not delink himself from adhering to gender specific roles and we have Sundri performing domestic chores like cooking, nursing and fetching water. Here it would not be out of place to consider Sikh ideas on womanhood, although Guru Nanak Dev's attitude towards women was much more liberal than his contemporaries ; he never discarded the values of the patriarchal structure and within that he created a very large space for women. The often quoted verse where he says.

"So Kyon manda AkhiyeJit Janme Rajan"

i.e. why call a women inferior for it is she who gives birth to kings is a testimony of his desire to change society's perception of women but Guru Nanak also believed that a women's place was in the household. Keeping this parameter in mind Sundri does not fit into his model for she chooses not to be in the safe haven of her home -- but it must be kept in mind that in the wake of socio-religious reform movements in the Nineteenth century the image of the suppressed, subjugated and secluded women was undergoing a paradigm shift and that is what Vir Singh is trying to reflect through his novels.

Although a fictional character, Sundri emerges as a paragon of saintly womanhood whose selfless courage and sacrifice culminated in her martyrdom. In the novel her last words to the Jatha (band of warriors) *"Dear Brothers please keep my submission always in mind - You must always uphold the dignity of women."* Through the protagonist Vir Singh tries to suggest the need for emancipation of woman because there are repeated persuasions for them to reform themselves and abstain from rituals. The author also tries to draw overt comparisons between Sundri's courageous devotion and that of her 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 characters and the author applauds their spiritual strength and devotion to their cause. However, one significant aspect of their lives that emerges is that once these women left the threshold of their patriarchal structures they could not go back to leading the lives of a householder. The three options before them are death, martyrdom or sewa. Sundri, of course has transcended the stage of ordinary existence and refuses to go back to her family but there is an effort on the part of the author to suggest her resistance to patriarchal norms.

In Sundri and the other two novels that followed, we also see an underlying theme of rejection of societal values. More importantly in the description of Sundri, Satwant Kaur and Sheel Kaur, Vir Singh is able to draw attention to the troubled lives of ordinary women who find no place in historical discourse. Such works, despite being outside the realm of formal history not only give us an insight into the past but help us to resuscitate the lives of subaltern women in the later medieval period. The paucity of historical

information of this age (and there are reasons for it) increase the sociological importance of such works. The use of footnotes to the text and the narrative landscape having historical characters and connotations add to its significance and Vir Singh himself admitted that the novel is based on information from historical sources like the 'Panth Prakash', the Khalsa Tawareekh and some Oral Traditions.¹⁰

History, like fiction, is fashioned by events in the lives of not just men but both men and women. Through this interweaving of fiction and history Vir Singh drives in the point that although society in the Eighteenth century did not undergo any drastic change but thought patterns had begun to change. By creating strong female role models who were paradigms of moral strength, physical courage 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.

Women despite their invisibility 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 coerce its readers to question this absence of gender within the discipline of history and have their voices restored; for not only have women enriched our history, they were as much a part and parcel of social processes as men and equally capable of influencing and changing social patterns.

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