

Exiled at Home¹ : A study of Women's Folk Songs from South Haryana

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Abstract

Diaspora is displacement of people from their original homeland and Diaspora literature is literature written by these people about their homeland. Such literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerge as a result of migration and displacement. The migration and displacement could either be self-chosen or imposed. In the case of north Indian women the diaspora is imposed upon them as they have to leave the parental home after marriage. Feeling exiled in the foreign land could be understood but what about the ones who are exiled at home. North Indian women are diasporic community who are exiled at home. Throughout their lives, they long for belongingness. They leave the parental home after marriage in the hope of getting a new 'permanent' home. But they are never fully accepted in the matrimonial house. Their situation is similar to other displaced people staying outside the native land, who can neither forget the home land and nor embrace the new (foreign) land. These women always remain the displaced 'other' but still nobody cares to listen to their agony. The present research is an honest attempt to understand the voice of these women who express their agonies, nostalgia, displacement, alienation etc. through folk songs.

Keywords: women, marriage, displacement, Diaspora, folk songs.

“What is the question here, as I have already said, is the ability to ‘hear’ that which we have not heard before, and to transgress in situating the text or the ‘fragment’ differently”

(Pandey 285).

Diaspora is displacement of people from their original homeland. Diaspora literature is literature written by these people about their homeland. Such literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerge as a result of migration and displacement. Diaspora could either be self-chosen (people moving out their houses in search of better employment opportunities) or imposed (women who are forced to leave their houses after marriage). To feel exiled in the foreign land is natural but what about the ones who are exiled at home. North Indian women are diasporic community who are exiled at home. Throughout their lives, they long for

¹ The first part of the title is inspired by the title of Ashish Nandy's book with the same name.

belongingness. They leave the parental home after marriage in the hope of getting a new 'permanent' home. But they are never fully accepted in the matrimonial house. Their situation is similar to other displaced people staying outside the native land, who can neither forget the home land and nor embrace the new (foreign) land. These women always remain the displaced 'other' but still nobody cares to listen to their agony. The present research is an honest attempt to understand the voice of these women who express their agonies, nostalgia, displacement, alienation etc. through folk songs.

Scholarly work on folksongs was started much earlier in colonial time period itself but it never gained so much political importance as it has gained at present times. So the task of the 'modern day scholars' working on folklore is more challenging as Dorson has rightly put it: "Historians write history of the elite, the successful, the visible, literary scholars study elitist writings and the critics of the art confine their attention to the fine arts. But the folklorist, almost alone among his or her scholarly brethren, is talking to the non-elite, folk. His perspective is directed to the contemporaneity rather than the obsolescence of folklore, to the conception that folklore reflects the ethos of its own ways, not of an era long past" (177).

Though scholars abroad engaged themselves with this contemporaneity and political use of folklore yet scholars in India busied themselves with tracing their rich cultural heritage through folklore. Folksongs sung by women were considered to be an unconscious act of singing having some cultural and religious value and nothing else. The present paper is an effort to study folksongs beyond their cultural and religious value and to understand married women's agony, home sickness, nostalgia etc. expressed through folksongs by placing the folksongs within the mainstream diaspora literature.

Indira Gandhi in the *Foreword* to the book *Women in Indian Folklore* has written "In the epics one finds women who were examples of courage and doing. In classical literature they became more decorative and even anaemic and were assigned the place of conservers, not innovators. But in folk-literature one finds them full of life". She is right as folksongs are lived experiences becoming synonyms with women's lives. It is difficult to detach folksongs from women's lives. They are entry point to a culture and women are carriers of that culture. They become a source material to understand women's lives (diasporic). They become a means to create socio-cultural history of women.

So much literary work has been done by feminist scholars from a feminist perspective where they tried to trace women's alienation or agonies in biographies, poems, diaries and other forms of written expression. But nobody cared to talk about the diaspora which women live throughout their lives. Ruth Bottigheimer writes "historians... have long recreated the past in the image of their masculinised present and in doing so have overlooked women's contributions and have thus excluded them from the social- historical and scientific canon of intellectual achievement and social accomplishment" (3).

As historians suffered from "selective amnesia" (ibid) and neglected or silenced women's voice in history, the same is done by feminist scholars as well. They neglected the oral articulations of generations of women "perhaps simply because what they have to say was not of importance to the privileged" (Jassal10).

I.A. Srivastva (1991) who has done a lot of work on folksongs of Haryana has divided folksongs into four parts:

1. Songs of the female deities
2. Ceremonial songs related to birth and wedding ceremonies
3. Seasonal and festive songs
4. Songs connected with chores

The songs sung at the time of marriage are the most popular songs. The songs sung in the girl's house are called banni, banri or bandadi, and the songs sung in the boy's house are called banna, bara or bandada. The songs are not just about the ceremonies and preparations of the marriage but they are also about the journey of the girl and the boy from childhood to adulthood. The songs sung in the girl's house register the pain caused by separation. In one of the songs "the mother woefully asks herself how she will bear the pain of separation from the daughter whom she has brought up with tender and loving care. She reminisces how she used to feed her daughter with fresh milk and grapes. She is now sad because her daughter is going away to another family, and she worries who will now take care of her daughter. Had she known before how painful this separation would be, she would have eaten the poisonous seeds of dhatura (the thorn apple) in order to kill herself, or would have had an abortion done to avoid this pain" (277).

When a girl is given into marriage, she is not just married to the boy but to the entire family of the boy. We have heard the same saying in so many Hindi movies where they say, marriage is not between the boy and the girl but between two families. This practice of giving a girl into marriage to the entire family makes her subordinate not just to the males of the house but to elderly women as well (especially mother-in-law and sister-in-law). In a situation like this she expresses herself through folksongs. The following song narrates the bitter reality of a woman's life.

What are you so proud of oh mother?
Why do you feel so happy looking at your daughters?
Your daughters will be taken away by sons-in-law
You will become all alone.

The same kind of helplessness is narrated by the mother in the following song;
What to do with these daughters, they are other's belonging
Sons-in-law will come and take them away
I will stand, looking helplessly.

These songs not only narrate the story of loneliness and migration but also of suffering. The new land or sasural is not at all welcoming where the girl has to fight even for the basic needs such as food and clothing.

O ragbir brother come to the ‘gher²’ your mausi³ fights everyday

O sister tell me the truth, why she fights with you?

O brother, she abuses my brethren and my body burns,

O mausi tell me the truth why do you fight?

O son, she doesn’t drink the day’s milk

Fresh pure milk is the reason of fighting.

O mausi give her just one glass, she works hard for your house,

O son, my son is in the army, why to feed the bull in the house?

O mausi, brother-in-law is in the army, who will listen to my sister?

This is a common situation in the villages of Haryana where the mother-in-law has total control over the kitchen. When husbands are not staying with the wives their condition becomes worse. They are ill-treated by other family members. Meanwhile women are left behind with their emotional and sexual frustrations they also have this fear of husbands having extra marital affairs or bringing mistresses home. In a way these songs work as an agency for women to express their unfulfilled desires and fears. The following song is an example of the same.

Mother- in- law I am Berry’s (Name of a village) daughter, if your son is not home why did you bring me?

Daughter in- law my son doesn’t listen to me.

Make him understand, there are so many jobs at home.

In the absence of husbands women are not only ill-treated but sometimes sexually abused as well by the male members (elder brother-in-law and father-in-law) of the family. Since they are not allowed to speak publically about such issues due to societal pressure folksongs become a medium to express which otherwise is prohibited.

In the midnight, comes elder brother-in-law with jalebi

Neither do I have kids nor do I have children, for whom have you brought jalebi?

Neither do you have kids nor do you have children, I have brought it for you.

I made thin chapattis and cooked potato curry

My mother-in-law prepared the food and I served it.

While serving him, he twisted my hand,

He twisted my hand, my whole body burned

My whole body burned I could do nothing.

² An exterior part of the house.

³ Sister’s mother-in-law.

Haryana is a patriarchal society where women are treated badly. Most of the women are beaten up by their husbands and in the absence of husbands they are beaten up by other male members of the family.

O husband, going on duty, bring me maroon sandals,

Sandal I will bring for sure, don't forget to send food for my brother in the fields.

I went to the fields with food, burdened with food; the enemy brother-in-law didn't help me

Thinking for a while, I threw the food on the ground

The fodder for bulls fell on the ground; his food became one with sand.

Leaving the bulls behind, he thrashed me in the fields,

Witnessed the friends of army man (husband) and said

'Some are beaten at home some are thrashed in the fields'

This subordination of women makes them voiceless but slowly they learn how to bargain with patriarchy. Steve Derne rightly observes, "while culture is a process of domination, it is not uncontested. While the powerful are often able to transform their power into status and esteem, subordinates are sometimes able to challenge the dominant culture" (218). Kandiyoti talks about the same contestation when women strategize within a set of concrete constraints She calls it "patriarchal bargain"- "the set of rules and scripts regulating gender relations, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined and renegotiated" (275).

One such example of contestation or subversion could be seen in Sita myth. By presenting Sita as an ideal wife, patriarchy has used Sita myth to silence women. But in villages women use the same myth to make themselves heard. They have found a suitable mask in the myth of Sita, a persona under which they themselves can speak up, speak of the day to day problems and critique patriarchy in their own fashion. The voice which they give to Sita is their own.

Linda Hess talks about the observation made by Manushi in Uttar Pradesh, "Though women have often been excluded from the tradition of written literature, their works devalued or deliberately lost; they have always been chief though anonymous participants in a very rich oral tradition, expressing their experience and point of view through songs and stories... thus representing a collective creativity" (quoted in Hess 20).

To add into the observation, it is not just their collective creativity but their collective understanding of things as well. They retell stories differently than men. Though Sita is not a rebel in their retelling, yet she could speak of her suffering. Her Rama is not an ideal husband but a traitor.

Kishwar writes, "It has taken me a long time to understand that Indian women are not endorsing female slavery when they mention Sita as their ideal, Sita is not perceived as being a mindless creature who meekly suffers maltreatment at the hands of her husband without complaining. Sita as an ideal doesn't mean endorsing a husband's right to behave unreasonably and a wife's duty to bear insults graciously. She is seen as a person whose sense of Dharma is

superior to and more awe inspiring than that of Ram- someone who puts even *maryada purushottam* Ram- the most perfect of men to shame”(239).

The gendered spaces provided to women through folksongs empower them to develop their own rituals, to have a “room of one’s own” (Woolf 1929). These rituals or the gendered spaces further help women to formulate a theory of resistance.

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