

Reflection and Refraction of Patriarchy in Punjabi Folklore

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Abstract: *After entering in the second decade of 21st century and facing the affect of patriarchy in spite of having too many laws for elevation in the stature of women, it becomes indispensable to hit upon its foundation. Patriarchy in one form or the other continued to be a fundamental component of Indian society same in Punjabi culture. Folklore or oral traditions have been well thought-out as reminisced knowledge and its carriers have been both men and women that is why it is becoming a new source of historical information. In the hierarchical character of Punjabi society a woman occupied the ambivalent state of affairs she was adorned with the beautiful relationships as daughter, mother, wife, daughter in law, mother in law, sister in law, maternal ant and paternal aunt. Historical literature clearly indicates the dubious nature of the relationship due to the deep embedded patriarchy. Whether the women in Punjab were not aware of the injustice done to them or were they never been candidly vocal against the patriarchy. Probably they were never so strong to raise their voice against the male dominating social structure. Hitherto available historical writings have not acknowledged the Punjabi folklore to trace the history of women. Moreover patriarchy was certified as sacred and was being strengthened by the religious texts. While tracing and examining history and culture of the unrecorded fragment of society i.e. women, it becomes relevant to explore what they were doing while men were making history or, how they responded to the historical and cultural period of nineteenth century, what reflections and refractions are evident to analyze and describe the position of women in the 19th century society. Present paper is a humble attempt to reconstruct the history of Punjabi women by exploring the folklore of 19th century and using it as a source for researching women's concealed approach for and against male dominated Punjabi society.*

Abstract: *Reflection, Refraction, Punjab, Folklore*

1. Introduction

After entering in the second decade of 21st century and facing the affect of patriarchy in spite of having too many laws and government policies for elevation in the stature of women, it becomes pertinent to hit upon its foundation. Boutros- Boutros-Ghali, the Secretary General of the United Nations, in Fourth International Conference of Women, uttered that there is no country in the world where men and women enjoy complete equality.¹ Patriarchy in one form or the other continued to be an indispensable component of South Asian countries and same can be easily traced in Indian society as well as Punjabi culture. Pre-Partition Punjab was northern-western state of India located in the Southern Asian country and women living in the said domain irrespective of caste and religious ties are Punjabi women. Punjabis have a rich folklore containing folktales, songs, ballads, epics and romances as *Qisse, Vars, Heire, Sithniyan, Suhag, Ghorhiyan, Watna, Alauhani, Chhand Praga, Boliyan, Khed Geet and Nacch Geet*², reflects the profound patriarchal social structure.

2. Objectives and Review of literature

The present paper is a humble attempt to investigate analytically and critically the situation of 19th century women in the hierarchical character Punjabi society in the Punjabi folklores. Virginia Woolf has rightly remarked about Indian women- “Imaginatively she is of the highest importance practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover, she is all but is absent from history”.³ The paper falls within a number of a broad disciplinary domains including sociolinguistic, the history, anthropology and sociology, gender studies and folkloristic. Colonial historical dialogue and gender historical literature especially Manmohan Kaur⁴, Gail Minnault,⁵ Jasodhara Bagchi⁶, Anshu Malhotra⁷ and Kalpana Das Gupta⁸ clearly indicates the ambiguous nature of the relationship due to the deep embedded patriarchy. Current paper addresses a few quarries: Whether the women in Punjab were not aware of the injustice done to them or had they never been candidly vocal against the patriarchy? It will explore which reflections of patriarchy are visible in the folk

traditions of Punjab? In this crum I would trace four most common indicators of patriarchy in Punjab pointing towards the lower status of women on the basis of folklore: Son Preference; Female Infanticide; Psycho- Social Conditioning and Crime against Women.

3. The Current Paper

So far as first indicator of patriarchy in Punjab ‘**the son preference**’ is concerned it has been found that from the ancient times son was valued more than the daughter.⁹ Multiple positive indicators in the form of imagery like *deeva* (earthen candle), *phul* (flower), *light* (roshan), *chand* (moon) and *chiraag* (earthen candle) were used for male baby. A few folk songs were jam-packed with resentment against the women without a successor and the word *deeva* or (earthen lamp) is a metaphor for son. ਜਿਸ ਘਰ ਦੀਵਾ ਨਾ ਬਲੇ, ਆਗਣ ਨਾ ਖੇਡੇ ਬਾਲ, ਉਸ ਨੂੰ ਰਾਜਾ ਕੀ ਢਈ, ਉਹ ਆਪ ਢਈਆਂ ਕਰਤਾਰ (Who can punish a women without a son, no child to play in the home, already been punished by God). Marriage remained an important event in the life¹⁰ of women in Punjabi social structure. As soon as the female became married she was called *Suhagan*. Matrimony in course of time was to be followed by maternity. An inquest with longing for a male embryo was sought after: ਰੱਤਾ- ਰੱਤਾ ਫੁੱਲ ਸਦਾ ਰੰਗ ਲਾਲ, ਕਿਹੜੀ ਸੁਹਾਗਣ ਤੇੜਿਆਂ? ਰੱਤਾ- ਰੱਤਾ ਫੁੱਲ ਸਦਾ ਰੰਗ ਲਾਲ, ਭਾਬੇ ਸੁਹਾਗਣ ਤੇੜਿਆਂ !¹¹ (Dark red- red flower blossomed with evergreen dark red colour, by which married lady plucked?, dark red dark red flower blossomed with evergreen dark red colour, has plucked by my brother’s fortunate wife). Flow of sentiment for the birth celebration of male child was to be all fun and joviality. It is perceptible in other segment of song when the happiness of male birth is boosted like this- ਅੱਧੀ- ਅੱਧੀ ਰਾਤ ਹੋਈ ਪ੍ਰਭਾਤ, ਕਿਹੜੇ ਘਰ ਮੰਡਲ ਵੱਜਿਆ? ਅੱਧੀ- ਅੱਧੀ ਰਾਤ ਹੋਈ ਪ੍ਰਭਾਤ, ਮੇਰੇ ਘਰ ਮੰਡਲ ਵੱਜਿਆ!¹² (In the midnight, day shines, which house was swirled? In the midnight, day brightens it’s my home swirled!). She was scoffed off openly. She could not wear dirt free clothes. Many restrictions were imposed to a female without a son and negative terminology such as *banjh* (child less) was common. ਪੁੱਤਰਾਂ ਵਾਲਿਆਂ ਦੇ ਮੈਲੇਮੈਲ ਵੇਸ , ਤੇਰੇ ਸੂਰੇ ਤੇ ਸਾਵੇ ਕੱਪੜੇ ਨੀ, ਪੁੱਤਰਾਂ ਵਾਲਿਆਂ ਦੀ ਭਿਜੀ ਭਿਜੀ ਸੇਜ, ਤੇਰੀ ਸੇਜ ਚੰਬਾ ਨੀ ਖਿੜਿਆ¹³ (The ladies with sons have filthy clothes, but yours are bright and clear, Fortunate are those having sons, on yours bed no flower blossomed) ਪੁੱਤਰਾਂ ਬਾਂਝ ਨਾ ਸੋਹੰਦੀਆ ਮਾਵਾਂ, ਭਾਵੇਂ ਹੋਣ ਹੁਰਾਂ ਪਰਿਆ¹⁴ (Without sons mothers does not look nice though they be the beautiful fairies!)

The women were facing questionable social tribulations and **Infanticide** was one of the most common practices among the higher and lower sections of society.¹⁵ Punjab, the cradle of Vedic culture placed women at the stature of the *risahngis* but *Atharvaveda* contains charms and rituals to ensure the birth of a son in preference to that of a daughter¹⁶. Slowly the deterioration in the society resulted into the practice of infanticide in ‘some sections of Hindu society during medieval period’¹⁷. At the advent of British rule in Punjab the custom seems to have prevailed in the upper and lower classes as well. Female infanticide was explained in many northern and western castes as being related to hyper gamy, status, maintenance and dowry. Hence it was wished there should be no daughter. The operant societal wisdom in the form of sayings was common: ਧੀ ਹੱਸਦੀ ਨਾ ਮਰੇ; ਧੀ ਵਸਦੀ ਨਾ ਮਰੇ ; ਧੀ ਜੰਮਦੀ ਮਰ ਜਾਏ ; ਜਿਸ ਦਾ ਦੁੱਖ ਵੀ ਨਾ ਆਏ (Daughter should not die while laughing, Daughter should not die while married, Daughter should die after birth No pain be there) Punjabi folk of the time were devoid of any kind desires and blessings for the birth of girl rather methods to kill daughters became more systematized. ਗੁੜ ਖਾਈਂ ਪੂਣੀ ਕਤੀ , ਆਪ ਨਾ ਆਈਂ, ਵੀਰਾ ਘਤੀ (Eat jaggery, spin cotton, don’t come yourself send brother). In 1848 John Lawrance¹⁸ took measures to stop female infanticide and sati by giving a slogan ‘ *Beva Mat Jalao; Beti Mat Maro; Kuri Mat Dabao*’ means Don’t Burn a widow; Don’t kill a daughter; Don’t dig a girl’. British Colonial intervention led to the formation of Act VIII of 1870 which prohibited female infanticide. It was not easy for the social reformers and British colonial government to interfere in the Punjabi customs which were common among the masses. The census of 1911 reported the number of Hindu Jat girls in Punjab were 839 per 1000 boys¹⁹.

Deep rooted patriarchy had its reflections in the outward manifestation of **Psychological and Social Conditioning**. A girl child was conditioned in an upbringing which had to be altogether different from a boy

child. They were the creatures of two entirely different worlds. The domains of activity were set according to which it was not considered for female to go out of home for wages.²⁰ The gendered ambience reflection were belittling in nature as a proverb forbids grinding to male; womb to bull and trail to female ਮਰਦ ਨੂੰ ਚੱਕੀ; ਸੰਢੇ ਨੂੰ ਗਰਭ; ਰਨ ਨੂੰ ਰਾਹ! The females were believed to stay in the four walled home as it was a prevalent belief that her exposure to the outer world would lead to lose her value for marriage in a better family. Hence it was said ਅੰਦਰ ਬੈਠੀ ਲੱਖ ਦੀ, ਬਾਹਰ ਗਈ ਕੱਖ ਦੀ ! They were not even allowed to join three-fold indigenous centres of education consisting of Hindu village schools corresponding to those of the North-Western Provinces; Sikh schools, a large proportion of which taught in the Gurmukhi character the language of the Sikh Scriptures or Granth; and Muhammadan schools, usually conducted by the Mulla of the local mosque²¹. As it was a well verified approach that women can never acquire knowledge. It was a prevalent view the females getting education would never come back home. By god's grace be back she could not be as whole as she been. The mocking attitude and the comparative parameters with nonliving entities were visible in the proverb as: ਰੰਨ ਗਿਆਨਣ, ਭੇੜ ਅਸ਼ਨਾਨੰ, ਲੋਈ ਖੁਮਬ ਨਾ ਹੋਈ²² (Woman can't be erudite, Sheep can't be bathed, Loi (men's shawl) can never be white as mushroom.) The urge to read and write forced them to express their frustration in the suppressed environment in a boli²³ - ਨਾ ਮੈਂ ਪੜ੍ਹੀ ਗੁਰਮੁਖੀ, ਨਾ ਬੈਠੀ ਮੈਂ ਡੇਰੇ, ਨਿਤ ਨਵੀਆਂ ਮੈਂ ਜੜ੍ਹਾਂ ਬੋਲਿਆ, ਘਰ ਵਿਚ ਘੁੱਪ ਹਨੇਰ (I did not read Gurmukhi, neither I been Dere²⁴, every day I compose bolliyan, in the darkened home). Their mother asked them to prey for the happiness and healthy life of their suhag (*pati da sukh mang ni*)²⁵. Conditioning was so strong that women commit voluntary suicide by burning herself with the funeral pyre of her husband (Sati). Patriarchy was a boulder as her mental abilities were either under developed or wasted upon questionable activities, whilst her notions of right and wrong overlaid by a superstition and credulity...²⁶ Women, as mother in law, always remained a powerful feminine image and far more powerful than wife. Relations of these two in the family always remained estranged. Feelings drained in the folklore are highly swelled especially when mother in law traces excuses to trouble her subordinate. In the chhand her veiled abhorrence by uttering these words- ਸੱਸ ਚੰਦਰੀ ਦੇ ਰੁਦਨ ਸੁਣਾਵਾਂ, ਪੀੜ੍ਹੀ ਉਤੇ ਬਹਿਜਾ ਵੀਰਨਾ. She was to be pained by the work and at times memorize her paternal family's love and care as: ਮਪਿਆਂ ਨੇ ਰੱਖੀ ਮੈਂ ਲਾਡਲੀ, ਸਹੁਰੀ ਲੈ ਲਾਇ ਰੋਹ ਵੇ, ਐਵੇਂ ਜਨਮ ਗਵਾਇਆ, ਚੰਨਣ ਵਰਗੀ ਦੇਹ ਵੇ²⁷ (my parents brought up me with love, in laws indulged me in bringing juice of sugarcane, wasted my existence, body is alike sandal) she was not paid anything but pains of merciless hard labour in the family. ਉੱਠ ਨੀ ਨੂੰ ਨਿੱਜਲ ਹੋ ,ਚਰਖਾ ਛੱਡ ਤੇ ਚੱਕੀ ਢੋਂ (Get free oh daughter in law! Leave spinning wheel and start on grinding machine). She was being abused in the name of her parents being helpless her frustration drained in a boli: ਨਾ ਦੇ ਸੱਸ ਗਾਲੀਆਂ, ਏਥੇ ਮੇਰਾ ਕੋਣ ਸੁਣੇ? (Oh mother in law! Don't abuse me, no one is here of mine). Women had to be in purda (covering) while working from the male (in few cases female) members in family which was obnoxious for them. There was a hidden reaction to get rid of this tradition: ਕੇਰੇ - ਕੇਰੇ ਕੁੱਜੇ ਵਿਚ ਮਿਰਚਾਂ ਮੈਂ ਰਗੜਾਂ, ਸਹੁਰੇ ਦੀ ਅੱਖ ਵਿਚ ਪਾ ਦਿਨੀ ਆਂ, ਘੁੰਡ ਕੱਢਣੇ ਦਾ ਮਰਨਾ ਮੁਕਾ ਦਿਨੀ ਆਂ (In the brand new urn I grind chilies, shall throw in the eyes of father in law, finish the job of covering face from father in law). The women folk were not getting adequate diet. At times had to stay without getting equal share of eatables: ਸੁਹਰੇ ਮੇਰੇ ਨੇ ਕਰੇਲੇ ਲਿਆਂਦੇ, ਸੱਸ ਮੇਰੀ ਨੇ ਵੰਢੇ ਮੇਰੀ ਵਾਰੀ ਅੰ ਪਤੀਲਾ ਖੜਕੇ (My father in law brought bitter gourds, my mother in law distributed, at my turn the empty urn was sounding).

Punjabi folklore clearly portrays a picture of women's life in Punjab during 19th century, where a male child was not only preferred by the Punjabi family, neighbored, the villagers but also by the society. The earnest desire for having a son in family strengthened the patriarchal structure and furthered the tendency to kill a girl child which was known in the literary terminology as Female Infanticide. In these state of affairs, the girls continued to stay alive were brought up in strict ethical obedience with a number of social taboos. There is enough evidence that they were not being sent to schools rather conditioned at home to respect and adore their respective husbands. After marriage a female had to leave her parental home and to stay with her in laws family. Conditioned girl

were regarded as 'sanskari' and 'shariff' and home tasks was her main responsibility where she had to be a faithful wife and dutiful daughter-in-law. It was the environment which made them to think that they are nothing without their husbands. All the family members of in laws family irrespective of gender instantaneously altered into 'patriarchal deities with all divinity' to be revered by the new entrant in the family. Punjabi folklore is the mirror image of the times in which physical and mental torture of females section of society refracted. Study is limited in nature as it covers only one side of folklore and that too inadequate in numbers.

4. Conclusion

An attempt has been made to sieve symbols of patriarchy, on the basis of 21 proverbs, boliyan and songs which was present in reflective as well as refractive form in the Punjabi society during 19th century when the British annexed and ruled Punjab. The Punjabi folklore clearly shows the patriarchal set up in Punjab in which women were having not only subordinate position but pitiable too. They were devoid of birth, love and affection, healthy diet, honourable place, education and environment to grow which resulted into indignation, hatred, jealousy and sick madness. They could not speak openly hence her sentiments got expression in folklore. A female in Punjab was being troubled by the social values drafted by the parents and grandparents in parental home shaped by dowry burden, child marriage, purda, female infanticide, four walled feudalistic upbringing. The marriage of a girl was seen as next birth as she had to leave the parental family and to enter in a new-fangled and widely divergent setting. Here the father in law, brother in law, relative in law was the medium of patriarchy and she was taken as a foreign element, less dowry fetcher, a working machine for mother in laws, veiling herself from male members and even elder female.

5. References and Notes

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- [19] Census Report 1911
- [20] Lebra, Paulson and Everett, ed. *Women Work in India*, ed.1st New Delhi, Faula Press, , 1984, p.20.
- [21] Hunter Commission Report
- [22] M. S. Randhawa and D. Satyarthi, ed.7th, *Punjabi Lok Geet*, Delhi, Sahit Academy, 2000, p.582.
- [23] Boliyan are of three types- Nikki Boli (small), Lammi Boli (long Boli) and Do Tuki Boli (two lined boli)
- [24] A place where the Hindu and the Sikh girls were getting education.
- [25] Dhiya ne dhiya pati parmashwa ni

- a. Sir da suhaag nakk da jewar ni.(oh daughter! Oh daughter!, your husband is your god, symbol of your married and husband is your ornament)

[26] *The Friend of India* , 31st August, 1866, Vol. XXXII, p.1018.

[27] M. S. Randhawa and D. Satyarthi, *Punjabi Lok Geet*, ed.7th, Delhi, Sahit Academy, 2000, p.102.