

Dalip Kaur Tiwana's *Twilight* as a Narrative of an Indian Woman

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Abstract

Writers like Dalip Kaur Tiwana and Indira Goswami refused to be labeled as feminists during their interviews. Not only these regional writers, even most of the Indo-Anglian women writers in India feel reluctant to be called feminists. They consider even the term 'women writer' as derogatory, taking away their artistic autonomy and identity and categorizing them by gender. This repulsion came not as a tactic to find favors in the nationalist struggle but through the varied experiences of women under foreign domination. One such writer is discussed thoroughly in this paper. It almost breaks my heart knowing about the sad demise of Prof Dalip Kaur Tiwana's. While I was researching on her translated works I always wished to know how to read Punjabi as a lot of emotions are while translating the text, still her translated works are an extraordinary representation of the capabilities of Indian women and leave a deep impact on the reader. Tiwana acts as a true representative of her contemporary Indian society highlighting the vices and virtues of it. This paper acts as a tribute to her fine writings and it tries to initiate a new discourse in the direction of seeing women not just as women or feminists but also as equal participants of the different social orders of the world, especially as a citizen of the modern concept which we know as 'nation'.

Keywords: Nation, Narration, Gender, Women, Existential Crisis and Working Women.

Introduction

Gandhi envisioned an India with equal opportunities for everyone irrespective of his caste, sex, or religion. One of his most important achievements during the freedom struggle was to mobilize women in large numbers to give up their sheltered and secluded existence to participate in the national movement. Women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Anasuya Sarabhai, Miraben, Sushila Nayyar, Kamala Nehru, etc accepted the clarion call and actively participated in the movement. Women exclusively protested against toddy shops, opium dens and foreign manufactured cloth shops. Gandhiji viewed women as potential partners in the struggle for a new social and political order. His only failure remained in the fact that he was unable to accept the fact of oppression being a social and historical experience related to production relations rather than a moral condition. Still, his contribution in creating an environment for women to break the shackles of domesticity is monumental. He believed that ‘woman... (is)... mother to the Nation’ and asserted that, “The economic and moral salvation of India thus rests mainly with you. The future of India lies on your knees, for you will nurture the future generation... The destiny of India is far safer in your hands of a government that has so exploited India’s resources that she has lost faith in herself” (496).

Maitrayee Chaudhuri in her essay “Gender in the Making of the Indian Nation-State” stated there were three ways in which the national movement and the Indian state “imagined the role of women. These were: (a) women as agents and recipients of development; (b) women’s political participation in the nation as equal citizens of a state that does not discriminate on grounds of gender; (c) women as emblems of ‘national culture’” (114).

These three roles were important in locating their figure in the ‘making of the Indian nation’. Economic self-reliance remained a primary characteristic of Indian nationalism; therefore it was also important for a woman to become financially independent if they had to participate in it. The second pillar of the Indian national struggle was a commitment towards political democracy and civil liberties, both of which are important in nation-building. The third important pillar was an assertion of ‘national culture’ over the one imposed by the colonizers, for this there was a need to create a perception of ‘Indian womanhood.’

Uma Chakravarti in her contribution to *Recasting Women* challenged the glorified status of women of ancient India in the construction of nationalist histories during the colonial period. She retorted to the argument by asserting the possibilities of the validity of it for the Aryan women but not for the Vedic *Dasis*. She studied the ways of inventing traditions to understand how the focus of nineteenth-century nationalists while defining ideal womanhood, remained limited to upper-caste Hindu women.

The same tradition was followed by Indian female novelists as well. Writers like Dalip Kaur Tiwana and Indira Goswami refused to be labeled as feminists during their interviews. Not only these regional writers, even most of the Indo-Anglian women writers in India feel reluctant to be called feminists. They consider even the term ‘women writer’ as derogatory, taking away their artistic autonomy and identity and categorizing them by gender. This repulsion came not as a tactic to find favors in the nationalist struggle but through the varied experiences of women under foreign domination. According to Chatterjee:

...the domain of the family and the position of women underwent considerable change in the world of the nationalist middle class. It was undoubtedly a new patriarchy that was brought into existence, different

from the ‘traditional’ order but also explicitly claiming to be different from the ‘Western’ family. The ‘new woman’ was to be modern, but she would also have to display the signs of national tradition and therefore would be essentially different from the ‘Western’ woman” (9).

Dalip Kaur Tiwana played a crucial role in active politics. In 2015, she returned her Padma Shri award in “Solidarity with other writers who are protesting against the increasing cultural intolerance in our society and politics and the threat to free speech and creative freedom” (Sahitya). She received the honor along with the Sahitya Akademi Award for her contribution to Literature and Education. She explained that “I had something big to give up, for a cause I believe in and which is close to my heart, and this is my way of protest. Minorities are being crushed, and writers and rationalists are being murdered, and no one is allowed to speak” (Sahitya). Her boldness made her one of the leading short story and novel writers of Punjabi literature. She was born in a well-off, land-owning family of Ludhiana district in Punjab. She completed her early education in Patiala. She later completed her master’s degree and a doctorate in Punjabi literature from the Punjab University, Chandigarh. Then, she worked as the first female lecturer, a professor and a HOD of the Department of Punjabi in Punjabi University, Patiala.

Tiwana became one of the youngest recipients of the Sahitya Akademi award as a response to the popularity of her work *Eho Hamara Jivana*. Left by the legacy of literature like *Gone are the rivers*, *Who am I*, *A Journey on Bare Feet*, *Tell the Tale Urvashi*, *Such is Her Fate*, *Twilight/Mark of the Nosepin* and many more, she departed her earthly abode in October 2015. The President of Sahitya Akademi, poet Gurbhajan Singh Gill, who acted as a successor to Tiwana for the position deemed her death an irrecoverable loss. He said “She was an extraordinary writer who could relate every character of her novel with the common people. She could easily tell her story to the masses, she was

among the few writers who continued to serve the Punjabi language till her last breath, was one writer who wrote extensively on the man-woman relationship and described the many trials and tribulations a woman has to face” (Sahitya). Rana Nayar commented on her literature that:

She wrote about the dilemmas, conflicts and pain of women caught in the jaws of a feudal society. Her women characters are not doubly but triply oppressed, as women, as women in a macho Punjabi society and as women in a feudal Punjabi culture. She spoke of a woman’s agony and anguish with a sense of inwardness, as only she could. Her women characters are as lonely as perhaps she herself was. But despite all this, she was a very positive and a cheerful person, always laughing, always bubbling with energy, even at 80. (Sahitya)

Punjabi writer Kartar Singh Duggal equaled Tiwana’s prose with Amrita Pritam’s verse in the sense that they both wrote of the plight of women in a “man-made society”. He further went on to say that “The only difference is that while Amrita Pritam’s milieu is mainly urban, at times even universal, Tiwana is rooted in the soil, her own tradition and folklore, economic exploitation of and the social curbs inflicted upon the other sex in society in the Punjab” (Punjabi). Tiwana has satirized the myths and fixed social standards for woman with the help of the two novellas, *Twilight/Mark of the Nose-Ring*. In his review article titled “Of Love, Loving and Martyrdom”, Jasjit Mansingh viewed:

The social setting in both stories is small town Punjab but both the protagonists are ‘modern’ young women. Modern in the sense that they have a measure of economic freedom, which is great beginning, yet they have not, cannot, withstand entirely the pressure brought to bear on them by the more conservative patriarchal mores into which they are born. (The Book Review)

Tiwana criticized the overpowering restrictions and double standards of society and family. Randeep Wadehra, in his review article *Maze of Feminine Psyche*, stated that:

In *Twilight* Harjit's emotional involvement with a colleague destroys her marriage. Torn between her need for conforming to society's norms on the one hand and her newfound love on the other she gets emotional support from Sonal – an emancipated woman with rather nonconformist worldview. Ironically, Sonal gets married just when Harjit's divorce proceedings begin. In the second story, *Mark of the Nose Ring*, Kiranjit's husband – an army officer – dies in the war even before their marriage is consummated. She refuses to don the widow's attire. This makes her vulnerable to barbs and undesirable attention. However, Kiranjit eventually makes peace with tradition by performing *shraadh* and sheds her nose ring. In both the stories women come into conflict with societal hypocrisy. (Wadehra)

Twilight is a mini-narrative related to the lives of several Indian women struggling to balance their work and domestic lives in the male-dominated nation. Harjit's unexpressed feelings towards one of her male colleagues became the reason of misunderstanding with her husband Rajinder, who turns her out of the house on a baseless suspicion of her having an affair. The novella metaphorically captures her struggle to understand her identity as a working-class 'individual'. The premise of the novella avails Tiwana to present the varied options for a woman as an 'individual'. The narrative remains mostly limited to three locations, Harjit's house, her office and working women's hostel. Whenever she tries to leave any of these three places, she is subjected to harassment by other members of society and ends up feeling unsafe as a citizen. The faceless and nameless family members represent the limited scope of women as an individual in society, as she is identified not with self but with her

husband who acts as her contact to the family, then to the society, and ultimately to the community.

Harjit is a representative of the Indians with access to resources, women who have surplus money to afford luxury but remain devoid of family togetherness. Her yearning for a child, whom she can cherish, shows her longing to have a family who would intervene in case she lost touch with her gateway to the world, i.e., her husband. The novel begins with a description of Harjit's cabin in her office building, which can be equated with any other government office in India. The walls of the office are thin, so much so that if someone "hammered a nail on the other side, the entire wall in (her) room reverberated" (3). When Harjit's colleague Amrik got sick and went to America for his treatment, Harjit wrote a letter to Amrik inquiring about his well-being. Although Harjit's feelings towards Amrik are never hidden in the narrative, she always remains self-conscious not to cross the Rubicon. But the letter became a source of a fight between Harjit and her husband Rajender. Rajender asked Harjit to leave the house, and she shifted to the working women's hostel in the city, raising Rajender's suspicion to an even greater level. Harjit kept her calm but remains confused, "She is not able to decide whether live like Ahilya, Yashodhra or Harjit. She wants to combine all the three into one, because 'Gautam' is present in every age" (26-27).

At the end of the novel, Rajinder shot Amrik and ran away. Although everything got back to normal after this incident; Amrik was saved, and did not press charges against Rajinder; nothing remained the same in the life of Harjit. She faced the dilemma of what to choose for her own, to stay dependent on a man as her gateway to society, or become independent and raise her child alone. Sonal pondered, "Harjit, who has travelled only halfway in her life. She has attained economic equality or rather economic freedom. She is yet to attain

mental freedom, when she will be able to think of the self not in the context of others, but in the context of her own self and the whole universe” (88).

There are limited characters in the novel; this may have been done by Tiwana to deliberately show how limited a woman’s world was during the age. The protagonist, Harjit, worked in a government office, apparently as a clerk. She had a love marriage with Rajinder, who was a government employee as well. During the narrative, Harjit never contacted her family; neither did she have any major contact outside her home. She is shown as a deeply thoughtful person; introspective about her life, her belongingness, her relationship and her self-respect. She is the representative of the working class Indian woman whose world becomes limited to work both at home and the office. She even has trouble conceiving a child, but her attempts to make her husband visit a fertility clinic are discouraged by the fear of Rajinder losing his social position of being a man.

She also represents a majority of other women of India who bear the responsibility of maintaining the esteem of the family. When in isolation, she questioned these responsibilities and thought, “Many women go on living with their husbands, despite being rebuked and kicked. Don’t they have any sensitivity at all? Or they live a double life with their mind and body living at different levels. Or maybe they don’t have souls” (30). Harjit questioned herself for questioning people while she was a part of the same culture as well. Her character shows how there are many hidden stories in the background of the well-known respectable faces of society. Her recognition of the inability to have feelings, no matter how platonic, for someone outside her husband is reflected in her words, “... how it can be possible for a working woman not to like or dislike people she daily comes into contact with? Liking someone doesn’t mean that you have illicit relations with him or her and similarly disliking someone doesn’t mean that you are not on talking terms with the people’ (Tiwana 11).

Through the character of Harjit, Tiwana tried to narrate the emotional trauma every Indian woman had to go through without even being erroneous. Harjit was educated, she felt lucky for this as she could consider her fate and her circumstances and analyse them because of her education. But a majority of women in India, because of a lack of basic education went on to suffer in the oblivion of their subjugation. Tiwana explained, “She (women of India) has merely attained economic equality or rather economic freedom. She is yet to attain mental freedom when she will be able to think of the self, not in the context of others, but in the context of her own self and the whole universe” (88). The education of girl child remained a priority only in the posters and slogans of the political leaders of the period but women of all ages suffered illiteracy even in the wealthiest households. She also considered the fact that the duty to conform to social customs only fell on the shoulders of a woman and purity of a woman was regarded as a virtue only when it conformed to the societal norms.

Harjit’s mother considered it a woman’s primary responsibility to compromise under all circumstances. Through her character, Tiwana projected society and its thinking as a whole. She asserted, “... It is only the husband who gives you respectability. Woman is not worth a penny without the man. You must tolerate his wrath sometimes. Rather than get into an argument, no harm in keeping quiet. The man has to fight the whole world outside and if he also has to fight his woman at home, he becomes a failure” (Tiwana 24). Her mother explained that home is always central to a woman and it should be given the highest priority by her. But, Harjit was perplexed to see the biased/partisan treatment meted out to her mother. Harjit also explained how women in contemporary society were treated as a commodity instead of a human being, she said:

As we sell wheat to purchase other household necessities, in the same way, a daughter is given away and someone's daughter is brought home. Like the 'barter' system of essential goods, the exchange of woman has also become an unwritten law of the land.

In fact, the value of woman has gone down further as other goods like clothes etc are also given along with her. In much the same way as a sweeper is told to take away the garbage along with two rupees" (28).

Although Harjit remained confused between her choice of conforming to traditions or moving in line with the modern world, she yearned to create a better world for women through her children. She thought of naming her son 'Manu', after the Hindu Scholar who wrote the Hindu book of Laws and explained her reason, that, "Is it to have another Manusmriti, the book of the Hindu code of life, written, in which more concessions are given to women?" (73).

Tiwana pointed out the discrimination against free-thinking women through the character of Sonal, who represents 'New India', with unrestrained liberty. She was Harjit's friend and often questions the set norms and double standards of the Indian society concerning women. She highlighted and questioned the conformity of women towards the set laws of society towards women, "Harjit you do not understand there is a difference in being pure voluntarily and being forced to stay pure" (Tiwana 16). Sonal followed the ideas of the west, which are reflected in her friendship with Cathy, who's an American visiting India to buy sarees and meet her husband's family. She felt that a woman can be liberated when they have the authority and responsibility to freely make decisions for themselves and their surroundings. She felt most women did not realize how their growth is hindered by the fact that they remain passive and hence negligent of their suppression. She asserted, "Most woman want to live comfortably by passing their responsibility of taking decisions on

to others. Their decisions are sometimes taken by religion, sometimes by law, sometimes by society and sometimes by tradition, in the shape of father, husband or son” (Tiwana 28).

Sonal is a modern girl, who wants to free herself from the shackles of male servitude and become an active and independent participant in the canvas of the nation. She is the type of character that people looked upon with both apprehension and appreciation. Even Harjit described what she felt about Sonal, “her refusal to marry the boy of her parents’ choice, her working in another city, staying in a working women hostel and living life on her own terms, give rise to mixed feelings in my mind. Sometimes, Sonal comes across as a strong woman, sometimes selfish, sometimes supercilious, and sometimes foolish. But her arguments do contain some truth that can frustrate the women, leading a very conventional life” (16). Her character acts as an inspiration for younger women to live and work shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts, rather than being subjected to hidden slavery, which is what the female nationalist of pre-independence India had envisioned for themselves. She is a practical woman and does not adhere to the overly romanticized notions of religious text. She is the opposite of Harjit. She asked Harjit to abort the child she is not ready to raise a child by herself, and live her life freely.

Harjit on the other hand felt, “Abortion means murder of a baby, as soft as a flower who hasn’t committed any sin except that of choosing you as its mother. It is like slaughtering an unseen face, in whose creation all the forces of Nature, i.e. the five elements contributed their powers” (57). Through Sonal’s character, Tiwana challenges the fixed duty of women to have a male or a child in her life as a source of interaction with the world. Sonal is seen drinking brandy, which is often considered taboo in society. But she highlights the underlying hypocrisy which prohibits and demonizes drinking by a woman but allows men to freely indulge in any such activity at their will, which also makes

them a man in the eyes of society. When confronted by Harjit over the rebellion of women in history, Sonal pointed out how all the literature representing women was “written from the man’s point of view and his perspective. When women write, only then we will come to know what is true and what is false?” (90).

Along with these two major characters, the novella also has a limited number of minor characters that we come across a few times, but they remain mostly absent, and the novel revolves around Harjit for the most part. Harjit’s husband Rajinder is shown as a typical middle-class male, who is ignorant of his wife’s wishes and continues to subjugate and dominate her in all spheres of their married life even when Harjit is economically independent. He is an example of the mentality of the society towards women who marry late. This is even more evident in his statement that, “Parents, who in order to enjoy the earnings of their daughter, don’t marry her off till late thirties, and when she herself finds a man, they reject the match saying we don’t like this man, we’ll never get you married to him, so as to escape the responsibility for paying for the wedding. In fact, they want her to go in for a court marriage and leave” (48).

Rajinder uses these arguments to justify his unjust behavior towards Harjit. The tradition of dowry plagues Indian society since a long time. The modern system of love marriage provides an alternative to this ill system. But Rajinder felt that he had favored Harjit by marrying her without a dowry. Amrik is the second major male character in the novel; he went to America for medical treatment. This shows the backwardness of the contemporary medical facilities of the country, where one could get good treatment only when he could afford to go to a developed country. The character of Amrik also highlights the corruption of the bureaucracy. He got Rajinder transferred to another town without even consulting it with Harjit. This primarily shows the assertion of a male to defend a woman’s honor, but there is another aspect to it, which is, how a senior

government employee can get other employees transferred for his personal motifs without any valid reason.

Tiwana also showcased various other aspects of city life. Men and women working in offices that close early on Saturdays and have thin walls, with basic facilities like fans, curtains, etc with access to peons, show how different their lives are from those of the villages that we saw in the previous chapters. The roads of cities are filled with scooters and some even have cars. One of Harjit's neighbors, Mr. Sodhi owned a car, and Harjit is faced with an awkward situation when she is constantly pestered by him into taking a lift from him. Sodhi misbehaved and manhandled Harjit and on Harjit's protest, he commented, "Don't get annoyed Mrs. Rajinder. I am one of your fans. Everybody says that Mrs. Rajinder is a marvelous woman-beautiful, intelligent and brave ... Give me a chance to do something for you" (78). This encounter shows how women, without the protection of a male, are constantly faced with teasing and misbehavior by other members of society.

Tiwana also highlighted the tendency of Indians to gossip, "Society looks with suspicion at that woman whose husband has left her or is thinking of leaving. I'm very scared of facing these suspicious eyes ... When I go to the office, it seems as if everybody is talking about me. When I'm in the hostel, it appears as though every woman living here knows that Rajinder is divorcing me" (47). This shows how Indians are more interested in the lives of other people rather than their own. We also see references to ancient Indian texts like *Mahabhart*, *Manusmriti*, etc., and their incompetency in modern society but still they are followed blindly in the society. There are references to cultural practices like *Shradh* as well. The novel ends with Harjit realizing how women have been subjugated without access to education which can promote independent thought similar to the situation of the people belonging to the lower

classes. Tiwana has created a feel of Indian situations for a woman and hints at the complexity of the lives of women in India.

Conclusion

To conclude, Tiwana strongly held the view that she wanted to be treated like a writer of the masses and not just for the woman. Her protagonists are clear examples of the notion of equality. Her texts, no doubt bring out a picture of society as a whole, but also help us understand how women are left out in the design of the modern Indian nationhood. Just like the female nationalists of the Independence era, she tries to enlighten women on a path to fight for equal opportunities and representation in the definition and narration of the nation. Her position as an educated woman gives her an edge in narrating the day-to-day experiences of women as part of Indian nationhood, and she does the same without any bias.

Tiwana was an active participant in the political discourses and discussions. She always stood by minorities against the cultural intolerance in Indian society and politics and fought for the right to free speech and creative freedom for every individual. The main themes of her novels include oppression and discomfort of the downtrodden, the suppressed desires of the rural populace, and the dilemma of a women's life. Tiwana's writings are pertinent in laying bare the daily travails of the subaltern with a clamor to include their voices in the narration of Indian nationhood. The ordinariness of the commonplace realities puts a special premium on their necessary inclusion as a part of the Indian narrative. She does not simply glorify the compositeness of the Indian nation frame and its distinctive materialistic and ideological standings but also foregrounds the inadequacies of its life situations as an essential corollary of the narration of its nationhood.

It is not unusual even today to find women sporting eight stone *bisaris*. Nose piercing has long been a symbol of marriage. In most cases, the ears of an infant are pierced in the early months of age, but parents wait for the “marriageable age” of a girl to get her a nose piercing, in a sense, therefore, it has even become a symbol of domesticity. *Twilight/The Mark of the Nose Ring* are a couple of novellas that complement each other in portraying the dilemma and struggles of modern women against this domesticity. Although the protagonists of both the novellas Harjit and Kiranjit operate in separate non-related contexts with their individual dilemmas, their experience is not very different from each other. A women’s struggle to find an independent identity in the national space becomes the central premise of both the novellas. Both the characters, i.e. Harjit and Kiranjit, are prone to falling prey to the enticement of criminal activities when they are left by themselves at any point.

Tiwana has not only portrayed the dependence of a woman on a man to act as a mediator between her and other individuals of the society and community, but she has also exposed the patriarchal setup. Tiwana asserted the need to break the shackles of the restrictive mould of hegemonic socio-cultural control to acknowledge the diversities in the women themselves; to accept their life situations as a key referent to the narration of nation; and to accept their capability to decide the nuance of their resistance against the hegemonic patriarchal positions. She affirmed that the female voice is a key referent for the comprehensive and inclusive narration of Indian nationhood. Her female characters show the hardships that free-thinking women have to face each day during their interaction with society.

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