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Exposing Female Experiences:

A Reading of Surjeet Kalsey's Poetry

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Abstract

Understanding women's suffering by situating Surjeet Kalsey as a poet in the complex diaspora milieu of two distinct societies which is Indian (pertaining to Punjabi society) and Canadian. It is one of the pressing issues that are taken up as meaningful context in this paper. The aim of this article is to analyse the position of women as marginalised through various socio-cultural elements of the society as well as through their experiences. Kalsey's poetry deals with the issues related to immigrant women on the Canadian soil. Her poems are testament to the imagery of the female experiences shown throughout her works. The poems of Surjeet Kalsey discuss the issues of immigrants, the situations and problems of women, culture, tradition, and human relations. She tries to bring forth or to centre stage the emotions, feelings, struggles of a woman which they experience and encounter in life. As a woman, Kalsey speaks for the women who are seen on margins and perhaps considered doubly marginalised. Being marginalised labels them as inferior, outcast, voiceless, powerless, suppressed both as female and immigrants. But the poet tries to challenge that by taking a stand as a "woman writer" who resists patriarchy and the oppression of women in Western society and culture through the selected poems of Surjeet Kalsey from *Paunan Nal Guftagoo* [Conversation with The Wind], *Aurat Shabad te Shakti* [Woman, Words & Strength], and *Rom Rom Vich Jagdey Deewey* [Body Illuminates].

Keywords: immigrants; diaspora; marginality; intersectionality; feminism.

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"To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body."

Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center

In her preface to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Bell Hooks affirms that it is problematic to be on the margins because margin is a place where there are powerlessness and a lack of agency. "Marginality" as a theory falls under the field of sociology in social sciences whereas in the field of literature, it is applied to understand inequality and development. Although, it can be used to describe the situation, the condition as well as the location of the people or the group or community whereas the term "margin" describes the boundaries, outskirts and the peripheries. Marginalities refer to the people or the community at the lower spectrum of the hierarchy in the society due to various criteria such as economic, social, cultural resources, and power. These criteria grapple the society for equal participation regardless of it being regional, national or global which impact the group's chances of living in the society. It can be stated that the concept of margin is not only used in the context to define people in the economic sense but also referred to the people of local communities based on their geographical, political, social or cultural spaces. Such spaces shape the environment of the person and his personality; therefore, margin can be understood from the perspective of centre or reference with the set of values associated with the ideal, process and resources. It suggests that marginality cannot be understood without the centre because it is the centre which provides some significant value to the margin as it does not hold its importance otherwise.

The theorists of marginality have understood marginality in context to the migration, culture, social as well as psychological. Theorists like Robert Ezra Park have understood the marginality through migration in relation to marginal man. He states that the characteristics of the marginal man are "spiritual instability, intensified self-consciousness, restlessness,

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and malaise" (Park 1928, 803). He has understood the situation of a marginal man through the fusion of the cultures and the conflict of the cultures which results in the "divided self" i.e., the old and the new one (Park1928, 802). He uses the term "cultural hybrid" in the essay which means that a man is living a cultural and traditional life of two distinct people which is inseparable. The situation can be taken to understand the condition of diasporic people as well where it becomes forceful to live a dual life. The other theorist named Everette V. Stonequist elaborated the concept of marginality to discuss the psychological uncertainty between two social world which reflects and impact the personality of an individual. He mentioned about the two cultures wherein one dominates the other and there is a certain tendency amongst the group of marginalised people to become the associates of the dominating group. Their desire of assimilation is very strong that it may lead to the development of anxiety, divided loyalty, and inferiority complex. Such conditions may also create mental illness or an expression of personal dysfunction like criminal activities and so on. The gap between the dominant group and the marginalised group develops in the individual a sense of self-pity, insecurity, and sensitivity for themselves. Further critics have commented that to be on the marginality also suggests that the marginal group stay away from the access to resources, opportunities, freedom of choices, development of their personal capabilities, and knowledge which hampers their potential of decision-making capabilities. The host society always sees them as an outsider, which them of their opportunities.

To contextualise the marginality in the relation to the Indian-Canadian Punjabi poet Surjeet Kalsey leads to understand the female experiences especially the immigrant women. Her works discusses the issues of immigrants, the situations and problems of women, culture, tradition, and human relations. She tries to bring forth or to centre stage the emotions, feelings, and struggles of a woman which they experience and encounter in life. The image of the women appearing in the poems of Kalsey depicts their desolate conditions

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in Canada. That as a woman they are seen as victims to social injustices and prejudices of society whether they are situated in India or Canada. It indicates the rigid and confined patriarchal conditions which do not offers them enough space to live their lives as a free individual. Conditions like these keep them away and behind as a woman and keeps them at the periphery of the society where she lacks access to her options generally. Being kept at the margins make marginality then gradually and slowly becomes an inevitable the part of her life. As a diasporic Punjabi woman writer, she expresses her thoughts deeply on the plight of females through her poems. The poetry of Kalsey reflects images of pain, angst, anguish, repressed desires, suffering, state of desolation, loneliness, position of women, bondage of cultural and traditional customs, man-woman relationship, patriarchy, diasporic experiences, resistance, existential position to name some. These emerging shades of women's position appearing in her poetry shows that Kalsey's in depth understanding of her surroundings as well as her minute observation over the conditions of woman belonging to her community.

Kalsey in her poems gives ample space to show critical circumstances of female in the society while taking complete charge by providing them voice and opportunity. In *Paunan Nal Guftagoo* [Conversation with The Wind], the poems are composed from the various perspectives. Surjeet Kalsey's poems are testament to the aspect of marginality which is evident through her poetic works. The marginality of woman is shown through the poems like "Dehleez–Teej" [Threshold–Three] where Kalsey is focusing on the condition of women which has remained persistent from generations. The meaning of threshold according to Marriam Webster dictionary means boundary or limit. The threshold shows that the women are kept within the boundaries where they feel trapped, suffocated, caged inside the circle of tradition and the clutches of patriarchy. Kalsey in "Dehleez–Teej" [Threshold–Three] writes:

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There lies a threshold beyond that space of yours
where my arrival is restricted
and forbidden
within this threshold to that
my existence wriggles
when stuck in trap of arguments
you seek my reasons
but you find them fatuous
you call my sensibility a mindful illness
your echoing laughter
satiates the generational male voices
hanging at your back
the maddening laughter rumbles in me since times
that woman's chained feet
when collides with the threshold
makes their lives blood-spattered. (Kalsey, my translation. 1990, 67).

In this poem, she is questioning the state of women through it. To Kalsey, the generational burdens push the women towards being submissive. Woman's ability of having compassion and emotional is criticised by the man who laughs at her situation is shown through "your echoing laughter." The echoing of laughter of a man is an example of the patriarchy which is still being carried forward till date. These thresholds have confined women not only pertaining to home and society but also psychologically. It restricts and curtails the potentiality and capability of women and Kalsey's poem is an example of that situation. When such situation is tackled upon, they give them endless pain and struggle to deal with it.

Other poems such as "…Te Mard Boleya" […And the Man Speak] and "Bin Chehari" [Faceless] discusses about the silences of a woman. In the "…Te Mard Boleya" […And the Man Spoke], Kalsey says:

That she is only made
to stand on her feet to wash dishes
that her hands

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are not meant to hold pen
that her forehead
is a trench of old and aged thoughts
which is futile to hatch a new thought! (Kalsey, my translation. 1990, 47).

The first poem reflects upon the presence of a woman which is voiceless where it is man who speaks only. Kalsey depicts through this poem that an intellectual faculty cannot be ascribed to the female as an individual. She is incapable to hold "pen" indicates her powerlessness to articulate. Her ability to not hold 'pen' ["Kalam"] indicates that her capability is confined within the household chores (Kalsey 1999, 47). She is considered as someone who is incapable to think thoughtfully and give new ideas which reflects the prejudiced notion and biased thinking of the man who sees women as a secondary to them. The second poem "Bin Chehari" [Faceless] says:

In the presence of the breeze
her face existed on her body
… … … … … … … … … … … …
She lost her face
in the bog of time
… … … … … … … … … … … …
She began searching since ages:
her face
her intellect
her identity

She has found
that lost face today
which she keeps on her empty neck
so, what's surprising in it then?
that if she has identified herself
and her intellect again!

Oh! But this is not the age of this face now!
That each manly thought
speaks the language of the body
turns for woman's body. (Kalsey, my translation. 1990, 48).

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The second one describes the identity of a female who is faceless. The faceless identity means that all the women are seen with one perspective by the patriarchal society which is to view their existence as a mere commodity. Kalsey is searching for her identity (identity is referring to her face here) which is lost. The lost identity presents the lack experienced by the females in the society. The "lost" shows the search to question their identity and existence in the society. Thus, it is difficult to retain one's existence and identity again. The female is viewed as figure who at the margins of the society against the centre which is represented by the male figure (the opposite gender). Due to this, at the centre, her position becomes weak as she lacks the access to the opportunities. Her denied access makes her moot in the society where she loses her power to express herself against the hegemonic system. Kalsey as a feminist has shown her thought against patriarchy by reflecting within which is referred by Dr Gurumel Singh Sidhu as introvert. He has observed her poems in *Paunan Nal Guftagoo* are as against the "repressive patriarchy" (Sidhu 2007, 41). He observes that Kalsey's poems show the figure of woman who is shy, naïve, respectful who is under the "social pressure" (Sidhu 2007, 42). Sidhu mention in his article "Feminism in Surjeet Kalsey's Poetry" that Kalsey's entire poetics oeuvre reflects that her feministic ideals are influenced by the western feminism[1]. Though the western feminism is more extrovert, but Kalsey's feminism is more towards inwards which reflects her conscience and intensity. Her poems portray the experiences of woman which are the result of their marginality. Kalsey's poetry becomes the medium to analyse and understand marginal position of woman which means that woman is bereft of the viable medium to speak. Kalsey's poems speak about the women's struggles and their painful situation. She is aware of the marginal space given to

[1] The title of the article is translated by me from Punjabi to English. The article is the part of the book titled *Aurat Ton Aurat Tak da Safar*.

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women in the male centric society which is why the poet finds it necessary to discuss this marginality through her poems.

Marginality not only discusses one's place in the society but also it talks about the identity. As Dr Rebecca Ray in her article "Identity and Marginality" quotes Stephen Mennell that:

> Identity which is multilayered and multifaceted…[and] are a way of making sense of who we are. It is the result of a very individual process of reflection, choice and an empowering expression of beliefs, tastes and values. Identities are also socially constructed and determined by wider social, cultural, political and economic contexts. They may be reinterpreted or even imposed upon certain groups or individuals by others, often as a result of inequalities of power and authority. In this case identities may be divisive and repressive or even rebellious and subversive (Kay 2005, 1).

The theme of identity is embedded in the poem of Kalsey while understanding in the context of marginality. Her appearing female imagery which appears reflects the concern regarding their identity that there is a constant search for one's individuality and identity. In the repressive patriarchal society as mentioned by Dr Sidhu, Kalsey is constantly talking about the hidden identity of women through her poetic works. Poems like "Bin Chehari" (Faceless) from third section of *Paunan Nal Guftagoo* shows the inherent desire for oneself and image. The woman in the poem is constantly searching for her old self. The self which was her identity and with the passing of time it is lost, and she has not found it yet. This yearning to find the inner self is apparent in her poems. Kalsey is trying to question the society's confined nature which has diluted the identity of women. The poem "Faceless" is a critique over the desire of the female body and that the face which refers one's unique identity hold no value. Marginalised people often tend to use their identity collectively against the dominant group to show their solidarity. They try to re-enforce their power against them and show their existence which reflects their consistent desire to assimilate

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with the dominant group. When the desire is not met as per the longing then they choose to create a separate identity against the dominant group to assert the importance of their identity.

Kalsey's second book *Aurat Shabad te Shakti* [Woman, Words & Strength] is composition of the poems based on the power of words which provide strength to woman to express her desires. The poems are the example of asserting one's identity through the various poems are thematically written from the different aspects of women such as of woman, woman's eyes, hand, feet, and house. These aspects of woman's body provide the glimpse into the life of a woman as well as who woman is and what it is like to be one. Each body part shows the different facet of her life such as in the poem "Aurat de Hatth" [The Hands of Woman] describes the function of the hands. Her hands which provide security, shelter, blessing, food, love, prosperity, and caresses. They are artistic and ultimate source of creativity. The other poem "Aurat de Paer" [The Feet of Woman] reflects that a woman is bounded with traditions and kept within boundaries. Here the boundary is shown by anklets, brother, father, husband or in-laws' house that her entire life passes by following the orders and rules. Her feet teach the coming generations to walk and show them the path to lead a prosperous life. Another poem "Aurat de Akkh" [The Eyes of Woman] where the poet finds herself as a witness to the injustices experienced by women in the society. She reflects that it is her inner eye of consciousness which is seeing the brutality against woman. It is painful, cynical, and detrimental to watch it. It is unbelievable to see their history written in front of her eyes. In "Main Janmaangi" [I will Be Born] from *Rom Rom Vich Jagdey Deewey* [Body Illuminates], Kalsey is claiming her existence that she will be born again because her existence is inevitable. Along with the existence, she is reclaiming her identity by asserting it. Her poetry can be analysed to understand the marginal position of woman which means that she is bereft of the medium viable to speak. It can be observed that Kalsey's writing shift discusses the journey of a woman from the margin to the journey

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where she has claimed this marginality as power to defend her position in the society. The shift from the submissive identity towards the reclaimed identity shows the evolving identity of the women presented through her poems. As the culture studies theorist Stuart Hall discusses in his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" that identity is ever evolving, dynamic, and not fixed. It is negotiated and redefined constantly with the help of cultural, social, and historical forces. As a diasporic writer, Kalsey is also criticising the identity of the women as secondary. She is commenting upon the doubly marginalised state of women. The identity of women has remained static and never appeared as fluid. The poem of Kalsey depicts both the conditions of Hall that on one hand, he writes:

> … 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history… (Hall 1990, 223).

This shared "'one true self'" is expository of the women's collective strength which appears through the poems. Kalsey not only shares the painful plight of immigrant women but also bring into forefront the problematic condition of women experienced universally. This universality leads women to feel and express their shared selves going beyond cultures and traditions. It is their common identity of being women which makes them "'one people'" as it reflects their shared historical and cultural experiences. It brings in them the notion of solidarity and oneness which makes them stable and firm besides the ongoing shifts. However, the second idea of 'cultural identity' depicts the process of being and becoming which means that identity belongs to future as well to the past. This emerging identity of being and becoming of women's marginal position with respect to the male counterpart located at the centre is apparent in the poems. Women's consciousness and

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solidarity help to overcome from the act of the suppression. As Bell Hooks in "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" is claiming and accepting the position of being at margin, but she is not seeing her state as weak rather she views that this will give her power to challenge the centre. Hooks says that it gives a sense of acknowledgment that they are a part of a whole. She considers that a centre cannot hold itself unless there is a margin which has become a focal point for Kalsey to discuss their situation as margins has given them a sense of wholeness provided with a strengthened self and solidarity. For she considers, marginality is way to show resistance to the hegemony and the centre, Hooks says:

> I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance - as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle. We know struggle to be that which is difficult, challenging, hard and we know struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfils desire. We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world (Hooks 1989, 23).

Kalsey's poetry is also coming from the space of this radical openness which Hooks has talked about. She shows her subjectivity by articulating her desires and opinions which has changed and transformed her personality. It has given her hope to live with the sense of freedom that the centre holds the power, and the margin is always understood in relation to the centre. She converts this space of deprivation into space of power which she enforces to show resistance against centre. Hooks uses this space to provide agency to those who are seen as marginalised, deprived, and abandoned. Therefore, this space becomes important to understand its necessity and significance when studied in relation to the centre. Woman's marginal identity is also the result of the power politics played because of race, class, caste, gender. Kalsey's diasporic image and women centric issues leads to understand the marginal identity of women through "Intersectionality" as coined by Kimberle Crenshaw

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in *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*. The work discusses the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in lieu of women of colour. The intersectional approach towards Kalsey's poetry brings forth the space where she is giving voice to the women of her community. The poet is taking an advantage to show the marginality as being a woman as well as being an immigrant. Kalsey's poems can be analysed to understand the immigrant Punjabi women who are ill-treated, seen unequal, and subordinate within the Punjabi society where their identity is questioned. It is difficult to survive in a space where there is lack of opportunity, and one is constantly pushed towards the boundaries. The space from where she is talking about the experiences of the females depicts excessively about the unchanged and quite traditional mindset of the Punjabi household. It is clearly observable that the patriarchal notion is embedded deeply in the structure of the Punjabi community. Taking the geographical space of Canada and India, there is very less difference when it comes to see the shifts in the traditional customs and behaviour. Seeing Canada as a first world country and land of opportunities, "multiculturalism" is its essential part which becomes an identity of Canada as a nation. The ideas of freedom and liberation are a part of its culture. It is evident that the movement from the third world country to the first world country like Canada brings many shifts culturally. These shifts bring some inherent changes behaviourally which shapes the immigrant's identity gradually while one is exposed to the cultural freedom. The behavioural change in the identity is lacking in the rigid and confined nature of immigrant Punjabi community/culture. Therefore, intersectionality also helps to understand the immigrant and gendered status of women when located in the rubric of diaspora and feminism.

Surjeet Kalsey's poems bring in various aspect of her poems through the concept of marginality. Her poems are witness to marginal conditions of women which reflects their positionality which becomes the reason of their marginality. The theorisation of marginality

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leads to understand the identity which brings in the concept of intersectionality. Discussing the issue of identity with Hall's essay gives window to understand the complexity of female identity and to overcome such situation by claiming the identity. The reclamation comes from the point of resisting marginality and calling marginality as a space of radical openness as Hooks says. Kalsey as Punjabi diasporic writer challenges the customs and behaviours imposed upon women from generations by the patriarchal system which are the reason for marginal identity.

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