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The Voiceless Woman: A Study in Dalip Kaur Tiwana's *A Journey on Bare Feet*

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Abstract:

The term 'Subaltern' incorporates the entire people that are subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender and rank, or in any other way. It is the subject position that defines the subalternity. When it operates in terms of class, caste and gender, it is more psychological than physical. This paper endeavours to highlight the voiceless marginalized women in Dalip Kaur Tiwana's autobiography *A Journey on Bare Feet*, (a translation from the original Punjabi text, *Nange Pairan da Safar*) rendered into English by Jai Ratan.

Dalip Kaur Tiwana is a sensitive and prolific Punjabi writer who has given a new approach and perspective for the study of social reality of crucial issues concerning women. The translation of her works into English, besides rendering much larger readership, gives an insight into the deeper psychological understandings of the peripheral existence of women in Punjab. Tiwana's purpose is to explore and set out the extent to which a society has established the discriminative order of caste, class and gender. She analyzes these issues of class, caste and gender which, when viewed together, offer a comprehensive précis of the feminist work undertaken to date to explain men's violence against women in a society. Tiwana posits that women who are toiling masses are leading their life as beasts of burden and as victims of dominant caste onslaught. It is but natural that they are mute.

The sniffles, sobs, loneliness, silence, resignation and neglect marks the lives of subaltern an everyday reality of struggling with the hegemonic power structures. They have 'no say' in the society they live in and so helplessly suffer and get marginal place or no place at all in the history and culture of which they are the essential part as a human being.

Keywords: Silence, Subjectivity, Stereotypes, Class, Caste and Gender.

Dalip Kaur Tiwana, winner of Sahitya Akademi Award, is a sensitive and prolific Punjabi writer who has given a new approach and perspective for the study of social reality of crucial issues concerning women. Her purpose is to set out the extent to which a society has established the discriminative order of caste, class and gender. She analyzes these issues of class, caste and gender which, when viewed together, offer a comprehensive précis of the feminist work undertaken to date to explain men's violence against women in a society.

Tiwana's feminist framework unfolds the subjective position of the voiceless and marginalized women in her works. She posits that women who are toiling masses are leading their life as beasts of burden and as victims of dominant caste onslaught. It is but natural that they are mute.

Admittedly, one gets realistic and authentic glimpses of the lives of women through the creative writings of Tiwana, particularly through her autobiographical work, namely *A Journey on Bare Feet* which is a historical memoir. She says in *A Journey on Bare Feet*, "It is a history, history of those who have borne it (on their bodies) long before, it is written on the pages of history. This autobiography is dedicated in remembrance to those who have endured history on themselves" (Translation mine from the original Punjabi text, *Nange Pairan da Safar*). Even if the narrative depicts Tiwana's life history, yet it is a history of Punjabi culture, rituals and beliefs as well. Although Tiwana's account is essentially personal, her struggle is the struggle of every woman, 'a shared concern'. Several concerns of women such as dowry, women's education, the general preference for sons and status of women form an integral part of *A Journey on Bare Feet*. Tiwana has truthfully delineated realistic and authentic accounts of women, their suppression, humiliation, sufferings, dilemmas and exploitation.

Dalip Kaur Tiwana has written this autobiography in a stream of consciousness technique where mechanical time span of past, present and future does not work; instead various time spans (Past, present and Future) overlap one another in a flash back technique. *A Journey on Bare Feet* consists of twenty seven chapters without specifying any date and year. Based on its content, this autobiography precisely recounts Tiwana's life from 1935-1980. The time span of forty five years of Tiwana's life is beautifully woven in this work.

Though the entire Punjab is reflected in this narrative, nevertheless, she specifically focuses on the areas of the Malwa and Majha that lie around and below the Sutlej. She writes about the people there, their fates and their fortunes in their own Punjabi Malwa dialect. She has captured their spirit through a women's sensibility which gives a different dimension and colouring to her writing.

Born on 4th May in 1935, Dalip Kaur Tiwana in *A Journey on Bare Feet* recounts her birth in a small village of Rabbon in Ludhiana district of Punjab where she is brought up in a wealthy traditional family of prosperous zamindars. It was the time of pre-independence, there were several princely states in India. Punjab was one such, the then princely state of India which Tiwana describes in this autobiographical account, Tiwana in the backdrop of colonial times highlights the working of zamindari system in the Punjab province. She takes notice of the richly adorned life of Maharaja of Patiala and his Ranis on her visit to Motibagh Mahal with her Aunt (younger Buaji), where in Fort Mubarika and Lila Bhawan, Ranis and Maharanis lived, all decked up nicely with diamonds, pure silk suits and attendants all around.

In her autobiography *A Journey on Bare Feet*, Tiwana first introduces us to her meek-looking, poor and humble grandmother. Tiwana's grandmother was a simple woman from a Jatt family, married to a rich man, Hazura Singh. Living in a family of zamindars of great

repute, her grandmother had never been accustomed to the lifestyle of opulence and grandeur of this royal family. All the time engrossed in different types of superstitions and beliefs; of sins and previous life, of birth and rebirth, of redemption and reincarnation, her grandmother taught Tiwana to live in fear of the Almighty and “his secret dispensation” (3). Her grandmother had lived her life as a stereotyped image of the silent, suffering woman in a village patriarchy. Her marginalized location in an oppressive, caste-ridden feudalistic society was not unknown to her. Every now and then she was reminded of her peripheral existence in that very house of zamindars. Tiwana described the extent of her grandmother’s internalization of her inferior position in a society she lived in by narrating an instance. She described when Tiwana’s grandfather gave a sum of hundred rupees to his wife while going to Nabha, the whole of the night her grandmother could not asleep for fear of losing the money. All the time she kept worrying, “What if I lose it? My parents are in no position to make good the loss” (3). Tiwana, on seeing the disturbed state of her grandmother suggested her to spend the money on daily items. Wondering at Tiwana’s suggestion her grandmother said to Tiwana, “What a large heart you have! That’s because you belong to an aristocratic family” (3). Her grandmother knew that she could not even think of spending such a big amount at a go. Tiwana in the narrative traces the dichotomy between classes and its fallout in shaping the psyche of the subalterns into pushing them to internalize their secondary stance in the society. Likewise, Tiwana’s grandmother’s alienated stance belonging to lower strata showcases her subdued position in an elite social milieu.

Tiwana has great regard for her grandmother whose unconditional love and preaching has made Tiwana what she is today. Her sense of gratitude for her grandmother lies at the core of her heart, which she acknowledges in these words: “When I was very small, my grandmother had breast-fed me. Surprisingly, her breasts had filled with milk. I was too young to know why my grandmother had nursed me in place of my mother.”(2).

Another very important character in this narrative is Tiwana’s mother, Chand Kaur. Chand Kaur was a daughter of a poor peasant Hira Singh. Chand Kaur’s mother, Har Kaur was a pious woman who died at a young age leaving behind her seven years old daughter, Chand Kaur and two sons. After her death, Hira Singh and Sadhu Baba Bhagwandas (Har Kaur’s foster brother) looked after the children with great care. Baba Bhagwandas left no stone unturned in bringing them up as his own children. He made Chand Kaur memorize “five scriptures, the sayings of the saints and the *Granth Saheb* with all its commentaries.”(26) His religious discourses too have enlightened her mind which, henceforth, had made her a devotee like her mother, Har Kaur. His affinity for the family was fathomless. It was only he who accompanied Hira Singh to Tiwana’s family with an offer of Chand Kaur’s marriage to their son, Kaka Singh.

In Journey on Bare Feet Tiwana also narrates her mother’s journey in Rabbonwalli family of zamindars. Chand Kaur, was a dark complexioned and an ill-fated woman. She was a neglected woman in the family because she had not given birth to any son, an heir to carry on the lineage of zamindars. She had consecutively given birth to three daughters in a marriage of five years. Besides being cooped up and suffered at the hands of her family members, she had also witnessed the separation from her own daughters, living under one

roof. For their degree of consanguinity lies more with the paternal, aristocratic family, she had no right either to love or show fondness for them. Her coloured skin, poor background and being a mother of daughters only serve the chief reasons of her plight in 'Rabbonwalli Family'.

Hailing from a poor class, Chand Kaur had also suffered at the hands of zamindari society, where she was forced to bear children till the inclination for a son was realized. In her essay 'Woman as Other' in *Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir aptly points out, "Woman is womb... We are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women... she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other." In the narrative, Chand Kaur was treated no less than a 'sex' and 'other'. Her physical exploitation on the pretext of bearing a male progeny is reiterative of the oppressive patriarchal structure.

Preference for a son seems the only reason to perform a marriage in a patriarchal/racial society. Should a woman fail to oblige or live up to the desired standard of the patriarchal society, she is doomed to give grounds for her existence – her sexuality, her womanhood and most of all her identity as constructed by the society. Any failure in regard to society's norms is highly unacceptable. When a third daughter was born to Chand Kaur, almost everyone in the house rebuked her. Tiwana's grandmother reprimanded her daughter-in-law – "What good are you if you cannot give us a son" (17) or 'Oh God it's our bad luck that you have fallen to our lot. That bride of peepal tree house took no time in giving birth to two sons in quick succession. A lucky family indeed! And you" (17). Tiwana's father also threatened to cut his wife (Chand Kaur) into pieces for giving him this sad news of the birth of a third daughter.

On seeing the situation worsen Tiwana's grandfather consulted a Purohitji and asked him to find out some way by suggesting some ritual so that his daughter-in-law could bear a son. He was worried over the spate of girls born into the family. Grandfather also wanted to know if the same wife will bear a son or will his son have to marry a second time. In those days second marriage was not a new phenomenon, it was a common practice. This is borne out by the elder aunt's (Gulab Kaur's co-wife) remark when she said, "Show me a Sardar who has less than four wives" (8). Connotatively, here the narrative strongly hints at objectification of women where they are considered as belongings, like things. Chand Kaur's exploitation on the basis of caste, class, race and gender also proved the fact that she was an object to be used and discarded.

Tiwana recapitulates those times when polygamy was rampant in India. She brings forth men's oppression while narrating her aunt (buaji), Gulab Kaur's story who had been married for quite some time but did not have any child. Gulab Kaur is the second wife of Tiwana's uncle (fufarji), General Sardar Tara Singh Sidhu, the Superintendent of Police at Patiala. He had married again in the hope of getting an heir, but the second marriage also proved fruitless. Gulab Kaur pleaded before her parents to send Dalip Kaur Tiwana (Deep) with them so that her husband's mind of marrying a third time could be changed.

On Gulab Kaur's request Tiwana was sent away to live with her aunt. Tiwana were three sisters, her elder aunt (fuffarji's first wife) said to Tiwana's grandfather, "Now that you have two daughters, we shall keep Deep" (8). At this point, Chand Kaur reconciled to her fate when no one asked her consent in sending away her daughter to someone else. Tiwana described her mother's love galore in an overwhelming tale of their separation, "She hugged me, stroked my head, my face, my arms and kissed me on my cheeks. Then suddenly burst into tears...Don't forget me. Tell your grandfather that you don't want to go" (6). Going away of Tiwana was not an insignificant matter for the family. Tiwana's grandfather too with a heavy heart had taken this decision, first to save his daughter's (Gulab Kaur) marriage and second for Tiwana's better prospects. He said with moist eyes, "Sons take her away, if you must. But look after her well. She is more precious to us than seven sons. Put her in a school. I'll pay for her education for a year, to start with" (7). Tiwana shows how these human relations get entangled in this universe and behave in regard to one-another's interest.

Tiwana's grandmother had always prayed under her breath for a grandson to be born whose light she should be able to see in her lifetime. Tiwana's father was a drunkard and this was also a cause of concern for the family. They wanted a son so that the property could be given to him. Once again the discrimination between a son and a daughter in legal affairs is highlighted. Tiwana and her two sisters could not have a rightful share in their father's property. The birth of a son was therefore necessary. Emphasizing on the importance of a male child in a socio-cultural fabric, Jaiwanti Dimri in *Images and Representation of the Rural Women* appropriately writes, "In a superior social space in a patriarchal setup where reproduction for women is an imperative (and), the reproduction of male progeny is a necessity" (242).

It was after many years of prayers that a son after five daughters was born in their family. Tiwana at last had a brother. He was born on a Thursday (Veervar in Punjabi) so, he was named Verendra Singh. On this auspicious occasion, Bishan Purohit performed many rituals. Grandmother lavishly distributed wheat and gur (jaggery) among the poor. Many other gifts were also doled out like phulkaris, dopatta, thick cotton bed sheets, hard cash and buffaloes among the people of the village. Bishan Purohit also predicted that the child would be long-lived, wealthy and influential. Tiwana's grandmother was anxious to know whether he would lead a normal life or follow in his father's footsteps, to which Purohitji replied to her contentment and said, "He has taken after her mother's family... He will prove a lucky boy." (84)

At this juncture, Tiwana's mother, Chand Kaur, who was doomed otherwise, was given some respect once the son was born to her. The result of Chand Kaur's penance has stood her in good stead. In a feudalistic society, giving birth to a son means a lot for the family but it does not mean woman's liberation in any way. At the most, it implies that Chand Kaur is now free of indictable blame of bearing a son.

Tiwana's preoccupation with women's sensibility, gender practices, and identities have proceeded to articulate and demand contemplation on part of the society's code of conduct. Tiwana records in her autobiography another problem usually faced by the girls in our

society. Tiwana recalls the time when her marriage was settled. When a month was left for the wedding, the parents of the boy broke off the engagement. In Tiwana's house the preparation for the marriage had started on a hectic note. In the book *Children and literature* by Shubha Tiwari, Alka Saxena in chapter *Depiction of Childhood in the Autobiographies of Indian Women Writers* says, "Amidst such joyous atmosphere when the proposal was called off, the family was left astounded. The social stigma that a daughter in the family had been rejected was upper most in the minds of all at home."(55)

In *Journey on Bare Feet*, Tiwana's elder buaji, Gulab Kaur said, "People would wonder why they had rejected a daughter of their (Rabbonwali) family."(73) or People will talk. It will bring us bad name." (74). When the proposal was called off, Tiwana's self confidence was shattered, comments and taunts only added her disappointment. Sometimes, she would stand before the mirror and had doubts over her looks and appearance. She wondered, wasn't she a good girl. Why did they accuse her of no-character girl? The rejection of Tiwana for marriage after it had been settled was a very serious matter because it could affect the prospects of Tiwana's sisters as well. When Samrala aunt (Tiwana's younger buaji, Baldev Kaur) came to know about the news she came rushing to Patiala again with her proposal (which once Tiwana's grandfather had refused) and started insinuating the whole affair with an eye to fix up the proposal of Tiwana's marriage with her sister-in-law's son. She spoke in such a sarcastic tone, "What belongs to the garbage dump must ultimately find a place there. Girls can't live in their parent's homes all their lives. They must go where they belong. Here's a good opportunity coming your way. Of course, you can try in other place. Nobody can stop you from doing that. But they would all insinuate that she is a once rejected girl, you may find yourself at a dead end" (89). Her talks even indicated a reference to dowry while covering up all the points, "Whatever you want to give, you can put it in girls' name" (79).

In Tiwana's autobiography the familiar issues of gender discrimination are acutely felt. The psychological trauma that a girl undergoes after her marriage is called off and the social reaction to such incidents is genuinely expressed. Tiwana recalled when the proposal of marriage brought by her younger buaji, Baldev Kaur was accepted by all. Her aunt (Baldev Kaur) took no time in finalizing the marriage date. At this point, Tiwana revealed her mind in this way, "They asked me nothing, told me nothing. I felt lost and forlorn in the melee, marked by the din and hubbub of a country fair. After school, I went straight to my room and read. Lost in the world of fiction I would soon forget the real world around me." (98) Tiwana took four pheras (four rounds called *Lavan* in Punjabi) around Guru Granth Sahib and then departed to her in-laws house, within few days. Tiwana was just in eighth standard when she got married. Being a young girl of twelve years; yet to come of age, she was sent back the following day to be retrieved back after two years from her parental house. After getting married, Tiwana resumed her studies as before, after a day's absence.

In the narrative Tiwana talked about her identity crisis when Miss Sen, her school teacher asked her, 'Miss Tiwana would you like to continue studies?' Tiwana had wanted to remind her teacher that she was no longer Miss Tiwana. Tiwana described her dilemma in these

lines, “Then what was I. It struck me that I was nobody. Yes, I was nobody. When someone addressed me as Miss Tiwana I felt like that I was leading a false life” (109).

Tiwana in her autobiography raises an issue of early marriage and its repercussions on the psyche of the child. She described that the problem is not confined to girls the boys are no exception to it. The story of Raghubir Bhai (Tiwana’s cousin) who, however, being married had fallen for a beautiful girl and had a mind to marry her. His story was evident of the fact that he also became a victim to the affects of early marriage. He said, “At that time I was still in school. My parents never asked me about my opinion... But why Should I be made to suffer for it? (111)”

Tiwana has woven various other threads while narrating her own story. She along with her tale narrates the woebegone tales of other women. Tiwana unfolds the strange story of an orphan girl child named Dhanni. As the story goes, when Tiwana’s uncle was the City Kotwal, a woman lodged a complaint that her husband had picked up a girl from somewhere and had brought her home. After interrogation the police revealed the facts that Dhanni’s step mother had sold her off to some unknown person who in turn had again passed her on to a stranger. Now, her step mother was not willing to take her back. Tiwana’s uncle (Fuffarji) General Sardar Tara Singh Sidhu pitied the girl and adopted her as his own daughter. When she grew up Tiwana’s uncle married her off to the brother-in-law of the Superintendent of Police of Dhaliwal. Unfortunately, her marriage came to a halt when her husband started ill-treating her for extravagant demand of money in order to pay off his family debts. Initially, she pacified him by taking money from her foster father (Tiwana’s uncle), later he began harassing her all the more. Unable to bear his cruelty for a long time, she refused to live with him. On her foster mother’s (General Tara Singh Sidhu’s first wife) askance, “But where will you live if you leave your husband? Dhanni in an anguish replied, “I will live neither here nor there. I will not live anywhere” (101). Her ominous words came true when she died of enteric fever bringing her story to a sad end.

Another instance, Tiwana unveils is about Baldev Kaur’s sister-in-law. Everybody was told that she died by falling from the roof top. But Tiwana’s grandfather’s remarks in this context arise doubts in the mind. He said to Baldev Kaur, his daughter who came with a proposal of Tiwana’s marriage with her sister-in-law’s son, “Don’t try to teach me. I just don’t want to marry the girl into their family. How do you know the boy’s mother fell from the roof by accident and wasn’t pushed down?...People know only what they are told” (46). Tiwana here depicts various social injunctions working at the grassroots in a socio-cultural familial setup where the demise or murder of a woman is put forward as an accident so to suppress the voice forever.

Dalip Kaur Tiwana presents the plight of both, rural and urban women where one unflinchingly attend to all the household chores and suffers all tortures, while the other though educated struggles unavailingly against her fate before she resignedly accepts her lot in life and decides to live barely and humbly as strange silent others. Tiwana probes the mind, the sensibility, the agitated heart of the lonely or trapped woman. Being herself a part of an aristocratic class, Tiwana does not lose sight of the plight of the woman fazed by the mindset of the zamindari

society, where veiled superficiality and hypocrisy works at the grassroots. Women's peripheral existence, their victimized stance calls for a pressing point to raise voice against social evils and its power structures.

To conclude, the dynamics of dominance and subservience central to the subaltern and feminist discourse is comprehensively critiqued by Spivak in her influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak states that "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (83).

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