The Heroine in Modern Punjabi Literature and the Politics of Desire

by

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Abstract

This thesis project focuses on the representation of the heroine in three works of contemporary modern Punjabi literature. More specifically, I address questions regarding the importance of the heroine in literature as well as the manner in which she is portrayed. Part of the work I have done is historical in scope, as each of the heroines is constructed in accordance with the needs and perspectives of the time of her creation. I argue that the preoccupation of writers centralizing their work around women was to address the rebellion that each heroine undertakes against their subordinate position in society. However, the rebellions that occurred took place within specific historical circumstances and within larger projects within which women’s roles would be defined. The first chapter begins with Sikh reformist Bhai Vir Singh’s *Sundri* written in 1898. Bhai Vir Singh constructs a role model Sundri, to re-energize a sleeping community. Problematically, through this process his heroine Sundri has to sacrifice her sexuality and is transformed into a goddess whose perfection is unattainable. The second chapter analyzes a literary movement that emerges alongside the nationalist movement. Gurbaksh Singh Preetlari’s novel *Anviahi Maa* (Unmarried Mother) was published in 1942. The heroine of this novel is a Bengali woman named Prabha who is shunned from society for being a woman who expresses and acts on her desire. The final chapter investigates the politics of desire in Shiv Kumar Batalvi’s *Loona* (1965). The women in this verse play are brought to the forefront to reveal the injustices that have been committed toward them by the patriarchal society that they are trapped in. Within these three works I analyze the constructed boundaries from which these heroines cannot escape. I critique the context in which each author defends or abandons his heroine. I argue in conclusion that that there is no appropriate space in Indian society or Punjabi literature for women to present themselves as sexual beings, without being chastised.
# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................ii

Table of Contents..........................................................................................................................iii

Acknowledgements.........................................................................................................................iv

Introduction...................................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1: Sundri ............................................................................................................................6
  1.1: Bhai Vir Singh and the Singh Sabha Movement ...............................................................8
  1.2: Nikky Guninder Kaur-Singh’s vision of a feminist Sikhism .............................................11
  1.3: Doris Jakobsh where are the women? .............................................................................15
  1.4: Bhai Vir Singh’s heroine, Sundri ....................................................................................17
  1.5: Sundri the doomed role model .......................................................................................19
  1.6: Liberated Sundri ...............................................................................................................26
  1.7: Conclusion .........................................................................................................................28

Chapter 2: Anviahi Maa (Unmarried Mother) ..........................................................................31
  2.1: The Progressive Writers Movement ...............................................................................32
  2.2: Gurbaksh Singh Preetlari ...............................................................................................35
  2.3: Escaping the gaze ............................................................................................................38
  2.4: Haunted by sexuality .......................................................................................................39
  2.5: Reconsidering sexuality ...................................................................................................44
  2.6: Conclusion .......................................................................................................................48

Chapter 3: Loona ............................................................................................................................50
  3.1: From Pooran Bhagat to Loona .......................................................................................52
  3.2: Loona a heroine? ..............................................................................................................56
  3.3: Ichara a victim? ...............................................................................................................60
  3.4: Ichara, Loona, and the space for action .........................................................................63
  3.5: Conclusion: The politics of desire ...................................................................................69

Conclusion .....................................................................................................................................75

Works Cited ....................................................................................................................................77
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Introduction

The illustration of women in contemporary Punjabi literature has been for the most part a project taken up by men. There are many reasons for this. Modern Punjabi literature—like most South Asian and indeed world literature—is dominated by male writers; it is thus not surprising that the portrayal of women in this context was crafted by men. Yet, while this observation is not a remarkable one in practical terms, it is not obvious at all why the portrayal of women would become such a central feature of modern Punjabi literary production, which, I will argue, it has.

In this master’s project I examine the work of three popular Punjabi male writers and their portrayal of women to consider just this: why and how was the portrayal of women so important to the construction of Punjabi literature? More specifically, I show how the Punjabi woman is constructed as a heroine in the written word of these three men, all of whom are major figures in the creation of modern Punjabi literature. After accounting for the central role of the female heroine in these works, and historicizing the imperative to represent women in this way, I further analyze how the authors in question undertake this task, and what it achieves. I address questions regarding each heroine’s agency and the boundaries that she is confined within, and how issues of women’s desire are configured within these boundaries. In this way too I return to history, as each of the heroines is constructed in accordance with the needs and perspectives of the time of her creation. Overall, therefore, the way the heroine is constructed tells us something important about modern Punjabi literature itself, and its historical construction.

The three works that I focus on are Bhai Vir Singh’s Sundri, Gurbaksh Singh Anviahi Maa (Unmarried Mother) and Shiv Kumar Batalvi’s Loona. All three works are very well

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1Punjabi is written in two scripts Gurumukhi and Shamukhi (the Perso-Arbic script). In this thesis I address Punjabi literature in the Gurumukhi script, not in Shahmukhi.
known in the Punjabi literary community and all of the authors are well respected: Bhai Vir Singh is considered the "father" of modern Punjabi literature; Gurbaksh Singh Preetlari was one of its foundational figures, a founder of an influential writer's colony in the late colonial period and founding editor of an early journal; and Shiv Kumar Batalvi is considered one of the finest poets of the post-Independence era. Yet, the reason I am drawn to the three chosen works of this thesis is because of the way each writer constructs his heroine. The issues that these authors present on behalf of their heroines are of a radical nature as they represent topics that have been neglected in broader Punjabi society.

One of the distinctive features of all three works is the treatment of female desire. As noted by Paramjit Judge a woman’s identity is "designed in terms of her status as a wife, mother sister; wife or daughter. All other relations are immoral and against tradition" (151). Therefore, women cannot desire to form a relationship with anyone outside of the connections that have been established for them, or they will run the danger of being perceived as immoral or lustful. We see in these three works how the authors have addressed this problem of desire. Bhai Vir Singh denies desire to his heroine Sundri, and she is portrayed as a woman whose sexuality has been erased: she is goddess, she is sister, but she cannot be more. Preetlari does something quite intriguing in that he allows his heroine to explicitly express her desire in his novel. Intriguingly, he then later denies this agency that he gave to his heroine Prabha in the introduction to the book, in light of criticism he received of the book. Finally, Batalvi openly addresses the concept of female desire and justifies the sexual attraction that his heroine Loona expresses; for this, his work is still considered radical. The subordination of women is seen even today, in novels like *Eho hamara Jeevna* (Such is her fate) authored by a woman Dalip Kaur Tiwana in 1969. In the book, Tiwana depicts the tragedies that follow a lower class woman, who is caught in
uncompromisable circumstances in her life. She is completely marginalized due to her gender and class, and cannot fight against these boundaries as she is powerless. The protagonist of this story starts off as an exuberant young woman. However, she is sold by her father and from that day forward her every dream and desire is trampled upon by the strict rules and regulations that she is trapped within. Her sexuality becomes her worst enemy as she has no control over those who objectify her. More recently, a short story written by Kartar Singh Duggal was adapted into a short film called Pooranmashi (Night of the Full Moon). This film tells the story of a mother who is forced to sacrifice her desires and marry a man with whom she has nothing in common. She later in the novel succumbs to her passion for one night, when she reunites with her first love. However, she is seen by someone in the village and is mistaken for her daughter, who then too has to suffer the consequences of her mother’s actions. This story conveys sentiments about the restrictions imposed on women to control their sexuality, which is also evident in the three chosen works for this thesis. In both of these works, we see that the problem of female desire has not been resolved in Punjabi cultural production, neither by women nor men: it remains both promise and threat. The three works examined here, therefore, tell a crucial part of a larger story.

Chapter One introduces the work of Bhai Vir Singh in the context of a prominent Sikh movement that emerged in the early nineteenth century, the Singh Sabha movement, and its agenda for women. Earlier work on women in Punjabi literature has focused on this context (and particularly on the Sikh scriptures), and so attention to the portrayal of women in Sikh contexts proved important. (Later chapters will examine other forms of representation in pre-modern Punjabi literary contexts.) Within this chapter I look at how Sundri is transformed from a young Hindu girl to a role model for Sikh women. I explore in detail how her character is executed by Bhai Vir Singh and the role that the reformist movement plays in the failure of this character to
represent a truly "new" vision for women. Arvind Sharma notes that "[h]istory books contain little information about women; and the few glimpses of women that are provided are for the most part about those who rose to prominence or fell to disgrace. Portraits of these women certainly cannot be said to be typical of women in Sikhism" (199). I argue that Bhai Vir Singh, through his conception of Sundri, constructs a figure similar to the few exemplary women mentioned in Sikh history, and therefore that she cannot be considered a realistic figure to which women can relate to.

Chapter Two introduces a prominent literary movement known as the Progressive Writers Movement. Gurbaksh Singh was representative of the writers within this movement, producing a novel in which the concept of self-critique was brought to the forefront. Preetlari introduces a Bengali woman as his heroine, who desires to be with a man without the consent of her parents, and acts on that desire; she then chooses to live as an unmarried single mother in colonial Punjab. This chapter follows the journey of Prabha and her search for acceptance in the male dominated world that suffocates her.

In the Chapter Three, I explore the female characters presented in Shiv Kumar Batalvi’s verse poem Loona, which portrays the plight of a woman married to an older man but who desires a younger man. With this Batalvi reworks a traditional Punjabi folk legend and transforms the negatively portrayed Loona into a heroine who voices her right to feel and express emotions that men had denied or previously misconstrued. I argue that while Batalvi’s choice to bring the issue of desire to the forefront is one to be admired, he ultimately fails to remove the social stigma attached to Loona.

This thesis concludes with thoughts about how these heroines are all bound by the possibilities that exist within their authors’ social mores. More specifically, I propose that the
denial of female desire either by the writers themselves or the world of Punjabi literature is a key factor for the continuation of the production of stereotypical heroines in Punjabi literature. This arguably, remains the central issue in the configuration of women in the cultural and popular sphere.
Chapter 1: Sundri

Portrayals of Punjabi and Sikh women in the pre-modern period are rare. One source that is often highlighted for its portrayal of women is the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib or Adi Granth. The first of the Sikh Gurus, Guru Nanak, spoke out about the importance of women, as we see in this passage:

From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her bad? From her, Kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at all.

Here the existence of women is portrayed as essential. As a result, as will be discussed, readers have highlighted the reformist statements made within these sacred texts as liberatory for women. Yet, outside of this and a few other examples, the role of women is never foregrounded in the scripture, and description of them, even in ideal terms, is relatively rare. This is true of other literature associated with the Sikh tradition (such as the Janam Sakhis [hagiographies]).

The Sikh tradition, therefore, does not provide a clear model for the construction of the heroic female figure.

One form of literature that emerged in the early modern period that did find a place for women was the qissa (story-telling), a very popular form of Punjabi literature that first surfaced in the seventeenth century. Farina Mir and Jeevan Deol’s work on gender formation in the qissa

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2 Adi Granth and Guru Granth Sahib are the names of the two texts which are considered to be sacred Sikh scriptures.
3 Translation of this passage is from a website called Search Sikhism and original passage is from the Guru Granth Sahib on page 473.
4 Qissa is the singular form and qisse is the plural form.
will be discussed further in Chapter Three. However, it is crucial to note here that the "qissa tradition was the foundation of the Punjabi literary formation...[which] dealt with questions of gender in compelling ways" (Mir 140). Qissa literature includes the construction of powerful females who rebel against social roles and in this way is, in some ways, like the reformist literature that was to follow in the nineteenth century. A prominent Punjabi qissa called Heer was written by Waris Shah, a sufi poet. Heer tells the story of a young woman named Heer who falls in love with a man named Ranjha. However, the two are unable to unite as Heer’s family disapprove of their daughter’s choice. Waris Shah’s rendition of this story focuses on the portrayal of a woman who takes a stand against the status quo in defense of her love for a man of a lower social status. One can see, then, a kind of "pre-history" for the heroine figure in such work. One of the places where attributes of qissa literature—at least its focus on central female characters—appear is within Bhai Vir Singh’s novel Sundri, the focus of this chapter.

Out of these antecedents, modern Punjabi literature has exhibited a near obsession with the female figure, often as victim, and sometimes as noble (and often long-suffering) heroine. This chapter will concentrate on a novel written by Bhai Vir Singh (hereafter referred to as BVS), a reformist from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries who played a leading role in creating a moral model for Sikh women to follow in modern Punjabi literature. He used the scriptures as a backbone for his creation and gave life to the reformist teachings by constructing a fictional heroine named Sundri. Focusing on this particular novel is essential to this study as Sundri was one of the very first examples of how a female heroine figure would be depicted and carried out in modern Punjabi literature.

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5 Sundri is also represented as the variation Sundari.
In this first chapter, I will begin by briefly describing the Sikh reformist movement, the Singh Sabha movement, as this movement was important in shaping the early literary career of BVS. It is from within this movement that BVS’s first novel Sundri emerged. Before introducing the story of Sundri, I step back to look at the portrayal of women in the Sikh tradition, as BVS’s approach was self-consciously Sikh in orientation as will be discussed below. I compare the viewpoints of scholars Nikky Guninder Kaur-Singh and Doris Jakobsh, who offer different assessments of the place of women’s place in Sikhism. The two scholars also present their opinions about BVS’s novel Sundri. I move on to support Jakobsh’s argument and explore the character of Sundri in depth to demonstrate how BVS’s novel reinscribes patriarchal norms in a movement that aimed to improve the status of women. I conclude by outlining how BVS’s genuine attempt to uplift the status of women was doomed to failure as the changes that he advocated were themselves deeply embedded within a male dominated discourse.

1.1: Bhai Vir Singh and the Singh Sabha Movement

Bhai Vir Singh, who is often referred to as the "father" of modern Punjabi literature, wrote the first Punjabi novel, Sundri, which was published in 1898. As a young boy, BVS had grown up reading about Sikh heroism from the eighteenth century and, consequently, began writing the story of Sundri while he was in high school (Kaur-Singh 188). As Tarnjeet Kaur also notes,

(Translation: Bhai Vir Singh is often referred to as the "father" of modern Punjabi literature, but his work on Sundri was published in 1898. As a young boy, BVS grew up reading about Sikh heroism from the eighteenth century and, consequently, began writing the story of Sundri while he was in high school (Kaur-Singh 188). As Tarnjeet Kaur also notes,)

(борн кількість місив з бідна підсім магія міг дивитися навіть має зліті донце їх із із бідна зміцнити убрання місив та бідна підсім на зорніні хати бич врівяс зім.
(Тарнджет Кур 14, 29).
Bhai Vir Singh’s father’s works of literature and his grandfather Giani Haazara Singh’s highly educated knowledge of the Sikh religion influenced him from a very early age…

Bhai Vir Singh was born into a household involved with the Singh Sabha movement. The first branch of the Singh Sabha movement began in 1873 in Amritsar and its momentum spread widely as over time many Sabhas were inaugurated. Gurdarshan Singh notes that the Singh Sabha movement "was the first movement among the Sikhs which possessed a definite constitution to regulate its affairs and to carry out its programmes and policies" (40). There had been previous reform movements of the Sikhs, however, as Gurdarshan Singh states, these "differed from the Singh Sabha in character and organizational approach" (40). Unlike the previous Nirankari and Namdhari movements, this was not inspired by a person who was given some sort of elite prestige or status; instead it was "democratic in character" (Gurdarshan Singh 40). Initially the movement was formed in response to growing multiplicity in the Sikh identity. "[and this] new cultural elite [the Singh Sabha] aggressively usurped the right to represent others within this singular tradition" (Oberoi 25).

The Singh Sabha movement "has been lauded as the first among the Sikhs to confront the question of women in the nineteenth century" (Jakobsh 105). This is why a significant number of publications from this period focused on women and their status. One of the powerful tools that the Sabhaites used for conveying their messages to society was the medium of literature. Since,

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6 All translations by Parvinder Dhariwal unless otherwise noted.

7 The term Sabha refers to one branch of the Singh Sabha movement.

8 The terms Nirankari and Naamdhari refer to Sikh reformist movements.

9 Sabhaites are members of the Singh Sabha movement.
as Anshu Malhotra argues, "Bhai Vir Singh was not only a leading light of the Singh Sabha movement, but is also generally acknowledged as the most important literary figure writing in Punjabi twentieth century. His influence in the movement of Sikh reform was therefore considerable" (44). She goes on to speak about the literature of the *Sabhaites*, as a way controlling women’s sexuality and reproductively as being "central to maintaining social privilege" (Malhotra 43). Dealing with women’s issues for this very reason was vital for the Singh Sabha’s agenda and, as scholar Christine Fair observes, "the Punjabi novel in its conception was a vehicle for the Singh Sabha ideology" (116). Thus, it is no surprise that BVS’s literary work was so centrally concerned with the portrayal of women.

Yet, this reformist agenda was not solely constructed by the Sikhs; it was also influenced by the colonial regime that oppressed India for many years.¹⁰ Kaur-Singh identifies how the "renaissance had a dual purpose, for it urgently demanded that the Sikhs recapture the purity of earlier customs and precepts, but it required equal urgency that they look to the future and change with the times" (202). This need to look to the future was heavily influenced by the colonial criticism of the treatment of women in India by men. As Malhotra has noted, "[h]istorians studying the idea of nationalism have commented on how the indigenous elites resorted to rediscovering, reinventing and rewriting 'tradition' when faced with a colonial onslaught that ridiculed their cultural conditions" (Malhotra 3). There was an abundance of literature being produced to address the neglected and subordinate portion of society, the women.

¹⁰ Reform was also pursued by other communities in colonial India.
Partha Chatterjee in his book *The Nation and Its Fragments* presents notions of how space became a defining factor in the roles imposed on women of this period:

Particular social practices degrading to Indian women were used by colonialists as examples of the “unworthiness” of Indian customs and traditions, which necessitated embracing the “modernisation” of colonialism. Indian [male] nationalists reacted to this by situating women in the spiritual realm of the home, which was superior to the material realm of the world being constructed and represented by colonial interests (Chatterjee 6). As evident in the quote above, Chatterjee makes a distinction between the inner and outer realm, where women are portrayed as sovereign in the inner realm. This is also a realm of modernization, but within the confines of the home. This concept is revisited in Chapter Two.

During this time "popular fictions have presented a paradox: they represent the corruption of the era as well as the desirability of its modernity" (Ghosh 2). This is why the Sikh reformists were adamant in wanting to redefine Sikh woman. Along such lines, BVS wanted to show that despite the influence of the British, "Sikhism produced truly moral and exemplary women and men" (Jakobsh 162). BVS attempted to redefine and reinvent the Sikh woman as someone who had freedom and courage; as I will show, he simultaneously confined her to staying within the social and cultural bounds that been constructed for her by the reformists.

1.2: Nikky Guninder Kaur-Singh’s vision of a feminist Sikhism

Before taking a closer look at BVS’s heroine Sundri, I examine the work of Kaur-Singh and Jakobsh. These two scholars each provide an interpretation into how women had been treated in Sikh traditions and in the Singh Sabha movement. This links their research to BVS’s *Sundri*. Kaur-Singh’s book *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* traces literary symbols and images to “explore the presence of the feminine in the Sikh conception and
perception of Transcendent Reality”¹¹ and argues how this existence should be translated to social and cultural realities (259). Kaur-Singh begins her argument by turning to western feminists, whom she generally defines as those "who inspired us [her and many other women] to examine the female condition in our religio-cultural milieu" (1). Kaur-Singh notes that Guru Nanak wrote for the subordinated woman far before the West had even considered looking into feminist issues. Guru Nanak not only wrote about women, but also spoke in favour of them by advocating for gender equality. He rejected the practice of sati¹² and denounced those who hindered women from participating in religious practices as he believed women were key figures in the road to salvation. As a result, Kaur-Singh states that western feminists "yearn" for the representation "we " [Indian women] received (4).

Kaur-Singh states that: "Ek Onkar [the one supreme reality] is beyond space, gender and time"; therefore, gender is non-significant" (3).¹³ Thus, the transcendent is genderless, which means that there is no favouring of one gender over another. Kaur-Singh elaborates on the female representation in the scriptures. She writes that "within the Sikh scriptural corpus the female principle is especially significant, and furthermore in the writings of the Sikh Gurus, pride and place is given both to the female person and to the female psyche" (Kaur-Singh 3). The scriptures feature many references to the female persona in the form of a mother and bride

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¹¹ A concept used by Nikky Guninder Kaur-Singh in her book on page 5; “The feminine principle in the Sikh vision of the Transcendent presents a holistic way of imagining and experiencing sacred power that can itself be a mode of empowerment.”

figure, and according to Kaur-Singh the "[m]other image focuses on the creative and nurturing aspects of the Transcendent, the bridal symbol develops the nuance of intimacy and passion in the human relation with the Divine" (Kaur-Singh 90). Therefore, according to Kaur-Singh the female—whether she is described as a nurturing mother or a bride whose existence paves the way to salvation—holds a prominent place within the tradition. Thus, she argues that "Guru Nanak did not want the feminine principle to be just a figure of speech or a literary device; the feminine principle was to pervade the life of Sikhs" (Kaur-Singh 253).

Yet, Kaur-Singh goes on to acknowledge that "in spite of its presence in literature, a recognition and validation of female symbolism has been neglected in the Punjab itself " (14). Therefore, concluding that women are not only overlooked in Sikh history, but also in Punjab’s social and cultural milieu, she notes that:

In Sikh hermeneutic and exegetical work, the importance of the feminine dimension is generally glossed over. The commentators, interpreters, and translators of Sikh scripture have primarily elaborated the masculine principle; the feminine—so powerful and eloquent—has been overlooked (Kaur-Singh 15).

Kaur-Singh identifies that the neglect that women have suffered is due to "academicians, Sikhs, and others" (14). However, the female voice in the scriptures and in other literature of the time is not suffering from neglect— it is simply not present at all, at least in terms of authorship. The concept of the female voice being articulated through the male narrator is however present—such as in the imagery of the bride longing for the groom, who represents God—and is reminiscent of a broader tradition in South Asia. Carla Petievich’s work on the rekhta and rekhti, which are both
genres of Urdu poetry is relevant here. *Rekhta* poetry unlike *rekhti* poetry “can never be narracted by the female voice (17). The content of *rekhti* literature unlike *rekhta* poetry "makes no pretence of addressing the divine as beloved. Much of its appeal lies in transgressing social and aesthetics norms" (Petievich 275). While the Sikh scriptures are not a form of Urdu poetry, there does seem to be some apparent similarities in their attempt to be inclusive of speaking through a female persona, such as is found in *rekhti* poetry and in other examples from devotional literature. One might see writers like BVS, who take on the role of speaking on behalf of women, within this tradition.

Kaur-Singh in her book also speaks of Sundri, whom she believes "in flesh and blood lives the Sikh ideal of insight into the Singular One" (188). Kaur-Singh describes Sundri as being a very real character, one unlike heroines of other texts. She is not awaiting her Prince Charming; instead "[Sundri] abandons all traditional texts and mores that proclaim the passivity and subjugation of women; instead, she provides a holistic model for men and women, opening up new avenues for self empowerment and transcendence" (204). Kaur-Singh identifies Sundri "as a unique ethical paradigm!" as she breaks away from her domestic sphere and opts for a rather dangerous life alongside her *Khalsa* brotherhood¹⁴ (12). Accordingly, for Kaur-Singh, Sundri is the epitome of the feminist heroine: [p]hysically and psychologically she embodies the power that is being articulated by the modern feminists" (204).

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¹⁴ *Khalsa* is the term used to refer to baptized Sikhs.
1.3: Doris Jakobsh where are the women?

Doris Jakobsh questions the feminist interpretation of Sikh tradition that Kaur-Singh goes to great lengths to illustrate. Are the few scriptural passages pertaining to women, or the few examples of brave Sikh women extolled in the tradition, enough to have us believe that Sikhs are far more progressive than other religions, or have we exaggerated the situation? Doris Jakobsh in Chapter Five of her book Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity, explores the history of gender construction in detail and places a strong focus on the Singh Sabha period. She diverges from Kaur-Singh’s theoretical approach and takes a more historical look at the matter of women and Sikhism. This leads her to reject many of Kaur-Singh’s interpretations. Jakobsh’s knowledge about the Singh Sabha movement also assists in defining the motives behind BVS’s construction Sundri.

Jakobsh argues that Kaur-Singh’s attempt to use everything from literary and grammatical devices to illustrate the inclusion of women in the scriptures falls short. The overwhelming fact remains that the few representations of women that do exist in Sikh texts do not substitute for all of those absent. Jakobsh is against using grammatical forms and images as evidence for the importance of women in the scriptures. She argues that it “is not clear is whether the male gurus in fact understood their enunciation to be feminine, or whether the representation of sacred speech in the feminine form was simply indicative of their social, cultural, and religious surroundings” (11). Jakobsh points out that we have no empirical evidence supporting the thought process behind the Guru’s intentions in the scriptures in this way. Overall, according to Jakobsh, very little has been written about women, apart from minimal references referring to the occasional exceptional woman who has been deemed worthy enough to make it to the pages of history (7).
Jakobsh outlines four principles—silence, negation, accommodation and idealization—which all "[guide] contemporary or near contemporary writings on women and the feminine in general in Sikhism" (3). The principle of silence is one that recurs in Sikh history and literature. Jakobsh describes how silence is not a reflection of "women’s essential nature," but a consequence of the lives that women led. She explains that according to “the traditional assumption that significant history pertains only to the realms of politics and economics, women’s history has generally been neglected" (8). Since there is no 'tangible evidence' outlining women’s participation in critical realms either being a part of it or speaking about it they have been left out of history (8). The principle of negation refers to erasing the place or importance of a marginalized group. In Sikh literature men write about women in passing or when convenient, which excludes their existence and leads one to believe that women have no significant role in Sikhism, further negating their role.

The principles of accommodation and idealization that Jakobsh discusses in her book are particularly visible in BVS’s Sundri. In terms of accommodation, the Sikh reformists were faced with the predicament of trying to accommodate two very different world-views, the Western and Indian. In order to reinvent the Indian woman the Sikh reformists wanted to create a happy medium between two cultures. Thus, as Jakobsh states: "new elites having imbibed a liberal Western education, [wanted to maintain their own culture and simultaneously] decried the undesirable aspects of the Sikh tradition" to accommodate the reinvention of the Indian woman (Jakobsh 13). On the one hand the reformists wanted to modernize the Sikh woman, but on the other, they wanted to maintain conventional regulations that posed many obstacles to her
autonomy. This mode of representation is tied to the mode of idealization. Jakobsh argues that idealization is

similar to the principle of accommodation, an extension of it, with important differences. Namely, while the positive strains of scripture are upheld as normative and of ultimate authority, the dominant need [of the reformers] is not so much to reform tradition as to idealize aspects of history and scripture as they pertain to women (Jakobsh 16).

The principle of idealization is executed in this novel through BVS’s reference to a few of the Sikh women who played significant roles in fighting against oppression and engaged in acts of courage and bravery. These real-life women were often mentioned and admired by the protagonist Sundri, who herself was created to fulfil a similar purpose. Consequently, Jakobsh opposes Kaur-Singh’s characterization of Sundri as being a realistic portrayal, as she believes that Vir Singh’s female heroines "were flights of fiction, mere figments of the reformed male imagination" (167). While she believes that BVS "deserves particular mention for his concerted efforts to create role models for Sikh women," Jakobsh is rather skeptical of the way BVS executed his Sundri (160). For Jakobsh, Sundri is an unrealistic depiction of a woman who was supposed to be reforming the modern day Sikh woman, as Sundri’s perfection dehumanizes her (165).

1.4: Bhai Vir Singh’s heroine, Sundri

The story of Sundri is based on a folk song "about a beautiful young newly married Hindu woman who was abducted by a Mughal Hakim [officer]" (Bal 102). Sundri tells the story of a woman who in the beginning of the novel belongs to a Hindu family and is known as
Surasti. She is abducted by a Mughal official, but manages to escape with the help of her Sikh brother who comes to her rescue. However, Surasti’s parents are afraid that the officer may return and therefore want nothing do with their daughter. Surasti’s brother who is a dedicated follower of the Sikh religion comes to the rescue of his sister, but as they leave their parents home they are confronted by the Mughal again. This time a group of men belonging to the Khalsa come to Surasti’s and her brother’s rescue and agree to take Surasti along with them to live in the forest. It is here that she is initiated into the Khalsa and given the name of Sunder Kaur, better known as Sundri. Throughout the novel, Sundri finds herself caught up in the midst of all kinds of hurdles that require strong dedication to her faith and the support of her Khalsa brothers.

One of the defining literary characteristics of this novel—one that has often been described as its limitation—is the blurred division between what is imagined and what really occurred.

BVS wanted to highlight stories of courage and bravery in the eighteenth century to awaken the Sikhs of the nineteenth century. For example, BVS stops the narration throughout the novel to add anecdotes and factual information to educate the reader about Sikh history. BVS at one particular point of the story moves from describing Sundri getting kidnapped to providing a historical flashback of Khalsa.

उदात्तसने अपने भ्रमण में भरोसा महत्व बंध दिखाया है। सेवा में विश्व द्वीप में भाषण में से बखानी लाए सेवय में संबंधित सुंदर नन्दी संबंधी, भग्नांत्व भुज रीं मस्ती में, तले मुट रंगीं मलबे। (BVS 55).

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15 Punjabi form of the name "Saraswati," is the name of the Hindu goddess of learning and wisdom.

16 The name Sundri is derived from Sundar which in Punjabi means beautiful.
Having read histories, the body begins to shake. The oppression that the Khalsa had to endure with bravery in those days, the pen cannot write, the eyes cannot read, the ears cannot hear.

Although BVS did not witness the atrocities that the Khalsa faced during the earlier periods, he is physically overcome with emotion from just reading about their bravery. Anne Murphy notes that" [BVS’s] intimacy with the past, and its direct physical effect is brought into the novel. Indeed the telling of the story of the past creates a personal, physical response in dramatic terms" (11). Murphy states how BVS achieves the construction of an "imaginary history" in this novel, which was a typical characteristic of literature of this period, reflecting the novel’s colonial context (Murphy 10). Accordingly, BVS focused on engaging the female reader by writing about the trials and tribulations his heroine Sundri endures. Since the Sikh reformists were "[s]atisfied that Sikh males were well established within the social and religious milieu through traditional injunctions clearly directed towards them, the self-appointed guardians of the Khalsa ideal went to great lengths to delineate an appropriate place for women within the Khalsa order" (Jakobsh 212). Thus, characters like BVS’s Sundri were brought to life to compensate for the lack of women in history and simultaneously to fulfill the needs of the Singh Sabha agenda to define the role of women as members of the Khalsa.

1.5: Sundri the doomed role model

Like his contemporaries, BVS ultimately produced a novel that continued to regulate the behaviour of women. This regulation is reflected through the character of Sundri who portrays "paradigms of moral strength, spirituality, boldness, and keen insight for the Sikh psyche" as
Kaur-Singh argues, but she adheres to them according to the standards set by males [in this case BVS and other reformists] (Kaur-Singh 155). Hence, Sundri is doomed to failure, because, as Malhotra explains, these standards are impossible to meet (43, 44). She has masculine qualities, but cannot use them, as BVS constantly draws attention to the vulnerabilities that are associated with women. This is why time and time again Sundri finds herself having to turn to the more capable members of the Khalsa, the men, for assistance. Sundri’s fellow Khalsa brothers come to her rescue because they believe that she is their sister, and therefore it is their religious duty to help her. Whenever Sundri attempts to display an act of courage she faces a predicament that leads to her being trapped in a trying situation. Time and time again, Sundri needs the help of her male companions who are "protective" of Sundri.

However, by accepting Sundri as their sister, Sundri’s Khalsa brothers deny Sundri her sexuality. This becomes clearly evident when Sundri tells the leader of the Khalsa group, Sham Singh, about her decision to stay with her Khalsa brothers.

My desire is to commitment my life to serving the Khalsa fruitfully. If you allow me to then I want to stay with amist my brothers. During times of peace I will help with serving food, and when during times of war I also want to be with my brothers and also tend to their wounds.

Here BVS through the character of Sham Singh defines the only thing that Sundri is allowed to desire: the life of an ascetic. In order to do this, she must give up her other worldly desires to receive her new freedom. At first Sundri did not want to give up her married life; instead due to
unfortunate circumstances her husband refused to accept her as his wife due to her kidnapping by the Mughal. This prompts Sundri’s devotion to Sikhism. This is why Sundri states that

I am fed up of the domestic way of life and my husband has himself abandoned me. It was his duty to protect me but he has refrained from doing so. I do not want to return to the life that the Guru has kept me from.

Married life does not appeal to Sundri, solely because of her husband’s actions. This rejection leads Sundri to the abolishment of her sexuality and the denouncement of a domestic life.

Sundri’s Khalsa brothers, through numerous instances in the novel, have to be reminded that Sundri is their sister and she must be treated with the same respect that they have for their own sisters. To exemplify the brotherly treatment that they shower on Sundri, BVS addresses the reader to state:

How blessed and blissful were those days! What kind of Satyuga (The Age of Truth), was it that upon seeing a young youthful girl amidst them, the entire Khalsa group looked upon her (Sundri) as a holy goddess, as their foster sister. All of them greeted her with the same respect that they greeted their own sisters with and bowed to her with reverence. This was the purity and excellence of character, which the Guru had taught to the Sikhs (22).

In this quote above, BVS glorifies members of the Khalsa group by revering their ability to consider Sundri as nothing but their sister. This he believes is a result of the Sikh morals and values that they have adopted. However, the fact that BVS acknowledges the space for sexual
desire to occur is of great interest, especially because he only speaks of the way the group look at Sundri. BVS does not even consider the way Sundri could feel in such a situation. Furthermore, BVS does not allow Sundri to associate herself to group that surrounds her in any manner other than the one he has confined her to: they are her brothers.

At the end of the novel Sundri is kidnapped for the fourth time and is confined by a Turk. She is later rescued by her Khalsa brothers and falls quite ill. While reflecting on the situation, a tearful Sundri states:

Brother! I am a great sinner, you have all had to endure many hardships because of me. I had hoped that I would be able to help my brothers; instead I have been the root cause of all troubles. How will I face Guru Gobind Singh ji...

Pouring out her heart to her Khalsa brothers, Sundri is not only upset about causing them so much trouble, but also finds herself unworthy of being a Sikh woman. She feels as though she was not able to perform as was expected of her by her male companions. Even though BVS is careful to shun any characters who mistreat women or doubt the power of Sundri, her character is still portrayed as vulnerable. He never allows Sundri to make decisions where she is able to endure the consequences without being saved by her fellow brothers. This further emphasizes the helplessness of women.

Another aspect of the novel that highlights the subordination of women is Sundri’s devotion to seva (selfless service). Her dedication to serving the Panth (or community) is
portrayed as similar to the much-admired Bhai Kanahiya, one of Guru Gobind Singh’s followers who would tend to the service of anyone who needed assistance. The notion of "selfless service" is a core component of Sikhism and of great importance to BVS. He believed that “it was the notion of service that was lacking in the self-centred individuality inherent in Western thought” (Jakobsh 162). Indeed, Kaur-Singh emphasizes the novel for just this reason, extolling Sundri as a "paradigm of Sikh ethics" (188). But seva is important to Sundri for another reason, which can been seen in Malhotra’s description of a pamphlet called Patibrat Dharm that was part of a larger collection of influential tracts released during the Singh Sabha movement. That pamphlet asserts that, in Malhotra's words, "a woman’s salvation was routed through her seva or the performance of daily domestic chores, especially those undertaken to please the husband" (122). Sundri wanted to attain salvation and she had already denounced marital life, therefore she committed her life to serving her brothers and she went to great lengths to please them: she told them that “it is my wish that I fulfill my life serving in the community kitchen. I should if you would allow, live here amid my brothers. I shall serve in the langar. When you launch out into combat, I should be in the ranks too" (BVS 194). Sundri thus, happily prepared food for her brothers and even volunteered to be a part of the ranks. The implication is that all forms of service would be open to her. Nonetheless, she spent far more timing serving the needs of her brothers than she did fighting the enemy. This further highlighted the defined roles that were being prescribed for women. Seva, therefore, was highly gendered.

Further, Sundri's ability to think and act independently, throughout the novel Sundri commits many selfless acts without discriminating between friend or foe, and in this sense she is

17 Guru Gobind was the tenth Sikh Guru.
like the selfless Bhai Kanahiya—but she also ends up in some sort of trouble and at the mercy of her heroic male companions. Every time Sundri helps a foe, she needs to be rescued and ultimately this leads to her death. For example, near the end of the novel, when Sundri is unable to keep up with her Khalsa brothers who have just rescued her once again, she suddenly becomes distracted by a Pathan (a Muslim generally understood to be of Afghan origins, but also used as a term more generally for Muslims from the Northwest of India) who has been wounded and is pleading for water. However, when Sundri informs the Muslim that she is a Singhni (Sikh woman), he becomes enraged and “picks up his sword....and thrusts it with great force against the helpless Sundri, the goddess of compassion," the latter being a name given to Sundri by her fellow Khalsa brothers (BVS 46). He falls to his death, but leaves Sundri injured. Here, BVS stops to again to address the reader and explain how his heroine was defeated as a result of her own compassion. He does not blame Sundri for taking pity on the Pathan, yet he does state that one of her Khalsa brothers had warned her about her inability to sense danger.

Unfortunately, Sundri! Your compassion became your killer. You had been warned by Sham Singh earlier: "O sister! Do not trust your foes; they are friends of nobody. The enemy and the snake are alike. There is no remedy against their sting. But innocent Sundri; you are naive; you do not know diplomacy. You are indeed an embodiment of charity and pity.

Through this emotional plea, BVS uses his heroine to justify the boundaries that are formed for women. This is why Sundri’s performance in making food or tending to the wounds of her brothers is exemplary. However, when BVS purposely places Sundri in difficult situations, she fails to relieve herself from them without needing support.
Sundri’s character for the most part is given quite a bit of freedom in comparison to the kind of lifestyle women were accustomed to living during that time period. As Gurpreet Bal states: "women at that time were kept well protected and were not playing any significant role in the outer social world" (107). Therefore, for women to leave their homes to live in the context that Sundri experienced would be un-thought of. Her lifestyle is one that the female reader could possibly admire, but it was not one to which women could—or even should—relate or aspire.

For example, after alerting the reader that Sundri is injured due to her own naive nature, BVS continues to converse with the reader and accuses women of being solely responsible for failing to adequately bring up their children to contribute positively to the Sikh religion.

O’ Sikh maidens of today, born with a silver spoon in your mouth and living in luxury and comfort!...Your children will grow up to be ill-trained just like you. They will be outwardly Sikhs but speak like Brahmins and dress like Muslims.

Fair observes that "Sundri’s heroism is manifest at the expense of every woman she is supposedly inspiring. [BVS] considered the contemporary women of the quam [group] to be lax, superstitious, apostate, leading themselves and their sons and husbands to hell" (116). The only way that women could redeem themselves was by surrendering to certain constraints imposed on their behaviour. Malhotra describes that it was common for writings of the time period to regulate the behaviour of women and the quote above is one such example of this. BVS reiterates throughout his novel how every woman should strive to be like his heroine Sundri. However, it was impossible to be like her, because Sundri is the perfect Sikh woman. Further, that perfection
was presumably only achievable if you were living a celibate life after having been kidnapped, rejected by your parents and rescued by a bunch of ideal men living in the forest—not a fate likely to befall a whole lot of real women.] Problematically, Sundri’s perfection is the root cause of her failure.

Malhotra goes on to describe how literature of this period "simultaneously sets up an ideal model for women and criticises both women and men for un-Sikh behaviour" (143). Women were presented with ideals that were impossible to follow, but were encouraged to act upon them anyway. While describing the various role models that BVS constructed Jakobsh states: "in the case of Sundri, a new goddess, a natural extension of the old paradigm that was supposedly being displaced was born....Sundri was transformed from a feasible, useful model to an archetype, a goddess" (Jakobsh 165). This particular goddess was, however, meant to regulate women’s behavior. Throughout the novel she remains loyal to her Khalsa brothers and serves them. Most importantly she never loses her faith in the Divine. These were all traits that according to the Singh Sabha reform would define Sikh womanhood. Thus, Jakobsh argues that "Sundri in the hands of BVS became the site of Sikh women’s identity construction and hence symbolic of a recovered and purified Sikh tradition" (Jakobsh 164).

1.6: Liberated Sundri

Before concluding this chapter, let us consider a prominent theme in modern Punjabi literature: the comparison and contrast of women with one another. Such comparison allows for arguments to be constructed by authors about who women are and (most importantly) who they should be. There are many instances in this novel where BVS portrays the plight and suffering of Hindu and Muslim women in contrast to his liberated heroine Singhani (female Singh) Sundri.
This is why he begins the novel by introducing Sundri as a member of the Hindu religion and then shares her journey of struggles against the Mughals and concludes with his Sundri finally at peace as a devoted Sikh woman. BVS goes to great lengths in this novel to show the superiority of Sikh women in comparison to Hindu and Muslim women. One of the most important reasons for this is that "Singh Sahba reformers knew that they were caught in a ‘crisis of authority’…The creation of alternate Sikh heroes and heroines was thus necessary to fulfil the elementary needs of world view intent on the creation of Sikh distinctiveness" (Jakobsh 164). BVS wanted to ensure that his Sikh heroine stood out distinctly against all other women.

In one instance, BVS describes in detail the lifestyles that the Mughal Begums (wives) lead. With the luxurious palace as the backdrop, we come face to face with the painful imprisonment and victimization of women. Kaur-Singh believes that this contrast was meant to portray how Sundri, a woman, had converted and committed herself to a religion that treats women with the upmost liberties and respect (155). But it is Jakobsh who provides a more convincing interpretation of this situation. She highlights how the lifestyle that Sundri leads is an inaccurate depiction of Sikh women as they did not generally denounce life at home and gallop freely with men in the forest (166). Sundri at numerous instances in the novel is in fact discouraged from wandering too far or riding alone anywhere. She, like the Begums, had rules that she had to follow to ensure her safety. Moreover, just like the Begums of that general period (roughly the eighteenth century, but such representations are not meant in any strictly historical sense), Sundri is forced to make decisions not out of choice, but because there is no other option. When Sundri is rescued by her brother from jumping into the fire and committing suicide, she faces a tough decision. She could either return home to her family, who had already denounced her, or go to her husband who had rejected her. In wanting to belong, she chose the Khalsa, and
like the Begums she transformed herself to meet the demands of the brotherhood. At this point in the story, BVS through the following statement makes it seem as though Sundri is making an authoritative decision. "ਦੀਵੀਅ ਪਚਾਦੀ ਦੀ ਵਿਖਾਁ ਤੇ ਦੀਵੀਅ ਦੁਧਦੀਆਂ? ਨੇ ਦੀਵੀਅ ਦੁਧਦੀਆਂ ਦਾ ਮੀਨ ਵਿਖਾਂ ਨਾ ਧਿਆਲੀ ਦੀਵੀਅ ਦੇਣ ਤੇ ਹਰਕੁਤ ਮੁਕਾਮੀਂ ਉਈ ਦੂਹਾਂ?" (BVS 8). "Why don’t women fight for their religion? If they haven’t so far, why should I not be the first woman to live courageously like my brother." What BVS does not mention here, is the fact that women did not fight because they had family responsibilities to maintain, not to mention the burden of upholding the family respect. It would have been impossible for women to justify leaving their families to go and fight the enemy. The lifestyle that Sundri’s character presented was simply not one that women outside of her domain could adhere to.

1.7: Conclusion

BVS wanted to create a role model for Sikh women to inspire them to be strong Singhnia. It is fair to state that to some extent he was quite successful in his mission. BVS managed to create a character who forged emotional resonance with the reader and became more than just a fictional conception. Consequently, “even today his novels are reprinted to exhort Sikhs (especially those living abroad) to follow the tenets of ‘true ‘ Sikhism (Malhotra 44). Harcharan Sobti further elaborates that, "[f]or a vast number of people Sundari has been a real person, an embodiment of faith, chastity and courage. They have loved and admired her. They have shed tears over her trials, and they have heaved sighs of relief at her providential escapes" (78). Yet, even though BVS wanted to portray the gender equality that Sikh women enjoyed, the heroic deeds and acts of bravery displayed by Sundri were too far removed from the typical conditions of Sikh women residing in the early twentieth century.
In the context of Bengal, Chatterjee compares the domestic realm that women were confined to with their service to the nation. He asserts that, "nationalism fostered a distinctly conservative attitude towards social beliefs and practices" (203). Bal further elaborates this point and states that "gender was constructed as a representative of Indian culture and traditions. Women are to be protected in the four walls of the house lest there be no western modernising influence on them" (105). This further reiterates that praising and valorizing "brave women" who act outside of societal norms is acceptable, but not for those in our midst. Thus, while BVS’s role model was very effective in expressing a Singh Sabha vision for women as supporters of the Khalsa through the character of Sundri, it failed to truly challenge the conventional expectations that existed for women. This leads us to question why BVS would do such a thing when he himself seems to have intended to advocate strongly on behalf of women. One might argue, as Kaur-Singh suggests, that BVS was hoping that the subordinated, represented by his heroine Sundri, would be relieved of all troubles once they connected and committed themselves to the Sikh religion; according to Kaur-Singh "for Sundri the root of a sexist and divided world lies in the failure to see the Transcendent One" (189). As Bal highlights," [t]he most important element of this text is that the construction of the Sikh identity has been carried through gender" (118). Therefore, this effort to accommodate Sikh women within the religion led to the abandonment of dealing with the real issues that women were struggling with. This, I believe, addresses one of the greatest failures of Sundri: BVS remained distant from the very women that he was trying to improve.

This chapter comes to an end with the death of our heroine Sundri, who departed as a woman liberated from her domestic domain, one in which she had no authority to make decisions
for herself; and then stuck within another interpretation of domesticity amidst a group of enlightened males. From here, I shall move on to another heroine presented in a novel in the twentieth century, who unlike Sundri does not seek liberation from her subordinated status through religion. Instead she is a young woman who is in search of acceptance, from a society who has out-casted her for expressing her sexuality. Here we see a "progressive" vision; however, as was seen in the Sikh reformist sources, the figure of the woman remains at the centre of debate.
Chapter 2: *Anviahi Maa* (Unmarried Mother)

As seen in the first chapter, the colonial period in India was a time during which an abundance of literature was produced to address the neglected and subordinate position of women in society. Writers and reformers were preoccupied with the figure of the female victim; some, like Bhai Vir Singh, created heroine figures to assert a different vision of the Indian woman. Here I once again turn to the work of Partha Chatterjee, who in his analysis of women and the nation notes how “nationalism separated the domain of culture into two spheres—the material and the spiritual...[the West dominated in the area of material, which consisted of] science...technology...rational forms of economical organization” (Chatterjee 119). He goes on to explain how it was through these examples that the colonizers had learned to “impose their dominance on the whole world” (120). In reaction to this, the nationalist had to “learn those superior techniques of organizing material and incorporate them into their own cultures” (Chatterjee 120). However, they did not want to imitate the West in totality as “the self-identity of national culture would be threatened...[and because they believed that] in the spiritual domain the East was superior to the West” (120). It is from these spheres that the construction of the outer and inner domains was constructed. The outer was the domain of politics; the inner domain was the location of the nation’s true identity: “the home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and woman is its representation” (Chatterjee 120). This reflected an overall dynamic in the colonial period. For example, Lata Mani found that debates around cultural practices involving women often progressed with women as the ground of conversation, among men, rather than as interlocutors themselves. Mani argues that through colonial rule:

women become emblematic of tradition, and the reworking of tradition is largely conducted through debating the rights and status of women in society. Despite this
intimate connection between women and tradition, or perhaps because of it, these debates are in some sense not primarily about women but about what constitutes authentic cultural tradition (90).

While Mani is concerned here with colonial discourse in an earlier period, as Chatterjee shows, this mode continued. Therefore, it would be the men who defined and constructed the boundaries that women were to remain within. One can even see this dynamic in the work of a writer like Gurbaksh Singh, who "appeared like a meteor in the Punjabi world of letters in the mid-thirties of last century...dazzled by the glare of American life where he trained as an engineer in the early years of the 20th century. He brought to Punjab some of this magical impact" (Jaspal Singh, 23 July 2012). Gurbaksh Singh embraced the sentiments of his time, constructing female heroines to address the needs of the day.

2.1: The Progressive Writers Movement

Just less than a decade before the formal independence of India, a group of young Indian writers came together to form the All-India Progressive Writers Associations (PWA). Priyamvada Gopal refers to the manifesto of the young writers which declares that "[r]adical changes are taking place in Indian society...We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence to-day" (Gopal 14). The PWA’s vision was grounded in resolving and addressing issues that were deemed fundamental to the people of India. The PWA’s manifesto did not praise the rebirth of a nation; instead they asserted that a reconstruction was needed for post-colonial India. They were adamant in pointing out that one could not turn a blind eye to the past, because it was responsible for their present condition. As Gopal states, “the PWA manifesto speaks of a dynamic process of recognising problems and

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18 The “Gurbaksh” of Gurbaksh Singh Preetlari may also be represented as “Gurbax.”
working through them” (14). This meant that the subject of gender was a point of great concern for the writers, as post-colonial India could not progress without the participation of women—we know this from the discourse of the Bhai Vir Singh period: women were essential to the formation of the nation. Yet, Anne McClintock notes as follows:

No post-colonial state anywhere has granted woman and men equal access to the rights and resources of the nation state. Not only have the needs of post-colonial nations been largely identified with male conflicts, male aspirations and male interest, but the very representation of national power has rested on proper constructions of gender power (92).

Women were central to the nationalist project, but they were also meant to take a subservient role within it. Thus, there are contradictions within the discourse of this period. The disparity that characterized the nationalist period continued into the post-Independence period. Thus, in an attempt to reconstruct the identity of the nation, the women were expected to remain authentic and traditional, while the men assumed the role of modernizing the nation by themselves:

Ironically, the nationalist phase, which is often referred to as liberating the Indian woman from the confines of domesticity by bringing her out into the public arena of political activism, in effect reaffirmed even more subtly the exploitative and restrictive role as prescribed by patriarchy, namely as a giver, provider but never a seeker for herself (Pankaj Singh 43).

Indian writers also manifest these contradictions. They embraced the decolonization project. The departure of the British and the upheaval that followed invigorated the PWA to bring into play a movement that would help reconstruct a new identity for the nation. During this time “popular fictions have presented a paradox: they represent the corruption of the era as well as the desirability of its modernity” (Ghosh 2). Writers within this movement attempted to
"inspire a body of literature that, by integrating the 'we' of both communal and national collective identities, attempted to break away from dyadic models of conflict and oppression" (Gopal 17). This was a difficult but necessary task as an effective self-critique was essential for reconstruction. As such, caught in the momentum of change and prosperity, many writers took the onus upon themselves to use their pen to address bravely issues that had been considered taboo. At the same time, while progressive writers did embrace social change in substantive terms, in certain respects were not as different from the nationalists as they claimed to be and many did not break free of their patriarchal attitudes. Conventional roles for women, both as writers and as characters in literary creations, were the norm. The women presented in literature still had many restrictions imposed on them.

Ismat Chughtai and Rashid Jahan were among the few writers who did not let anybody, including fellow members of the [PWA] association, dictate what they wanted to express through the powerful medium of literature (Malik 649-664). In fact, Rashid Jashan, Sajjad Zaheer and Ahmed Ali, a group of writers who would later be a part of the PWA, wrote an anthology called Angarey (Live Coals) in 1932 that spoke to the reform that would emerge after the colonists left India. "Angarey acknowledged that there was awareness that masculinity and male sexuality underwrote emancipatory projects and needed, therefore, to be subjected to scrutiny" (Gopal 35). This is why in the "last story in the collection [of Anagrey] (perhaps strategically positioned this way) is structured as a confession from a man who sees himself as a progressive, but who comes to accept responsibility for his wife’s death because of his complicity with patriarchal discourses of masculinity" (Gopal 35). Such works challenged assumptions about the role of women and placed the need for social change at the centre of the literary project.
2.2: Gurbaksh Singh Preetlari

It is arguably through the influence of the Progressive Writers Movement that writers like Gurbaksh Singh Preetlari were inclined to produce literary pieces such as *Anviah Maa* (Unmarried Mother). Preetlari, like BVS, is often referred to as the father of modern Punjabi prose. He founded a prominent Punjabi literary magazine in 1930 called *Preetlari* (Love Chain). The monthly journal attained such popularity that Gurbaksh Singh’s name was forever transformed to Gurbaksh Singh Preetlari (and indeed he himself is often called 'Preetlari'). The motto of the magazine reads "[a] common heartbeat of so many, the symphony of love-lyric, with everything in it" (Walia, 23 July 2012). The content of the magazine was progressive in nature as it promoted religious tolerance and included stories inclusive of sexual content. Surjit Singh recalls one particular publication in the magazine, which was written in the form of a letter about the Sikh religion. The letter was written by Gurbaksh Singh and "had the effect of an exploding bomb on [Sikh fundamentalists]" (39). This daring nature continued to be a part of Gurbaksh Singh’s literary career and this is reflected in the novel discussed in this thesis. Many prominent writers began their literary careers with the *Preetlari* magazine. After Gurbaksh Singh’s death his family took over the editing of the magazine, but it failed to uphold the same popularity as it had when Preetlari himself was in charge.\(^\text{19}\)

In 1935 Preetlari constructed a colony called *Preet Nagar* (locality of love and friendship):

[t]he story of Preet Nagar is the tale of how the progressive ethos and culture of the Punjabi literary sensibility was shaped and nurtured during the cultural renaissance,

\(^\text{19}\)Problematically, many literary magazines in Punjabi gain their appreciation through the people that they affiliated with and then after their departure from the magazine they tend to lose their credibility.
before the partition. The township was a showcase of the composite Indian culture, which encouraged community living and established its own brand of philosophy that set a new trend among the contemporary Indian intellectuals and this trend was bereft of the British influence (Walia, 23 July 2012).

*Preet Nagar* is located in between the cities of Amritsar and Lahore (it still exists)—and was visited by actors, playwrights, writers, thinkers and politicians. Famous poet Dhani Ram Chattrik was very helpful in the purchasing of the large tract of land (Walia, 23 July 2012).

Many stalwarts were associated with its formation...a school was built for adults to create dialogue...plots were made for individual houses...[it also had ] a community kitchen...meetings were held often where people congregated to exchange ideas and enhance social activism through arts and literature” (Walia, 23 July 2012).

The town was open to both males and females, although it was the females (poets, writers and actors) who spent time in the community kitchen. The cultural activities that took place within *Preet Nagar* were revolutionary in nature as they "shook the British Government and many actors, including the daughters of Gurbaksh Singh, were picked up by the police and put behind bars for staging revolutionary plays [there]” (Walia, 23 July 2012). Thus, it is fair to state that the township was constructed as symbolic of reformist behaviour, rebelling against the colonizers and their ideologies. *Preet Nagar* became a “melting pot of cultures” as Hindu, Urdu and Punjabi writers all came together united by the cultural and social bonds that were keeping them together. People were able to live “homogenously” and engage in “peaceful discussions” about the “sufi saints and the teachings of the Gurus” (Walia).

Arguably Gurbaksh Singh’s social reformist nature was greatly influenced by his education in America. Surjit Singh notes that whenever he met with Gurbaksh Singh " he
expressed hope in writing that India would emerge as a secular state like most of the Western democracies...He also hoped that India would develop democratic institutions based on high moral values and integrity, and that these institutions would not be used as a vehicle for party politics” (43-44). Consequently, Preet Nagar on a larger level could be viewed as a metaphor for the India that existed before the disruption of the British as well as a model of what India’s future would look like. Yet, as much as Gurbaksh Singh rebelled against British rule, he still wanted India to develop democratically like the West. Surjit Singh continues to state how the first impressions of America were formed through writings of Gurbaksh Singh who included his experience about America in his short stories. "The America [Gurbaksh Singh] described was one of the most advanced democracies in the world" (44). Here we see Gurbaksh Singh, like the nationalists, portraying the need to mimic certain aspects of Western ideologies, but at the same resisting their authority and influence.

Gurbax Singh could visualise the shattering of his dream during his own life. The first blow to this model village, which Gurbax Singh wanted to develop into another Shantiniketan\(^\text{20}\), came when the country was partitioned in 1947. Another setback came when the border township witnessed the ugly days of terrorism (Walia, 23 July 2012 ). Unfortunately, these setbacks were also felt by many members of Gurbaksh Singh’s family who were attacked by militants when they took over management of the magazine (Walia, 23 July 2012). Today Preet Nagar stands in shambles and is unrecognizable, many of the buildings have been pulled down; as described recently by a journalist, "sadly now Preet Nagar belongs to the haze of history" (Walia, 23 July 2012).

\(^{20}\) Educational institution
The focus of this chapter is a novel published in 1940 called *Anviahi Maa* (Unmarried Mother). At first the novel appeared in sections of *Preetlari*. It was later officially published as a book in 1942. Since then the book has had numerous editions, allowing the author to write an introduction to the novel after the story had already been critiqued (as will be discussed). The novel focuses on the journey of a young Bengali woman who through taking one critical decision in her life ends up facing all kind of struggles to survive in the world as an unmarried mother. The novel begins with its heroine, Prabha, unexpectedly meeting a man named Chitrunjan from college, who is in trouble for committing a murder. Prabha ends up spending the night with this prisoner and becoming pregnant with his child. Prabha’s saga begins as she soon realizes that there is no place in her world that accepts an unmarried mother.

### 2.3: Escaping the gaze

Throughout the story, Prabha tries to escape the consequences that she has had to endure due to her acting upon and expressing desire, but it clings to her through all her experiences. Prabha is thrust into the world as an object of lust, and she cannot escape the lustful gaze of males that follow her right from the beginning to the end of the book. Prabha’s journey leads her to many places, starting with religious shrines, where she is confronted by men who want to take advantage of her plight. Prabha visits two Hindu temples and informs those in charge that she is poor and looking for work. In turn, she is met by young rich men who abuse their position of authority. Prabha states her views about these men through the narrator Gurbaksh Singh. She describes them as being incapable of giving her the kind of help that she was seeking.
Giving something becomes very difficult for them; they always have lustful eyes through which they look at everything. Prabha is disheartened by both places because both secretaries' eyes are full of self-fulfillment. The kind of desires Prabha’s youth and plight aroused in their hearts could not be hidden by their eyes.

Prabha then decides to seek help at a Sikh temple. She is somewhat familiar with the Sikh religion as she had heard Guru Nanak’s *shabads* (Sikh hymns): "ਦੁਰਖਤ ਸੰਘਰਚ ਦੇ ਪਤਲ ਤਾਲ ਦੁਆਰਾ ਪ੍ਰੀਤੀ ਮੀ ਬਿਰ ਮੰਗ ਪਾਨ, ਹੁਣ ਪਾਣ ਨਹੀਂ ਕਿਣ ਸਭਾ...[ਭੀ]" (Gurbaksh Singh 50). "From reading these *shabads* Prabha had formulated the opinion that the Sikh religion was a complete reform of the Hindu religion". Therefore, when Prabha enters the temple and is greeted by an older priest she immediately feels a sense of comfort that was absent from the encounter she had with the younger men at the Hindu Temple. Yet, just as Prabha begins to tell the man about her troubles, she is interrupted by the priest's young son, who has the same "greedy eyes that she seeks safety from" (51). She flees. Finally, Prabha finds herself a home at a Christian missionary hospital. It is here that she gives birth to her son and makes a comfortable home for herself and her child.

After a year, due to internal politics in the institution and the pressure to convert to Christianity, she is forced to leave the hospital and finds herself homeless. Returning home is not an option, so Prabha has to find a place for herself and her child. She decides to head to Lahore and become a teacher.

### 2.4: Haunted by sexuality

When Prabha arrives in Lahore, she is confronted even more directly by her sexuality as a "problem." She finds that wherever women are in a position of authority they refuse to give her a
job and use her lack of experience as an excuse. Preetlari comments on this by asking "टेली छिमंग छिंट छिटू देम जैल छ बिनाश हुई वे महत्त्व मी वि ऑपरेटर टिम्मरीए व वे वी विशे दराव उे छिटू वी रघ विमे गुंड़ा-अर्ध टिम्मरी अपघ तेये उपर दर्म्ह तली वज्तीएउ" (62). "How could Prabha at such a young age understand why middle aged women refuse to keep a girl in her prime, more importantly a beautiful girl, close to them?" Finally, Prabha finds work in a private school where the principal is a family man. Problematically, private schools have more than one person in charge; there are many committee members and other figures that hold quite a lot of weight in making decisions for the school. Thus, Prabha ends up tutoring one of the children of one of the school leaders. This particular man is a great lecturer in religion, but at the same time there are many rumors of his relations with the female teachers in the school. Nobody dares to question a man of his calibre about such matters. Preetlari tells us that "[w]ithin fifteen days of tutoring, Prabha understands that she cannot teach under the expectations being placed upon her; however, she continues to teach hoping that she could turn this experience into a positive one" (64). But as time progresses Prabha begins to notice how the man begins to take liberties with her: "[t]hese little liberties did not bother Prabha as she is from a much more liberal culture than the one Punjabi people are accustomed to" (64). But one day the man decides to take things too far by taking advantage of Prabha and wants to spend the night with her. Prabha manages to escape that night, but before she leaves the man he warns her of the destruction that he will bring to her life. Prabha is subsequently kicked out of the school and newspaper articles are written about her and her son maligning her character. Once again Prabha finds herself homeless and even more vulnerable than when she first left home.

After a brief stay with an old woman in the city of Amritsar, Prabha heads to Harimander Sahib, a Sikh temple where she has previously visited to do seva (selfless service). (Seva is a
concept that was introduced in chapter one through the character of Sundri.) Preetlari writes here that

Prabha’s idea to stay in the temple is not unheard of as many men and women did seva by helping with the ongoing construction of the temple...and then they ate here and slept inside the temple; however, Prabha had forgotten that she is not like the other women—she is young, beautiful and kind natured! (73).

Through this quote not only does Gurbaksh Singh foreshadow the fact that there is a clear distinction between the kinds of seva that are available for women, he also blatantly expresses that it is Prabha’s sexuality that poses a hindrance to the kind of service that is available to her. One day after Prabha puts her son to sleep she goes outside to do some seva, which in this situation meant that she carries bricks on her head in a basket and has to walk back and forth to unload and refill the basket. While walking back and forth Prabha notices that a man, one who has been doing seva for some time, is looking at her. Prabha characterizes him as a man "who has the ability to identify two types of women very quickly: bad ones and those who are destitute, ones whose plight he could take advantage of" (74). This man comes closer to her and continues doing seva. It is here that Prabha cries out through the narrator to the reader as she is utterly disturbed by the nature of the men that she has confronted.

Everyone from school principals to men engaging in seva at a temple all succumb to the power of lust! Who could she tell, to who could she ask for sympathy! All those impartial in society have only one assumption about her youth. These are those people whose righteousness has labelled her as an ‘unmarried mother’ and shunned her out of society and now they feel that Prabha is unworthy of the companionship of any married or unmarried girl (74).
Prabha lost in her thoughts ends up tripping and falls unconscious. Eventually an old and very popular doctor comes to her rescue, and he keeps Prabha and her son at his home. While Prabha suffers many injuries that take a toll on her physical beauty, a new sense of confidence arises within her. After Chitrunjan, the father of her son, this is one of the only instances in the novel where a male is described in such a positive light. Prabha’s diminishing hope is awakened by the doctor who she describes as man with an “old face, [with a] white beard, sympathetic large eyes and hopeful fingers with which he constantly checks Prabha’s pulse” (78). Prabha and her son get along extremely well with the doctor and think of each other as family. They all bring out the best in each other; however, society did not see it this way. The people around them all are very suspicious of the relationship that the doctor and Prabha share. Dr. Lal is a Christian; many people questioned the religious background of Prabha and whether she had converted. The Sikhs were claiming that Prabha is a Sikh as she did seva at the temple, while the Hindus were claiming that she belongs to the Hindu religion. Caught amidst this battle, Prabha, is summoned to the Deputy Commissioner’s office to clear up the allegations being placed against her. Prabha arrives at the office and speaks in a very confident manner, stating that, "this society has no authority over me. If your justice separates me from beloved and respected father Dr Lal and his safe shelter, and puts me in the captivity of these devils (society) then I choose to kill myself. I have reached the height of my tolerance!" (79). The commissioner then asks Prabha if she has converted and she responds, "I have not, nor will I commit my life to any other religion. If you let me live then I will live according to my own will, if you don’t then I choose not to live at all" (79-80). The powerful outburst that Prabha makes not only surprises the Commissioner, but it alarms Prabha as well, as she is left shaking. The Commissioner allows her to stay with the doctor.
In the final part of the novel, Dr Lal and Prabha open their own nursing home for women who are need of shelter, medical assistance or work. One day Dr Lal receives a call from an ill friend and asks him for help, and Dr Lal decides to send Prabha to nurse him back to health. On the way back from the visit, Prabha’s bag is stolen by a man working at the train station. This leads her to meeting with the manager Sukhraj. Sukhraj is well respected at the station and is very popular among his co-workers. Sukhraj brings back Prabha’s stolen luggage and apologizes and feels very embarrassed for the mischief committed by his team member. Prabha is very impressed by Sukhraj and feels an instant connection to him and continues to think of him when she arrives back home. A few months later Prabha returns to the station to meet with Sukhraj, however, he has left his job there and started working on a farm shared with other workers from the station. Prabha returns home, but within a week she receives a phone call saying Sukhraj fell off his horse and broke his legs, and even though many people are tending to him he needs a good nurse. Prabha heads over to Sukhraj straight away and is overcome with compassion after she sees the amount of attention and care he is receiving from his friends. Prabha stays ten days with Sukhraj and as the time approaches for the two of them to part, Preetlari creates a similar ambiance to the one that occurred when Prabha and Chitrunjan first met. Sukhraj lost his first love and wants to remain loyal to her, therefore, he is troubled by the fact that he has developed feelings for Prabha. He says, "I don’t want to love you, but why are you so loveable to me?" Prabha responds by stating that “she has answer for his question but first needs to know how he feels about her" (90). Prabha joins their hands together which leads to "Sukhraj asking her if he can kiss her hands" the two of them continue to flirtatiously toy with each other (91). Eventually they figure out that Sukhraj is Chitrunjan, and that he did not die in the earthquake, but he
thought Prabha had died. The two re-unite and although it is not clear what happens next—(as the novel ends here—) it seems that soon Prabha will no longer be an unmarried mother.

2.5: Reconsidering sexuality

Gurbaksh Singh's heroine Prabha represents the reform that he and other progressive writers supported. Moreover, it is through Prabha's hardships that one is also able to understand how the writers were stuck in a paradox, as women were central to the discourse of this period, but only in certain terms. Anviahi Maa, as Sadhu Binning notes in a review, was controversial: it received great criticism which forever changed the manner in which Gurbaksh Singh was perceived by his audience. In some ways, it is not surprising: like many works of the period, it addressed women's position in society for the express purpose of engaging in critique. It was meant to "cause trouble." Gurbaksh Singh acknowledges this. Binning goes on to note: "मिठूँ चाली बंत रित दी तै वि तुरुवथी मिठ छाल दे मुठूँ लिच छिचे छवरे उणी भापथी छिमड़ पे टिम धंध दुँ घउँ पी भूवथममली उलीवे रुँधे पेंग वलच दै" (Binning, 24 Feb 2012). "What deserves praise is the influential manner in which Gurbaksh Singh wrote the beginning of the novel. Preetlari does not simply introduce to the reader to his heroine Prabha, instead he uses this opening to justify his intentions for writing the novel." The introduction, which was written after the publication of the novel, explicitly expresses the cold hard facts behind the mission Gurbaksh Singh embarked upon with writing this story.

No work of mine has ever been received without criticism because I have never written anything to entertain myself or others. Every aspect of my work speaks out against immoral values. I believe that aside from the acceptance of these immoral values nothing else brings suffering to the fate of man (8).
From this statement it is quite evident that Gurbaksh Singh, like members of the PWA, believed that self-critique within Indian society and its values was integral to the progression of India. Thus, Gurbaksh Singh constructed a heroine who was of a Bengali origin to appeal to not just Punjabi people, but to the entire Indian community; this novel was part of a larger discourse, a national project. This is evident in the fact that, even though Gurbaksh Singh wrote the book in Punjabi, its content was inclusive of many Indian cultures and faiths. Gurbaksh Singh discussed how this novel distanced him from many loyal readers of the Preetlari magazine, which until that point had been highly acclaimed. In order to address these critiques Gurbaksh Singh writes that he has been misunderstood by his readers as he did not characterize Prabha in such a manner to popularize her. Instead, Gurbaksh Singh wrote the novel as an "advocate of Prabha as his entire soul felt sympathy for her and her plight" (8).

While speaking on behalf of his heroine Prabha, Gurbaksh Singh alludes to qissa (storytelling) literature and how his heroine Prabha’s relationship with Chitrunjan differs from the ones pursued in these stories. Gurbaksh Singh states:

There are many complicated relationships presented in Heer Ranjha, Laila Majnu, Sohni Mahival, Sheere Fariyad21 and other similar stories...there is even reference to them in religious scriptures. But realistically speaking, what were these relationships? In these stories, we see the triumph not of man's spiritual nature but his corporeal nature. But the victory of Anviaahi Maa is of man's spiritual nature (9).

Gurbaksh Singh feels that the relationship between a man and woman in qissa literature cannot be compared to the soulful union existing between his heroine Prabha and Chitrunjan. The heroines from qissa literature according to Gurbaksh Singh are base material creations, whereas,

21 Heroines from qissa literature
the unmarried mother Prabha is not. However, it is here that Gurbaksh Singh begins to contradict himself, as the reasons that he provides for distinguishing his heroine from Heer, Sahiba, Laila defeat the purpose of him being so determined to fight on Prabha’s behalf.

To understand fully Gurbaksh Singh’s dilemma over Prabha’s sexuality and desire, we must return to the opening of the novel. When Prabha meets Chitrunjan randomly on the eve of his hanging—for a crime he did not commit—the reader is told that the two had never been close friends or known each other very well. Moreover, the entire scene that describes the walk and the conversation that takes place between Chitrunjan and Prabha is portrayed in an innocent manner. Chitrunjan is handcuffed and is being escorted by the police. Prabha is startled to find Chitrunjan in such a predicament and immediately feels great sympathy for him. When Prabha engages in a conversation with the prisoner, he claims that he has been set up for murder and is unable to convince anyone of his innocence, not even his own father. Prabha takes great pity on the prisoner and just as the two are about to part ways, she makes an impromptu decision that will forever change her life and demolish any aspirations that she or her parents held. She decides to spend the night with this condemned man and create a memory that would conjoin them forever. This particular scene is described in a very sensitive manner. Prabha’s desire to stay with Chitrunjan makes her decision seem unquestionable:

[Prabha] thought of Chitrunjan very highly in comparison with the other boys from college, but Chitrunjan had never come very close to her. Therefore, she did not know about his kind hearted nature. She was happy when she met with him and never felt any uneasiness when she parted from him (22).
However, now Prabha feels that she cannot separate from Chritunjan. He too feels the same way, but he cannot “ask Prabha for anything, but every limb in his body began desiring something” (24).

Yet, in the introduction of the novel, written in the wake of the criticism that followed it, Gurbaksh Singh states claims that Prabha and Chitrunjan never loved one another and had absolutely no desire to be together. In fact, Gurbaksh Singh takes this innocent meeting a step further and says that during such an encounter there is absolutely no room for sexual desire. The only kind of desire that he allows his heroine to legitimately feel is to sympathize with Chitrunjan on his final night as a prisoner;

Prabha did not love Chitrunjan. She never wanted him to be her husband, she never even thought of him as a companion. Nor did she ever desire to be near him. She just sees him randomly on a dark night with handcuffs...there is no prior connection or promise between the two of them and absolutely no talk of connecting sexually (10).

In the story, Prabha and Chitrunjan separate after their night together, and they go their own ways, with the expectation on Prabha’s part that they would meet. She immediately began making arrangements to get a lawyer for Chitrunjan, to save him. But then there is an earthquake. Prabha and her family survive, but Chitrunjan’s name is listed among the dead. This incident causes Prabha to become secluded and very reserved. She refuses to marry, as she believes that she is the widow of Chitrunjan. Prabha ends up faking her own death to save the honour of her parents and leaves home.

Once again, Gurbaksh Singh’s introduction stands in opposition to what takes place in the novel. When Prabha returns home she has her wants to hire a lawyer for Chitrunjan
with the intent of saving him, but the earthquake disrupts this plan. Moreover, even after the
earthquake, Prabha searches for Chitrunjan and finds that she is unable to move on with her life
without him. Gurbaksh Singh’s heroine quite obviously develops an attachment to Chitrunjan,
which is why she willingly sacrifices the rest of her life to live as a widow and a mother to his
child. She did not desire sacrifice; neither did she act with simple lust. She desired Chitrunjan,
and acted on that desire. This is something Gurbaksh Singh’s wrote, and then repudiated.

2.6: Conclusion

Ironically, just as Gurbaksh Singh’s novel reflected the preoccupation with the female
heroine that was characteristic of modern Punjabi literature of the period, his description of this
incident in the introduction is also quite reflective of the larger nationalist discourse of the
period. He wanted to depict Prabha as a woman who was willing to sacrifice her future for the
nation, but not for the desire that exists within her. Problematically, this was not the mission that
Gurbaksh Singh’s had originally embarked upon; his introduction allows the reader to see that he
is writing against his own novel. When one reads the book without looking at the introduction, it
seems Gurbaksh Singh allows his heroine Prabha to desire. In the introduction, Gurbaksh Singh
denies this to his heroine. Unfortunately, Gurbaksh Singh falls into the predicament of being
unable to support the controversial heroine that he creates, as he is reluctant to cross the clearly
defined boundaries set for women by none other than those who claimed to liberate them.

Gurbaksh Singh tells the story of woman who is considered an outcast in society and throughout
the novel remains loyal to her by allowing her to surpass every obstacle that she crosses. He
abandons Prabha as soon as his fictional story enters the real world. We can see a parallel in his
own life as well. Gurbaksh Singh was married and had two children. It is commonly known that
Gurbaksh Singh’s daughter wanted to marry writer Shiv Kumar Batalvi, whose verse poem
Loona is the focus of Chapter Three of this thesis. However, Gurbaksh Singh reacted negatively
towards the union and did not allow the two of them to marry due to caste [and religious] differences (Soza 17). It seems in this real-life context, too, he repudiated his earlier commitments.
Chapter 3: Loona

The final chapter of this thesis will focus on a verse play written by the popular Punjabi poet Shiv Kumar Batalvi. Batalvi was a progressive writer, seeking to improve and modernize Indian society. As has been argued, he was not unusual in this: modern writers in India were generally committed to progressive values, which is why many championed women and members of the lower classes and castes. R.K. Gupta notes:

[O]nly in the post-Independence period and especially since the 1960’s that Indian novelists have begun to question seriously and systematically, and at times reject outright, traditional interpretations of women’s role and status in society. Ideals of womanhood firmly entrenched—often imposed by men and unconsciously internalized by women –are now losing their sanctity and are being critically assessed (299).

In this regard, Batalvi was particularly well known for his poem Loona, written in 1965. The poem’s rebellious tone is typical of the period in many ways: in the early post-colonial period, modern writers defied tradition, while still exploring it. The writers reworked traditional themes and then critiqued them. As Safir Rammah and Manu Sharma have argued:

It was perhaps not a coincidence that Shiv Kumar Batalvi came to age and quickly gained prominence at this crucial juncture when the emerging era of modernity was decisively and permanently replacing the traditional way of writing Punjabi poetry (1).

Loona thus embraced changes that were taking place within modern Punjabi literature: it simultaneously reflected a long-standing tradition and sought to overturn it at the same time. Loona was unusual in the period, however, for how far it was willing to go in presenting women’s perspectives by allowing them to express themselves, unafraid of criticism through the

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22 “Loona” is also represented by the variation “Luna.”
male author. Batalvi brings the concept of desire to the forefront and takes a stand against those who have misconstrued this desire as lust. Female sexual desire in the South Asian context has often been portrayed as "lust," that is, with associated negative connotations that locate such expressions of sexuality as outside of "appropriate" social and familial norms. This is perhaps most vividly demonstrated in the South Asian context in women's songs, where women's sexuality rarely finds expression. Prem Chowdhry argues that "women’s songs about women's sexuality represent an alternative to the sexual politics that valorize the chaste woman, and that they blatantly mock the dominant social and behavioural norms by articulating an alternative viewpoint" (25). While prominent songs valorize the chaste woman and demonize the lustful, Chowdhry writes, "women’s songs, on the other hand, accept their own lustful nature as natural, and speak of sexual encounters and seek fulfilment" (26). Perhaps because of this, such songs are seen as threatening by men. Anthropologists Ann Gold and Gloria Raheja in their study of women’s songs refer to the split-image theory in which women are assigned with many different roles. According to this theory:

Wives are in a double bind: they should be fertile and thus must be sexually active; simultaneously they must be absolutely chaste, in terms of not only marital fidelity but of sexual reticence. This problematic chastity of wives evokes anxieties recreating the conceptual split between sexuality and fertility at the human level (31).

A tension therefore exists between sexuality and chastity, and female interest in sexuality is construed as lust, outside of the appropriate, and desire—the legitimate expression of that sexuality—is not heard of at all. The manner in which Batalvi portrays and defends his protagonist’s right to express such a form of sexuality is thus perhaps what makes Loona unlike any other modern work. He brought the expression of a woman's sexuality into the formal sphere
of modern Punjabi literature, outside of the peripheral world of women’s songs, and allows his heroine to express her desire in a manner that challenges the valorization of chastity.

This chapter will examine how Batalvi challenges the anxieties surrounding women’s desire and agency in Loona. This includes examining the structure of the poem with reference to its two main women characters, Ichara and Loona, to explore how they are used by Batalvi both to describe the norms for women—through Ichara—and to subvert them, through the figure of Loona. Batalvi uses these characters to show that there are different ways of responding to the subordinated positions they have been assigned, although in neither case is the character freed from them.

3.1: From Pooran Bhagat to Loona

Batalvi’s Loona is a modern Punjabi composition—the language it uses is modern in form, and its verse is not formed in the traditional verse forms of earlier traditions. It is based on a Punjabi folk legend called Pooran Bhagat. This folk legend is a popular tradition. As scholar Deepak Manmohan-Singh has noted, "ਪੂਰਨ ਅਖੀਰ ਲਗਾ ਗੀ ਕਾਨ ਕਾਨਾਂਕ ਲੰਦੀਆਂ, ਲੇਖ-ਖੀਰੀਆਂ, ਘਾਡਾਂ ਅਖੀਰ ਵਿਖੀਆਂ ਾਫ਼ ਦੇ ਟੂਧ ਵਿਚੋ ਸ੍ਰਮ ਲੰਦੀ ਪ੍ਰਸ਼ਾਂਕ ਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੀ ਉਸ਼ਾ ਗੀਓਂ ਤੇ ਲੇਖ-ਖੀਰੀਆਂ ਲਗਾ ਗੀਓਂ ਦੁਆਰਾ ਗੀਓਂ।" (115). "Pooran and Loona have taken the form folk music, bed time stories and legends, and [are] still prominent components of the Punjabi culture and everyday life." Arguably, the fact that Batalvi decided to rework a very popular ancient legend is why Loona is considered a classic in modern Punjabi literature: it is simultaneously very old, and very new. During the wave of

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23 Pooran Bhagat means (holy person) and can also mean “whole devotee” which alludes to an incident Pooran faces in which his limbs are cut off and later restored to him. The name of one of the central characters in the legend is named Pooran which may also be represented as Puran in this thesis.

24 Batalvi’s version of Loona is presented as a verse play divided into eight acts.

25 All translations by Parvinder Dhariwal unless otherwise noted.
decolonization, Batalvi dared to deconstruct a pillar of traditional Punjabi literature and
reconstruct it in a way that would, in his view, revolutionize Indian society for the better.

One of the most popular versions of this tale was written by the *sufi* poet Qadar Yaar in
the nineteenth century. According to B.M. Bhalla, "Qadar Yaar’s narration is an affirmation of
social cohesion, stability and continuity. It reflects the values of its historical epoch in terms of
caste, class and gender" (Bhalla, 3 July 2012). In Qadar Yaar’s version of the legend, a King
from *Sialkot* (name of a city in Punjab) named Salvaan is married to Ichharan and they have a
son named Pooran. Salvaan later also marries a girl named Loona, who is young enough to be his
daughter. After Pooran’s birth astrologists warned the parents that they must not look at the child
until he was twelve years old, as Pooran is considered to be inauspicious for his father. Thus,
Pooran is kept isolated and then returns home after his father’s second marriage. Loona is
attracted to her handsome stepson, who is of the same age she is, and tries to form an intimate
relationship with him. However, Pooran refuses all advances made by Loona and claims that
because she is his stepmother it is wrong of her to behave in such a manner. After being rejected
by Pooran, Loona becomes infuriated by her circumstances and she tells Salvaan that Pooran
tried to seduce her. He believes her and punishes Pooran by having his arms and legs cut off and
thrown in to a well. Later in this story Pooran is saved by a Guru with spiritual powers, who
gives him the name of *Pooran Bhagat.* As Pankaj Singh notes, "[i]n his composition *Kissa* Puran Bhagat, Kadar marginalizes Puran’s mother Ichhran, and maligns his stepmother Luna as

In some quotations cited, Qadar yaar’s name will also be rendered as “Kadar yaar.”

In some quotations the name Ichharan is represented as Ichharan.

Summary of Qadar Yaar’s traditional version of the legend is derived from Pankaj Singh: Pankaj Singh. *Re-
Presenting Woman: Tradition, Legend and Panjabi Drama.*

*Kissa* written as *qissa* is a form of Punjabi storytelling. *Qissa* is the singular, *qisse* the plural.
a promiscuous woman who sought the love of her 'son' and who was responsible for his mutilation" (111).

While there are numerous qisse or pre-modern story traditions whose female characters can be seen as influencing Batalvi’s protagonist Loona, Heer, from the story of the star-crossed lovers, Heer-Ranjha\(^{30}\), provides perhaps the most striking parallel. There are many different versions of Heer, but Waris Shah’s rendition is one of the most prominent. In this tale, a young woman called Heer falls in love with a man of a lower social status named Ranjha. The two are unable to unite as Heer’s family opposes her decision to marry a man who is of a lower social status than her. Heer is eventually married off to another man, but she never accepts the marriage as she wishes to remain faithful to Ranjha. It is within this text that the reader is introduced to a heroine "who is removed from the chaste world with which women were traditionally associated and transform[ed] into a sexual being" (Deol 15). As one who dared to express her desire towards a male, Heer is described in a very sensual manner and she embraces her sexuality. Yet, at the same time, Heer’s parents "desire to conrol her sexuality" (Mir 140). In defiance she demands from not only her parents but also the qazi (judge) her right to have her desires fulfilled. Farina Mir notes that "women in the [Heer-Ranjha] texts behave in ways that confound the prescribed gendered norms of the time, and provide an opening for rethinking patriarchy and gender relations in late colonial Punjab" (149). Therefore, even though Heer’s needs and wants remain unfulfilled, they are voiced. For example, Heer’s behaviour is portrayed in the qissa as one that brings dishonour to her family, yet, there are numerous dialogues within the qissa in which Heer speaks out against "the social [and religious] structures that stand between her and

\(^{30}\) Heer-Ranjha the name of a famous Punjabi qissa, Heer is the name of the female character and Ranjha is the name of the male character.
Ranjha" (Mir 140). Mir notes however that qisse such as Heer-Ranjha "do not fit a simple binary between male patriarchy and female resistance power. Rather, these texts portray a world where the role and proper comportment of women was being debated and negotiated" (148, 149).

This leads me to Batlavi’s Loona in which he highlights how the choices of women were being controlled to deny them of their sexuality, Batlavi—as a modern Punjabi author, writing in a different time—takes his Loona one step further than Waris Shah takes his Heer, as his heroine Loona not only reacts against the social boundaries that were imposed on her, but also dares to act upon her beliefs. In the introduction of Loona, Batalvi acknowledges that his version of this legend is much like Qadar Yaar’s version:

मैं निम्न वचन कीं लिखते धरती ढोर से भागने दे ती किलेर 'ते किलेर' ही पुरन दे रंग देख लटेर महादेर दीर तीर तै, निम्न निम्न फिदेर वचन भागल तसी लगाही दै। तुरन निम्न निम्न फिदेर वचन धी मझुड़ी लेतर ही तसी सी...वधों वधों विन्दुर वर्धात ची दै, ते धावत ही टुंडी रहू, मिसब भंडा तै उं मात ते सभें ही मेंढ रह। (Batalvi 4).

I have based this story on the qissa of Pooran Bhagat and have only used it up until Pooran’s hands and feet are cut off. After this the story the story seems fanciful. Also, after this I had no need for the story...The story is absolutely Qadar Yaar’s thus the characters are the same too. The only change is that the story is set in today’s world and mode of thinking.

Yet, in order to rework this ancient legend to fit the progressive impulse of twentieth century modern Punjabi literature, there were necessary and inevitable changes that had to be made. One of the most important distinctions between the qissa and Batalvi’s version is title: Batalvi calls his version Loona as opposed to the traditional name of the story, Pooran. This transition in title mirrors the titling of Waris Shah’s qissa Heer. Thus, the fact that Batalvi parts from using the
original title of this legend demonstrates how he wants to bring the attention of his readers to the women in the story as opposed to the men, evoking Waris Shah’s *Heer*, and moving beyond it. As Parmjit Singh notes

Unlike the love legends which at least glorify love between man and woman, in these proclaimed legends of morality positing models which the righteous man must shun. Waris Shah, despite the misogynistic strain in his poetry, celebrates the love between Hir and Ranjha and suggests through their love an allegorical celebration of soul seeking union with God. But in legends of Puran...woman and her love singularly termed evil, a temptation which the ideal man must triumph over to attain perfection and salvation (112).

This is perhaps the greatest challenge that Batalvi faced in his execution of Loona, he not only faced the task of removing the evil connotations associated with Loona’s name, but also needed to portray her love for Pooran in such a favourable light.

3.2: *Loona a heroine?*

Batalvi constructs his female characters in a very different manner from Qadar Yaar, as the women in his poem are allowed to speak and express their most inner feelings, which until now had been neglected. Drawing readerly sympathy for the character of Loona would not have been an easy task; in traditional versions of the legend she is portrayed as "a woman of lust, going against her 'Dharma' (duty) of motherhood. She is a sinner, because she has seductive designs upon her son" (Soza 59). Thus, it would be difficult for an average Punjabi reader accustomed to reading about a character repeatedly chastised for her sensuality to see her in a different light. Perhaps even more troubling is for readers to admit that they can actually sympathize with the plight of Loona. However, this is exactly why Batalvi characterized his Loona in such a manner, as he wanted her to be able to reveal all that had been suppressed and...
allow the reader to understand Loona’s side of the story. Manmohan-Singh emphasizes how this poem is an insight into a women’s soul, her innermost feelings and thoughts, a domain largely neglected within Punjabi literature:

The central character of this book is Loona, more specifically a woman. Therefore, every character that was created is depicted from a woman’s point of view. In Punjabi culture, patriarchy is prevalent. Thus everyday circumstances, events, feelings and emotions are only understood and conveyed from a man’s point of view. However, this book is an exception, in which social, cultural boundaries and the condition of man have been attempted to be understood through a woman’s perspective (Manmohan Singh 119).

Even though Loona’s circumstances, feelings and emotions are being conveyed through Batalvi—a man—he has her voice her opinion by challenging the status quo. Loona in Batalvi’s poem speaks and voices her concerns to the reader. "सलयोगी ती / अंग्र तिरिं रा बेले? / सीघ रा सेरथ तिरिं रा बेले?" (Batalvi 63). "My dear friends / Why should fire not speak? / Why should she not open the lock that seals her lips?" Bajaj defines Batalvi’s usage of the fire metaphor above as: "Loona is a flame in the fire of passion; as a flame, she cannot betray her innate nature to its opposite, fire smothered by marriage to an old man" (119). Loona revolts against the restrictions placed upon women and questions why a woman should remain suppressed and silent; especially when she who has been dealt with intolerable injustice. Batalvi’s characterization of Loona highlights the rejection of traditional ideals that were carved out for women. In fact, it is because Loona’s open rejection against subordination one is able to sympathize with her plight and realize the complications of the traditional roles assigned to women in society.

In the traditional version of the poem Loona’s circumstances lead the conventional reader to perceive her as a villain, but Batalvi challenges the social conventions that consign her to this
role. From the moment Loona’s marriage is arranged with King Salvaan, the reader is given a glimpse of the sacrifices that she is forced to make. Not only does she have to suppress all of her dreams and desires, but she is repeatedly informed that this is the fate of a woman. But Loona does not fit within the standards that society has created for her. While she is sympathetic to her father’s actions and understanding of King Salvaan’s motives, she is overcome with anger. This represents one of the contributions of Batalvi’s work. Gupta has argued that "feminism in modern Indian fiction has been too descriptive and not sufficiently critical. While it has effectively played with the surface, it has not sufficiently provided insight into the deep social and psychological factors which produce the environment in which exploitation of women becomes possible" (301). Batalvi uncovers the causes behind Loona’s misery quite explicitly. Loona’s father thought that by marrying his daughter to a King, he would be securing a future for her that otherwise could not have been provided. Loona makes clear that his decision was not in keeping with her best interests.

King Salvaan may have power over his kingdom, and authority over Icharan, but he is ignorant to the fact he cannot force Loona to love him. Physically Loona is his, but emotionally and mentally Loona’s heart yearns for someone else. Salvaan cannot control her emotions; this poses a threat to the male dominance that up until now had never been questioned within the story. Chowdhry has observed this dynamic as well:

Usually in male renditions of the lustful woman two things stand out. One, the woman is almost invariably married to an old man. Second, she does not have offspring of her own. This certainly suggests that at a certain level, while portraying women’s lustfulness, these male renderings deplore the unequal matches. Yet they fall short of offering them as justifications or offering a sympathetic understanding of female desire (11).
While the glaring age difference between Loona and Salvaan is a point of contention in both the classical and modern version of the story, it is Batalvi who allows for sympathetic treatment of the feelings that Loona has for Pooran, allowing her to verbally express herself and justify her actions. In creating a sympathetic view of women’s desire, Batalvi not only deconstructs traditional modes of thinking, but also attacks society at large for the intolerable circumstances it creates for women. In Batalvi’s poem Loona is used time and time again to highlight this issue as the character cries out to the reader:

My father did me wrong  
He married me to a wilted flower  
Ichara his first wife enjoyed his youth  
I am of Pooran’s age..  
This world is not scandalized
But if Luna desires Puran
Why is she considered worthless by society?
Loona lashes out against the conventional values that society blindly follows and is flabbergasted at the hypocrisy that surrounds her. “Foregrounding Luna’s suffering in age and youth Shiv Kumar questions the system which does not object to this mismatched marriage but raises the sceptre of morality if she longs for fulfilment in a man equal in age and youth” (Pankaj Singh 129). Our society allows Salvaan, who is the same age as Loona’s father, to marry a girl who is in her prime and expect her to live as his loyal wife. However, the thought of Loona pursuing a relationship with Pooran is considered immoral and despicable by society. As Gupta has noted, this provided the paradox that Batalvi tries to highlight: No longer extolled as noble sacrifice or enveloped in an aura of misty romanticism, women’s suffering is...portrayed, especially by women writers, with bleak realism for what is often: an outcome of male egotism, selfishness, and heartlessness (Gupta 300). Loona’s misery from her unequal match to Salvaan "loses its edge in the legendary discourse as it gets embodied in a woman who is portrayed as overly wicked, cruel and lustful and full of vengeance" (Pankaj Singh 132). Batalvi’s Loona denounces all negative connotations associated with her by clearly identifying those responsible for her plight. She distinctly highlights Salvaan’s selfishness and her father’s helplessness as the root causes behind her misery. Loona acts upon the boundaries that trap her.

3.3: Ichara a victim?
At the same time, Ichara, Pooran’s mother is arguably the real victim in the poem. Batalvi left the character of Ichara to act in accordance with the model of the traditional ideal Indian women, who like a helpless victim remains suffocated by everyone in her life. Manmohan-Singh describes the plight of Ichara as that of a women who has never questioned her right to do anything, instead she blindly walks on the path that her husband and society has carved for her:
"Ichara is a woman whose life is defined by obliging to the males in her life while suppressing her own desires." Ichara, unlike Loona, does not speak out against the injustice that suffocates her. Ichara accepts that this the way of the world and she must live within its accord. She silently suffers the consequences of her husband’s decisions, but never dares to label him as the root cause of her problems. Ichara believes that:

Ichara is deeply wounded, but incapable of acting upon her emotions. From her statements it seems as though she has reached a stage of acceptance, where she has comes to terms with her fate and does not have the will to fight against the oppression in her life. "Ichara hovers
between the given fate of women and her own sense of injured self-respect, which leads to poignant expressions of unresolved suffering” (Pankaj Singh 132). This is traditionally the model that is held up for women: to endure. Moreover, instead of clearly outlining her own suffering and pain, she is quite general with her language. She refers to all women when speaking of her own misery and she believes that all the injustice in her life is due to the fact that she is a woman. Her emotional reaction is circumscribed, demonstrating how, as Cynthia Wolff argues while discussing stereotypical formations of women employed by men in European literature that:

The proper emotional sphere for women was rigidly limited..A woman could suffer; she could feel love (especially unrequited or betrayed lover), but seldom sexual passion; she could feel sympathy for others.. but she was portrayed as incapable of moral outrage...more strikingly, she was never permitted to feel anger; the absence of rage in these otherwise highly emotional women is truly striking (211).

Similar connections can be made to Punjabi literature, and particularly this text, as the only emotion that does surface for Ichara is her love for Pooran. This is why she cannot detach herself from her husband Salvaan whom she has left behind; arguably the only connection that she had to him and continues to have is through her son Pooran.

At the same time, Batalvi gives Ichara an opportunity to speak and express her woes to her maid. Ichara conveys a sense of acceptance with the situations that she facing.

बित्राणे देम चिंताँ
पी घड़कणे हे
सिंचे खेळतं हू चर्चां ती
माच बेटी तः
ढेवो तुम्चं-वृंबं
Where did you marry your daughter father
Where people do not care for anyone’s pain
Where women endure the lowest hell
In which they are given no more respect than a shoe

Ichara is fully aware of the injustice that has been imposed on her, but she has learned to live with it, as she has never had the ability to make her own decisions or determine her own rights.

3.4: Ichara, Loona, and the space for action

Ichara is stuck in the grasp of the ideals that have constructed for her, yet, because in Batalvi’s version she returns to her maternal home, the reader is given a glimpse into the possibilities of what even the idealized woman is capable of doing. In the introduction of Loona, Batalvi writes that:

I state that Ichara is the daughter of a noble king. She returns to maternal home after the incident as she feels responsible. The truth of life always tell us that any proud wife never anticipates that during her lifetime or after she has died that the love her husband has for her should be shared with another woman.
Ichara’s choice to leave Salvaan’s kingdom brings to the surface another critical point: in the traditional tale the reader easily identifies with Ichara’s predicament as it is often echoed in society. However, Batalvi’s version forces the reader to think about why a woman who has been denied the love of her husband should have to live her entire life still abiding to his wants and needs. Ichara while speaking to her servant Goli states,

दिव ठूँढ़ बैठे,
बुना धड़ी घुमा
ती मैं बिंद बैठा
के मैं बिंद मारा
मैंंं बेटी ही,
उप ता अतिम ती
पुलिङ बैठ बैठे,
भुजां बेलिनगड़ तुँ
दिव ही बेलिटे घाट ता तीत्र सापे
पीला,
आठ वी बठल ती दिनहँस‘े रे
पीला बैठे ते घड़े,
ती मेंछ अपे?
(Batalvi 90).

One my son has been taken away from me
Second, I have lost my husband.

Oh what
And where should I go
No road called out to me
Returning home Goli, this seems wrong
Daughters
Have no place in homes they have left behind
Since when have parents accepted daughters who leave the homes of their husbands?
Therefore, even though Batalvi’s decision to send Ichara back home was made to portray her as a strong woman who denounced the immoral behaviour of her husband, she was still left feeling responsible for his actions. Ichara continues to pity herself and become even more subordinated, which defeats the purpose of her making such a bold move in the first place.

Loona on the other hand does fight back. In traditional versions of this story, Loona claims to her husband that his son lusted after her; this results in Pooran's punishment by his father. This is portrayed as an evil act, as a form of vengeance. Yet, it is also clear that otherwise her own life would have been in danger. Therefore, in order to save herself Loona metes out vengeance on Pooran. This revenge does not bring about any significant change in her life, but it does highlight the fact that Loona—a woman—had the courage to do something to save herself. Manmohan-Singh suggests why this is possible: "Loona is the daughter of a low class family. For this reason, society does not regulate the standard which she is supposed to live according to the same way as it does for Ichara. Ichara’s suffering is killing the woman within her" (Manmohan Singh 118). Loona is from a low caste, which means that traditional norms often associate her with being an immoral woman. Ichara—an upper class Indian women—cannot defy norms for women without facing scrutiny about bringing shame to her upper class status. This is why Ichara is not shocked by the constraints that she has to live within; she knows what it
is expected of her, and feels responsible for it. While Ichara is upset that her husband Salvaan has abandoned her, she does not feel any resentment towards him. Contrarily, Ichara feels that Salvaan has the right to such promiscuous behaviour for he is a man, a king. This is why she states: "हिंदु लड़का बड़ूबी यह वीर अभे निवृत्ति तथा तर बङ्ग भिङ्ग नंदी" (Batalvi 85). "What can a women who Lack the ability to fulfill her husband’s desires say?" Ichara blames herself for not being able to live up to the standard that is expected of her. She feels that if she had been a better wife then she would not have to face such circumstances. But, what she fails to realize is that Salvaan never sought to replace his wife, the mother of his son Pooran; instead he wanted someone who could satisfy his lust. This becomes evident in the beginning of the play when Salvaan reminisces about the birthday celebration that took place for his friend Raja (King) Verman. It was here that Loona the most beautiful girl from Chamba\(^{31}\) was asked to do pujaa (prayers) for Raja Verman’s long life. Salvaan tells Raja Verman his wish to marry Loona, but Verman expresses his disapproval as she is from a low caste and is only sixteen years old; whereas Salvaan is an old man, an invalid. Salvaan attempts to rationalize his decision by describing the distance between his first wife Ichara and him:

### मैं से पूर्व दिवज्ञी
### देशांतरुपती मी
### भाग बेंकुले दे चूंगे
### मेवे दहरी मी
### ध्रुव दी मां दिग्द्रजं
### धुप-दिशाती मी

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\(^{31}\) Loona’s maternal residence was in the town of Chamba
The sun I married
Was colourless
The fire from Chaudal’s [Ichara’s father] hearth
Was lacking affection
Pooran’s mother Ichara
Did not have beauty
Yet the snake of fire [Ichara]
In my house was able reproduce
I was the sun
But I have lived a life full of darkness
The snake of fire never inhaled the fragrance
From my pain

From the snake of fire’s womb I found sunshine

But that sunshine never met with me.

Salvaan married Ichara with the hope that she would make him content; yet, Ichara did not live up to his expectations. The two of them shared a loveless marriage; nevertheless, they produced a child together, but never had the chance to raise him. Salvaan and Ichara continued to live together, while their hearts grew further apart. Thus, Salvaan tells his friend that "after suffering from an unsatisfactory marriage for so many years, he deserves this one indulgence [Loona]"

(Bajaj 116).

She has long black hair

Fragile limbs

She is fair in color

White pearls for teeth

Loona!
Salvaan’s detailed physical description of Loona, one that he concocted after seeing her just once hints at the kind of companionship that he was seeking in his old age. Salvaan was fully aware that he had nothing in common with her, Loona, he was so overcome with lust that caste, age, and all other disparities between them did not matter. Distance is what broke Salvaan's first marriage, but he wants to disregard all of the differences that create distance between Loona and himself, and longs to be near her. His desire requires the sacrifice of hers.

3.5: Conclusion: The politics of desire

Batalvi through his characterization of the figure of Loona attempts to portray the denial of women’s sexuality and create an awakening in the reader of the existence and legitimacy of this desire, as Manmohan-Singh notes: "Loona’s revolutionary attitude awakens women. She brings to the forefront new questions about women being lured by material wealth in comparison to wanting a meaningful relationship with someone who is worthy of their youth" (124).

This awakening is revealed when Loona expresses her discontent at being married to a King. Loona has no interest in material wealth or even the security of a comfortable life, instead she seeks a more meaningful relationship, one that is worthy of her innocence, her youth. Loona is not physically attracted to Salvaan, but she does desire Pooran. Traditionally this attraction was labelled as lust and its connection to motherhood is what made Loona a villain (Chowdhry 14). Loona is Pooran’s stepmother; therefore, there are certain social expectations that she is crossing when expressing her desire towards him. As Bajaj notes Loona resists the maternal bond that she is being forced to be bound to Pooran by; "[i]f [Loona] cannot be a wife to her son's father, how can she accept the filial bonds of the father's son as sacred?" (118). Batalvi in his rendition has given the attraction that exists between Loona and Pooran a more plausible and sympathetic depiction. When Loona sees Pooran her suppressed youthful desires are awakened and she has no control over them. Batalvi emphasises that Loona’s feelings are natural for a girl
of her age. Pooran has the ability to give her the meaningful life that she, in her youth, is seeking. Therefore, while her desire to engage in a relationship with her stepson was viewed as a sin according to societal norms, this was not the case for Batalvi who understood that Loona never accepted Pooran as her son.

Batalvi’s version of this story ends with Pooran’s death, yet, "he is not presented as a hero, the protagonist here is Loona...his death cannot create tragic emotions" (Bhalla, 3 July 2012.). Batalvi states:

I have sympathized with the plight of the suffering women by blowing on [the flames of] her wounds to reduce her pain or perhaps increase it. But I have blown these puffs of sympathy from within those folds of my heart in where the female inside me sleeps, where the man inside me sleeps. Salvaan still exists in today’s world and even today Loona is not understood as being innocent. The only changes that occurred are in names and dates.

Batalvi in his Loona, attempts to free this mislabelled woman from traditional interpretations of her character and attack all negative associations that belittle her. Moreover, Batalvi also highlights through his quote that the sympathy that he feels for Loona emerges from the “inner woman” that resides within him, a male. The sympathy that Batalvi feels is expressed through the construction of a woman who takes on the role of Loona, a heroine who boldly demands that
her sexuality to be perceived as desire not lust. But Balalvi’s powerful heroine is executed through the comfortable position that men hold in society, which further complicated the situation.

In an attempt to relieve Ichara and Loona from their suffering, Batalvi relies upon stereotypes regarding the "types" of women in his characterization of both Loona and Ichara. The question remains who is the protagonist of Batlavi’s poem? Is there room for a protagonist in this story? Ultimately, Loona does not manage to rectify her circumstances in any significant way. Is she, then, a heroine? Salvaan at the end of the story is still married to two women, and Loona had to victimize Pooran in order to save herself, also a victim. She is not able to overcome social conventions and fulfill her love for Pooran. This presents a key question regarding the subjective agency of Loona and Ichara: what can Loona and Ichara do to improve their situations? They can do many things, but to what end. Bhalla argues that "Loona questions old conventions but she behaves most irresponsibly towards Pooran and does not dare to say even a word to Salvaan. She has no courage" (Bhalla, 3 July 2012.). Loona’s powerful outbursts are nothing but empty words that have no effect on those around her. Even though she made a radical decision in being responsible for the death of Pooran, her character still does not seem to have made any progress. This forces the reader to realize that there is no space to act upon or change intolerable situations that women have to endure. This can be seen in the quote below, which shows how Loona herself was fully aware that she would be labelled by society regardless of whether or not society ever understood her plight.

\[ \text{नेम्नन्द्र-निर्माण लड़ी} \]
With this blame
His existence will get flowers
Which will glorify the earth
For many generations to come.
Whenever people will sit together
The purity of Pooran’s flower
Will be discussed by them
They will swear at Loona
They will embrace Pooran
And the fragrance of his flower
Will be spread to everyone
Perhaps with any Salvaan
These people will not marry a Loona
No daughter like me
Will have her desires trampled upon
Perhaps a heart wound
In a boy like Pooran will not kill him
As Pankaj Singh states "it is amazing that neither Salwan’s credulity nor his cruelty has become proverbial in Panjabi culture...But surprisingly it is not the King’s action which is condemned but singularly Luna’s lie" (120). Ultimately, it is this lie that Batalvi seeks to define more accurately as a plea to society, who denies Loona the space to live as a sixteen year old girl, who is able to desire, think and control her own destiny. Bajaj describes Loona’s final decision of ruining Pooran as a consequence of the flame that exists within her:

   Hence, [Loona] burns as fire must, and in her burning burns the one she loves and eventually herself as well. Her motives of destroying Puran are complex, for she seeks not so much to destroy him as to glorify him and destroy herself. Hence, in this process, we see Loona killing Puran only to make him live; in living on, she kills herself. Posterity will be the judge (119).

As writer Surjit Singh Kewal states, this is exactly what Batalvi wanted: to open the eyes of society towards the unjust suffering that women have to endure. He did not want the reader to
pity the characters, but instead to identify with their plight and condemn the social ills that exist even today (Kewal 25). Batalvi through his characterization of Loona attempts to portray the denial of women’s sexuality. Problematically, this portrayal of women’s desire is presented in a male-dominated, public venue, the world of modern Punjabi literature. This world excludes women the right to express their desire. This is why the poem ends with Loona crying and silenced—not gloating—over Pooran’s body: "ਪੁਰਨ ਦੀ ਉੱਖਥਾਈ ਲੇਖ ਦੇ ਮਿਲੁਣੇ ਬੇਠੀ ਭੁੱਚੀ ਦੇ ਨੇਂਚ ਬੇਠੀ ਬੇਠੀ ਨਾਂਘੀ ਹੈ" (Batalvi 196). "Near Pooran’s body sitting at his head Loona has her hand on her mouth and cries." The reader sees in poignant terms the continuing of reality of continuing the silencing of women’s voices. There is no room in this literature, in this world, for legitimate female desire. In this final scene, Loona places her hand on her mouth to emphasize her vulnerability as a woman in the male-dominated society that surrounds and suffocates her. Loona once again is mute.
Conclusion

All three of the writers in this thesis, each in their own way, hoped to engage in contemporary struggles that Indian women confronted. These writers used the powerful medium of literature to act as a voice for all those who were unable to speak or act for themselves. As Gupta states:

"For all its limitations, feminism remains one of the most significant developments in modern Indian fiction. It has brought about an insistent, searching revaluation of the role and status of women in society and thus may justly be considered an exciting and innovative approach which has vitalized and enriched Indian fiction of recent years in many, many ways (301)."

Producing literature that sparked debate and controversies brought about much-needed attention to issues surrounding women. However, none of these writers succeed in freeing their heroines from the strong cultural and societal pressures that subordinate these women. BVS through the character of Sundri advocates for gender equality by incorporating her into the Khalsa brotherhood. However, instead of being accommodated, Sundri is forced to sacrifice her sexuality and adhere to a new set of gendered norms. Conversely, Preetlari openly allows his heroine Prabha to express her desire and continues to defend her on her journey for acceptance. However, in the later-written introduction to his novel, Preetlari abandons his heroine and denies her the very rights that he advocated for in his novel. Finally, Batlavi emerges on the literary scene with an approach that differs from BVS and Preetlari in the sense that his verse play concentrates on attaining justice for a once condemned evil vamp, who through his work is transformed into a protagonist. Batalvi defends the right of his heroine Loona to express her sexuality right from the beginning of the play to the end. "यदि भविष्य में देख भी खराबी तो रहा भी देख भी खराबी देख भविष्य" (Batlavi 76). "In every lover’s image [sexual being] exists a mother and in every mother’s image exists a lover [sexual being]."
He does not detach Loona from her sexuality at any point in the play, which further highlights the manner in which women are usually defined as being entities who cannot be viewed sexual beings; they can only be mothers, sisters, or wives. Yet, in the end, the women in his verse-play remain trapped. Therefore, it is through the last chapter of this work that one reaches an unavoidable truth; alternate subjective visions that are formed for these women, like the forbidden notion of women’s desire presented outside of the paradigm of lust, can only be understood as a vision. There is no room in this world or in the male dominated public venue of Punjabi literature for the actual acceptance of such representations.

The last chapter of the thesis ends with Batalvi’s Loona written in 1965. As noted in the introduction, even recent literature contemplates questions surrounding women’s desire and has left the matter unresolved. Yet, the genuine attempts made by BVS, Preetlari and Batalivi to sympathize with the plight of their heroine’s will be revered in Punjabi literature for generations to come.
Works Cited


