



International Research Journal of Humanities, Language and Literature

ISSN: (2394-1642)

Impact Factor 6.959 Volume 9, Issue 3, January 2022

Association of Academic Researchers and Faculties (AARF)
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Hierarchies in Women and Honor in Gone are the Rivers

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Abstract:

DalipKaurTiwana (4 May1935–31 January 2020) was a novelist and short-story writer of contemporary Punjabi Literature. The women in her novels are caught up in customs, traditions, and societal norms. She exclusively wrote on gender inequality and how the culture surrounding women in her works is repressive and suffocating. She raised questions by writing against the structured violence existing in Indian society in the post-independence world. The novel in the study *Gone are the rivers* was translated into English in 1998, it is a story of a feudal society, of glorified servants, patronage, and of unquestioning submission to the Maharaja of Patiala and his family. The paper tries to analyze the hierarchies among the women characters in the novel and how the concept of honor is exaggerated to keep the social system intact, also how tradition and modernity conflict with each other.

Keywords: *Hierarchy, Honor, Tradition, Modernity, Feminism, Culture, etc.*

Introduction:

DalipKaurTiwana (4 May1935–31 January 2020) was a novelist and short-story writer of contemporary Punjabi Literature. She won both regional and national awards including the Sahitya Academy Award (1971) and PadamShri (2004), and her works are translated into almost eleven languages. She wrote thirty-three novels, several poems, and short stories. She spoke for the downtrodden, the rustic folk- especially women, from a woman's perspective, she exclusively wrote on gender inequality and how the culture surrounding the women in her works is repressive and suffocating. She raised questions by

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A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories.

writing against the structured violence existing in Indian society in the post-independence world. The women in her novels are caught up in customs, traditions, and societal norms. The novel in the study *Gone are the rivers* was originally published in Punjabi in 1990 as *Lang Gaye Dariya*, it was later translated into English in 1998 by Bhupinder Singh and S. C. Narula. The paper tries to analyze the hierarchies among the women characters in the novel and how the concept of honor is exaggerated to keep the social system intact, also how tradition and modernity conflict with each other.

Gone are the rivers is a story of a feudal society, of glorified servants, patronage, of unquestioning submission to the Maharaja of Patiala and his family. *The novel* uses “two kinds of temporalities. The first refers to a feudal time while the second to a modern/democratic time. The narrative in the first part is cyclical, episodic, symptomatic, and never linear. The second part refers to the post-independent time; the narrative is more linear, more realistic, and more like the ‘novel’. This internal refraction about the genre seems to be alive to the burden of a postcolonial writer” (Kamalakar). *Gone are the river* is a story of three generations- the title signifies the time of feudalism that is gone by, modernity taking over, as a river is never stationary so is the time and the people, there is a challenge to the status quo which is difficult to digest by the people living in the Kothi of the Sardar. The novel has no reference to politics, there is a scarce reference to Partition, it offers no character in the center stage, and the lives of the people revolve around the royalty, the Maharaja. It is a story of the house of Sardar Bakshish Singh, his wives- the Sardarnis, two daughters- Harpreet and Cuckoo, his son Gurbakshish Singh, his daughter-in-law Rosie, and his grand-daughter Dolly. The household functions as a system that is based on sacrifice, one character’s life can be seen only in the vicinity of others, there is a clear lack of individuality. The Sardar is vizier to the Maharaja Bhupinder Singh, the novel serves as a chronicle of the times when he was ruling over Patiala. The house shatters with the death of the Maharaja, everything comes to an end. In a review of the novel, Khushwant Singh writes in a review of the novel, "Then the Maharaja was himself deprived of ruling powers and his state merged into Punjab. Only memories remain. It is these memories that Dalip Kaur Tiwana has, with gentle delicacy, enshrined in her novel."

Most of the novel is narrated in an omniscient manner, the latter part is shown through the eyes of Harpreet who mourns the loss of her people and the feudal regime she was once a part of. For the study, the focus will be mostly on women characters and how the

males in the novel perceive them. “Laden with jewelry, they learn to live behind closed doors, go out in purdah, avoid the eyes of an alien male, and to survive they also learn to manipulate and bluff. Barren women fake pregnancies and adopt children to prevent their husbands from marrying again”(Jain, xiii). The novel opens to the point where the life of all the people in the house is at a standstill- the Sardar and the Elder Sardarnihave passed away, Cuckoo is unmarried and has lost her mind, Harpreet is in America, Rosie and the younger Sarder have constant quarrels- they are just counting days and passing their time with a sense of meaninglessness, alienation. In the next chapter, we are taken to the past and made familiar with the lives of the people living in the Kothi of the Sardar in their glorious days. First comes the routine of the younger Sardarni which is assisted by her maid Raji, there is a detailed description of the way she gets ready every morning to be presentable to the Sardar. The hierarchy among women is made clear to us through the routine of the elder Sardarni, she is the one who talks to the Sardar about every matter big or small and she controls the other women in the house. She was barren therefore to continue his lineage the Sardar decided to marry again because of this the position of elder Sardarni in the house came to a threat, so she decided to bring a woman from an ordinary family so that she could never dare to be her equal. It is evident from the conversation of both the maids- Raji and Sadiqan- how the woman of the house had to be prepped so that they are representable to cater to the ‘male gaze, the powder-puff routine, the jewelry, the clothes, proper mannerisms. Raji tells Sadiqan that the elder Sardarni is plotting against the younger one to make her grow fat and ugly so that the Sardar will not pay more attention to her. The Sardarni of House of Ratigarhias comes to the Sardar house for rescue as her husband’s second wife managed to secure a baby boy from somewhere so she wanted one for herself, she also puts conditions that the boy should be a high caste child and should come from a respectable family, the stakes are high for her as her position in the house will become questionable if she won’t bear him a son. On the other hand, the younger Sardarni is never involved in serious conversations of matters, be it with the Sardar or any other guests that come to their house, even though she is the one who bore the Sardar a male child and two daughters to ensure the continuity of his lineage. The elder Sardarni’s maid is always worried about her future in the house because the younger one might throw her out anytime and claim the property as she was the one who gave children to the Sardar. The elder Sardarni dismissed her claims and reminded her that she is the real mistress of the house, and she knew that the younger

Sardarnicame from an ordinary family and might not possess the courage to do so, she further said that only women from great houses were capable of planning grand intrigues. Despite her faith in the Sardar, just in case, as a backup, she had stored a good amount of cash and jewelry in the bank to secure her future. The women in the house are competing against each other just to have some value in the eyes of the males in the novel.

To make the hierarchy clear to the younger Sardarni, the elder Sardarni constantly reminded her that she will be number two in the house, she could only hope to be the second-best, she was only brought to have children in the house and she is only a biological mother to them, they are actually elder Sardarni's children, they have to live in the same house with her and the Sardar is hers equally as well. Whenever there is a guest in the house the younger one always sat amongst them and never grasped a thing, she would sit there and gaze at their faces, admiring their richness, their beauty, clothes, jewelry, etc., her life is no more than that. "The younger Sardarni can be perceived as a victim of the social system where her productivity is purchased and the children once born, are governed by the command of the elder Sardarni" (Jain, xiv). There is a constant desire in every woman in the novel to have a male child to have a sense of security and position in the house. The elder Sardarni is calmer, restrained, thoughtful, and composed as compared to the younger one, she came from a high-class family and had witnessed enough of the royal events in her life, the maintenance of the house, the lives of the children, and smooth functioning of the family are the only things that mattered to her. Even to visit her parents the younger Sardarni had to ask permission from the elder Sardarni and no one in the family knew about her kith and kin.

The novel is all about holding parties where the women of the house were supposed to display their beauty, their clothes, and jewelry symbolizing the respective status of their families which can be witnessed in the incident of the celebration of the birthday of Gurbakshish Singh, Sardar's son. To entertain the guests a courtesan Amma Jaan and her daughter were called. When the girl started dancing and caught the attention of all the Sardars, their wives started apprehending her as if "a cat had been set amongst the pigeons" (Tiwana, 13). But they were reminded she was nothing but a dancing girl and posed no threat to them because in every house, in their culture, in their society- the class and the caste mattered more, the honor held supreme importance.

The Sardar had two daughters- Harpreet and Cuckoo, there was special attention given to their socialization and conditioning, they are groomed to perfection to make them perfect wives in the future. They are taught religious scriptures, music, the English language, the art of cooking, etiquettes, mannerism, etc. They had a full-time chaperon- Aunt Devaki, who had been living in their Kothi since her early widowhood, “her eyes were as sharp as a crow and she unfailingly noticed if the headgear off either of the two daughters slipped a bit, if either of them missed her morning bath, or laughed aloud, or missed having almond oil rubbed into her hair” (Tiwana,21).Theengagement of the younger daughter was fixed before the elder one which became a problem for Sardar’s family, their ‘honor’ was questioned, and thus they decided to find a groom for her as soon as possible. The elder Sardarni asked the Sardar to take their opinion of Harpreet about her marriage as the groom selected by them was from America, to which he answered, “if she’s my daughter and my blood flows in her veins, then she must know family honor and social customs are more important than herself. And if she knows this, she must also know that the decisions taken by her father will be sounder than the ones made by her in governing her happiness and if she understands all these things, then it is enough for me to consult the mother instead of the daughter” (Tiwana, 42). When the elder Sardarni asked him to take the younger one into confidence, he also made clear to her the hierarchy of the household by telling her that they are her daughters, “one doesn’t win a claim to children simply by giving birth to them” (Tiwana, 43).

The abduction and molestation of women are quite common in the novel- which shows that the ‘honor’ is class and caste associated- when it comes to the women of their own house it is significant. First, we come across the incident when Sairan, the gardener’s wife was molested by Bahadur, the driver’s son, the Sardar upheld honor above everything, because it was a woman working in his house,thus he recklessly ran out of the house to kill Bahadur with his gun, the elder Sardarni came to his rescue and took away the gun from his hand and tried to calm him down by talking normally as if nothing has happened. Another incident is that of the abduction of the British governor’s daughter by His Highness because of which the Patiala state lost the territory of Shimla to sort out the matter, it was later retrieved by SardarBakshish Singh facilitating him to become the chief vizier in the court of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh. The other incident is of the abduction of the daughter of the royal astrologer of Chittor, the future son-in-law Sardar- Kaur Sahib came to Patiala and he

was told the girl had been taken into the palace by ritual already and the only solution to it is that the Maharaja marries her and makes her his queen, she was allegedly made a part of a ritual that was performed in the palace for the worship of shakti by a tantric to gain victory over their enemies, to gain better health, life, security and lineage, her honor was of no significance for them, “in the presence of the Maharaja, selected Sardar and queens, all of them dancing in a state of inebriation, a group of virgins was asked to disrobe and worship the Devi and then all of them together enacted the Lila or process of creation” (Tiwana, 47). As the girl has already crossed the point from where there is no return, the state of Patiala became the enemy of Chittor and the Kaur Sahib proclaimed that no one from Rajasthan will ever visit Patiala and no one from Patiala will ever visit Chittor. This proclamation proved to be fatal for Cuckoo as she didn’t accept Jaimala from the prince at that time and thus she remained unmarried her whole life. Another incident is narrated by the Sardar to the king that people connect the beheading of Gurnam Singh and the abduction of his wife to him, to which His Highness responded, “I make queens out of ordinary women, what else do people want? Everything belongs to God and the king, so I can use it the way I like” (Tiwana, 50). The tone of the Maharaja is that of a typical patriarch who uses religion as a shield to get what he wants, to him, the honor of these women held no meaning.

The concept of honor is further exaggerated in the novel from time to time, it holds a different meaning when it is a matter of the household. The women are never to be seen without purdah in public, they must have a veil over their heads all the time. Attorney to Sardar, Prem Singh’s elder son-in-law killed his sister-in-law because she was having an affair, Prem Singh justified his action and said, “...you know what these women are like, she began to flirt with another man. Now my son-in-law came to know of it-he chopped his head off- and if you ask me, he was right, one can’t let the family honor go to the dogs” (Tiwana, 41). He pleaded the Sardar to get him out of jail by implicating that it will be reflected on him as well, that it’s not his son-in-law who is in jail, but it is Sardar’s Attorney’s son-in-law who’s in jail- “it’s not really a question of our honor but your honor” (Tiwana, 42). The abduction of the daughter of a royal astrologer by the people of Patiala led to the proclamation by Kaur Sahib, Cuckoo’s fiancé, that no one from Rajasthan will visit Patiala and vice versa, Cuckoo remained unmarried all her life waiting for Kaur Sahib, but for him, the honor of his state was above her life. Another instance is of Naseeb, a weaver’s son, who came to the Sardar for help as his future brother-in-law was harassing the family

for dowry, the Sardar gave him the money instead of taking any action telling him that “such matters are not settled through force” (Tiwana, 56). In the event of the death of the Sardar when everyone was crying bitterly, the elder Sardarni was much more concerned about holding the Bhog ceremony for him, his life held less value than the façade of royalty they have to keep up with- “Great was my husband, great was his glory, arrangements must be perfect for his Bhog ceremony- his death is not a small event- many big people will be coming” (Tiwana, 63).

Sardar’s son, Gurbakshish Singh, began to drink heavily after his father and elder Sardarni’s death, the younger Sardarni also turned to religion to pass her last days. His wife Rosie presents a contrast to the other women in the novel, as she is educated in England, she is aware of her rights and her idea of freedom, conjugal life is different from others. She tries to stop him from drinking, he snaps at her and tells her, “A woman is meant only to serve her man, only to serve her man. Do you Understand? Manu says that a woman is no better than a man’s shoes, a man’s shoes”, to which she responds, “But the shoe might fly off the footy and hit the head” (Tiwana, 65). He calls her a silly woman and claims that she misbehaves with him. Rosie sees through his toxic masculinity and ponders over her future in this house- “Was this going to be the pattern of her life? Today he shouted at me, tomorrow he will abuse me, and then the day after tomorrow. no, no, she cried aloud- I would rather poison myself than suffer such a fate” (Tiwana, 66). There are constant quarrels between the two which the younger Sardarni fails to understand because to her this kind of verbal and emotional violence is normal, she tries to suppress Rosie by manipulating her with the idea of honor, instead of saying anything to her own son- “Vahutiji, the sons and daughters of respectable families don’t wrangle like children of servants” (Tiwana, 67). The Sardarni expects her daughter-in-law to act as a rehabilitation center for her son. She ultimately leaves the house and moves to Delhi leaving her daughter behind in the custody of her father.

The life of Harpreet comes to light when she arrives in Patiala for the first time after her marriage, how her husband has left her for an English woman years ago and she’s raising her two children on her own by doing petty jobs, she mourns for the death of her father and mother, she couldn’t recognize the Kothi, the city of Patiala, everything seemed so different to her. She encounters Dolly when she was trying to locate her house, she recognizes her and takes her home. There is a contrast between tradition and modernity over

here which reflects through the character of Dolly. When Harpreet asks about the whereabouts of her brother, Dolly tells her that he has gone to the club and she will go and inform him. A girl driving a car on her own, going to the club, where men will be drinking, wearing sleeveless salwarkameez, going to the cinema at late hours, going to her friend's house, hanging out with boys, a girl who talks back- all this seemed very odd to Harpreet even when she was living in a first-world country, a sense of unease and certain helplessness could be seen in younger Sardarni as well. Gurbakshish met with his sister and complained to her about why she never told anyone about her conditions- "You didn't tell us anything sister... if Bapuji was not around, at least I was," "If nothing else. I could at least have killed him." "It's not a question of gain or loss, it's a question of honor" (Tiwana, 83). The honor never came into play when he was fighting with his wife and when he neglected his own daughter. Harpreet was living in America but her thinking never changed, when in a conversation with her Dolly took her mother's side calling her a 'self-respecting lady' and her father 'positively feudal', Harpreet was surprised to see the daughter of the house of Sardars talking at such length. Dolly repeatedly questioned the norms- how can a husband and home be more important than oneself, she finds these ideas outdated. She questions the institution of marriage, and family, she vouches for divorce when a couple is not happy with each other. For Dolly the value of a woman should come from within and not what is given to her by any man, she inherited her mother's ideas, and she is more independent and more thoughtful. Gurbakshish neglected her daughter all his life, and suddenly enquired about her whereabouts as she wasn't home till the evening, Harpreet tells him that she has gone to see an English movie with her friends and will be back by eight. "Gone to the cinema? At this hour? Alone? With a girlfriend? The words hit Gurbakshish like brickbats" (Tiwana, 92). He followed her to find her with her English Professor- 'son of Pandit Bishna of Lasoi- the beggar caste', when she told her that she wants to marry him he shot her twice and then shot himself. The life of his daughter held no meaning when the honor of his family was at stake, how could he let her marry a low-class person. The novel ultimately offers no escape for any of these women.

"The novel is all about the crumbling edifice of feudalism. Hide-bound in the trappings of the feudal society of liveried servants and crystal ornaments, patronage, privileged idleness, and unquestioning subservience to family 'honor'. Bakhshish Singh and his family, find themselves overwhelmed when things begin to change. Even as the newly

independent nation takes charge of her future, Gurbakhshish and the women of the household cling to the crumbling mores of the old order -unsuccessfully and with tragic consequences. The old era has ended and a new one must begin. The Sardar and his Kothi symbolize the old order. The collapse of this world was perhaps inevitable. It was too self-centered and closed to last too long”(Kumar, 214). The women in the house are functioning in a closed-knit system where their role and place are already decided, the deviation from which becomes problematic for everyone. They are manipulated using the concept of honor to set them right, their hierarchies are reminded to them from time to time for the smooth functioning of that very system-Dolly and Rosie offer a break from that system, as they are modern and educated, ultimately both are discarded by their family.

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