



Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series

INDIAN LITERATURES IN DIASPORA

Edited by
Sireesha Telugu



ROUTLEDGE



Indian Literatures in Diaspora

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Sireesha Telugu**

Cover image: [add credit line if known or TBC if pending]

First published 2022

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-1-032-01540-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-02299-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-18279-5 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003182795

Typeset in Times New Roman

by Taylor & Francis Books

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4 Intersections of the Vernacular and the Diaspora

The Genre of the Nayi Kahani (New Story) and the Pravasi (Migrant) Writer-Usha Priyamvada¹

Anjali Chaubey

Historically, in the Hindi diaspora, various regional languages of the North-North East regions of India—varieties of dialects of Bhojpuri, Magahi, Maithili, Awadhi, Bagheli, Chhattisgarhi—travelled first to the distant continents in the nineteenth century in the strictly colonial context of indentured labour (Jayaram 42; Mohan 8). These languages were uprooted and replanted in different capacities by the indentured workers from India who were forced to migrate to Trinidad, Tobago, South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, and Suriname after the British “Act of Emancipation” of 1834 (D’Souza 1071). Some of these languages gave rise to newer dialects (such as those of Bhojpuri) and creoles (Jayaram 44) in the spoken form, but only a few of these languages have had literary outputs. However, the Hindi language (which is based on the standardised Khadi-Boli, shaped by nationalist, socio-cultural forces) migrated through a different upwardly mobile social class, caste, and gender in the second half of the twentieth century. The Hindi literary diaspora being formed especially in the USA and other European countries is a thriving space. Usha Priyamvada, Susham Bedi—*Havan* (Fire Sacrifice) (1989), *Lautna* (Returning) (1992), *Nav Bhum Ki Ras-Katha* (Tale of the New Land) (2002)—and Mridula Garg—*Uske Hisse Ki Dhoop* (Her Share of Sunshine) (1975), *Kitni Qaidein* (Imprisonments) (1975), *Vanshaj* (Heir) (1976)—are some important writers who have a sustained engagement with literary Hindi in the USA. Likewise, from other international shores, there are authors such as Kiran Patel, Sudha Chandola, Panna Naik, and Malathi Rao who are part of the South Asian diaspora in Hindi.

Whether one writes with a clear political ideology of promoting the vernacular abroad or to connect with the “local” literary scene of the language (the two are not mutually exclusive), the contour of the literature is definitely expanded. To quote Walters, such literary narratives are “crucial ongoing sites where diaspora claims are made, unmade, contested, and reinforced” (Walters qtd in Hua 46). The formation of this diaspora began in the mid-1960s when higher education as a means of immigration was becoming a phenomenon with the opening up of the international borders and the creation of the South Asian departments that

would accommodate migrant academics. The trend to travel abroad to specialise in one's degree had started much before India's freedom from the colonial powers; however, post-independence, one saw a different wave. The erstwhile colonial subjects graduating from the institutions established during colonialism deflected to the West, first as students and later becoming representatives of their country/continent in those universities, making an interesting postcolonial turn. Priyamvada migrated as a Fulbright Fellow like her compatriot Bharati Mukherjee, who arrived in America as a PhD fellow. The latter is a celebrated writer of the English diaspora from India. The period in which they rose to prominence is particularly important given the debates and ideological conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s, when several waves of feminism, post-colonialism, America's growing imperialism in the garb of "globalisation", and the categorisation of "first", "second", and "third" world countries were being stratified. If one compares the two authors, they occupy two ends of the diaspora spectrum—Priyamvada's literary process of situating the homeland happens in Hindi for a readership that is largely situated in India, while Mukherjee homes herself in English by writing about her Indian experience for the Western readers.

In the subsequent pages, through a close analysis of Priyamvada's writings, an effort is made to study how the Hindi literary movement of the *Nayi Kahani* (New Story) gets adapted onto diasporic literary settings and advances the cause of the former. At the same time, the chapter also looks at the *homing* process of the writer and the *unhoming* of her protagonists who are forever wandering to belong. Since this is an author study and analysis of a specific literary movement, it will be beyond the scope of the chapter to draw a comparison with the diasporic writings coming out in English during the time.

From the decade of the 1930s to the late 1940s, the Hindi literary scene is marked by the *Adhunik* or modern period, which is characterised by nationalism with an impetus towards social reforms. A noticeable strand in the literature of the time, especially in the emergent genre of the short story, is an engagement with the economic and cultural changes during and post-Independence period that make it imperative for women to operate outside the domestic sphere. This phenomenon creates a major ripple in the conventional arrangement of the family structure and the genre of the *Nayi Kahani* (from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s) and takes it upon itself to delineate the effects of this societal flux. This literary movement is championed largely by male writers such as Mohan Rakesh, Kamleshwar, and Rajendra Yadav, who chronicled the changing urban reality and its pressure on the traditional family unit in the journal titled *Nayi Kahani*. Some writers like Phanishwar Nath Renu ("Teesri Kasam" ("The Third Promise")) extend the theme to rural settings to delineate similar challenges and the quest for individuality against the backdrop of social responsibility. These short narratives have non-linear plots and fractured narratives that attempt to express a new kind of urban realism. Some recurring themes are the alienation of individuals in the

family unit, changing man–woman dynamics, and most importantly, engaging with the site of Indian modernity and its impact on the “working women”. The movement lasted only for a decade and its very existence is contested for its significance on the literary map. Usha Priyamvada and Mannu Bhandari are the only two women writers who are chronicled within the Nayi Kahani Movement.

The category of the “career woman” or the “working woman” becomes the entry point for most of these narratives as it was the new subject of the changing times. Amongst the existing “type” of women in Hindi literature, there was no category that could accommodate the “working” or educated women, although they had started making unflattering appearances in contemporary narratives of the time. This new emerging category was baffling for the male critics and writers as it defied any linear appropriation. While literacy for women in the house was seen as a means of strengthening one’s social capital, the “working” woman was perceived to be on a slippery slope, for she was operating outside defined boundaries. This surface progressiveness of society of that time was a further setback to women. They were introduced to the ideas of independence, they could even be economically independent (although not many had a claim over their earnings), yet the tightness of the moral noose forbade them from attaining any individuality of their own. Mohan Rakesh’s “Miss Pal”, Usha Priyamvada’s “Surang” (“Tunnel”), Mannu Bhandari’s “Ghutan” (“Suffocation”), Rajendra Yadav’s “Ek Kati Hui Kahani” (“A Half Story”), and Nirmal Verma’s “Parindey” (“Birds”) are some texts where the writers try to bring out the contradictions inherent in the given model of progress. In these stories, women are definitely placed in a changed cultural-social matrix but are made to operate along the old traditional coordinates. Priyamvada’s writings deserve special attention when one is looking at the writers of the time because her treatment of the then socio-cultural dilemma problematises the inherent contradictions of Indian modernity that expected women to straddle tradition alongside. The renowned critic Namvar Singh says about her work:

Inhone kahaniyon mein gehrai se manveey sambandhon ki vyakhya ki hai aur nari-jevan ki unvisangatiyon ka yatharth parakchitran kiya hai jo poonjivadiyantrikta ki den hai. Unki kahaniyon mein saamanti aur poonjivadi shoshan ki shikar adhunik nari ki tasvir to milti hi hai, sath hi milta hai maujuda sabhyata mein nihitantar virodh par vyang, paramparagat jarjaroodhityon par prahar, vyaktigat charitra-skhalana aur yaun-vikrityon ka yatharth vishleshan, bekari-mehngaijaisi samkaleen rajnetiksamsyaon ka vivechan.

She has given an in-depth exposition of human relationships, and the complexities in women’s lives arising out of the workings of the capitalistic machinery find realistic expression in her stories. In her stories, one gets a picture of women suffering in feudalistic and capitalistic structures along with a discussion of the contradictions of contemporary life,

critique of the crumbling traditional conservatism, and issues around sexuality and unemployment and inflation.

(Singh and Sharma vii, my translation)

Although she is one among the few women writers who have found a place in the journal *Nayi Kahani*, Priyamvada is mainly recognised and read as a *pravasi* (diasporic) writer. Given the fact that she migrated to the USA in the 1960s, one can see the influence of the Nayi Kahani Movement in the stories that were written in a new land. This interesting overlap of the two themes—diaspora with the vernacular—has resulted in pushing the scope and range of the two genres simultaneously. A *pravasi* writer is read along familiar lines—the proximity to Indian sensibilities, the presence or the effect of Western influences in her writings, how she counteracts those, and, more importantly, whether she ends up celebrating her *desh* (motherland) or not.

In a very *diasporic* reading of Priyamvada's writings, one can divide her writing into four distinct phases—the “native”/initial phase, where the setting is Indian and the ethos of the female characters are strongly rooted in the conventional set-up. The second phase is the work composed in the initial years of residence outside India, where the characters are exposed to the newness of American cultures and they are steadfast in upholding their own culture even while being drawn to the specific elements of the new world. The third phase is where the characters move past the initial stage of upholding the norms of their old lives and actively participate in their own individual quests that originate only because of their presence on the new soil. And the final stage is where the yearnings of the characters have given way to disillusionment and it is no longer about the place or its ethos. Wherever there is a return to the homeland, it is mitigated with a sense of loss or a defeat against the circumstances. Along with the diasporic thread that marks her work, the domestic undercurrent of stressing women's individuality is curiously entwined throughout her narratives. This thematic coexistence—diasporic dislocation along with the “working”/independent woman paradox—facilitates the narrative by broadening the range of her characters and situations, although this also can also lead to a simplistic reading of the cause-effect relationship between the two themes. For instance, an Indian woman embracing her sexuality and liberating herself from the servility of social demureness is easily believable if it is happening in the “vitiating” West, but will appear less credulous in a typically traditional set-up. This becomes the limiting aspect of her writing, for one tends to read too much into the spatial location and overlooks the circumstantial situation of the protagonist, and the possibility of her making similar decisions in the non-West is never considered.

Priyamvada says of her stories:

“Banwaas” (Exile), “Ek Aur Bidaai” (Another Farewell) maine America pravaas ke pratham warsh mein likhin, jin mein ek sanskargrast strike

mann aur vichaaron ka pashchimi sabhyata aur sanskriti se takraav spashh hai.

“Banwasa”, “Ek Aur Bidaai” which were written in the first year of my stay in America carry a clear conflict between a traditionalist woman and the western civilization.

(Priyamvada, *Banwaas* iv, my translation)

Interestingly, she uses the term “sanskargrast” meaning someone suffering from tradition, instead of “sanskari” which means traditional, to suggest the crippling effect of cultural indoctrinations. As evidenced in her early writings, Priyamvada is a little restricted in exploring radical models for her protagonists even though the exposition of their plight within the institutional existence is one of the primary concerns of her writings.

Overlapping of Vernacular Elements with Diasporic Imaginations

As stated earlier, the preoccupation of the Hindi story writers of the time was to capture the new urban reality and social changes. Rural and urban migration to foreign countries for education and career opportunities was an important part of this social change that formed an important entry point for the vernacular into the diaspora. Especially in the literary imagination, it provided a fertile ground for the exploration of new and radical ideas. Like the characters in the fictional narratives for whom a movement away from home opened up immediate vistas of opportunity, for the author too, setting up her stories, removed in location from the native readership, gave her enough room for experimenting with situations and themes. The traditional Indian man, who has always been in charge of his affairs, all of a sudden found himself negotiating with racial hierarchies on the professional front and a changed dynamic at home. Whether in India or abroad, male complacency was affected by the advent of modernity, and even though the position of women was not drastically uplifted, the ripple of change had been set in place. Priyamvada’s stories explore various dimensions of these changes in the diasporic settings.

At this point, it should also be worth noting that the images of the West in Hindi literature of that time are mostly ridden with negative perceptions. The West as a corrupting force on the protagonists and the struggle of the (mostly male) hero to fight them with his (traditional) virtues were some of the stock themes. The readers of this form of didactic literature were usually advised against the enterprise of immigration by showing how life “out of India” can be less than desirable (McGregor 706). Although Priyamvada was not outwardly taking on these male-centric immigrant narratives, there was a clear shift from her early writings, such as “Chahardiwari” (“The Four Walls”), “Toofan Ke Baad” (“After the Storm”), “Chutti Ka Din” (The Day Off), and *Pachpan Khambe Laal Devarein* (1962) (Fifty-Five Pillars and the Red Walls) that were written in India, and “Ek Aur Bidaai” and “Banwaas” which were

penned in the initial years of stay “out of India”. Her other texts such as *Rukogi Nahin Radhika* (1968) (Stop Please, Radhika), “Saagar Par ka Sang-eet” (“The Music from beyond the Sea”), “Trip”, and “Kitna Bada Jhooth” (“Big Lies”) indicate her non-judgemental reception of the “impact” of the Western influence. As one has maintained earlier, Priyamvada puts to use this “out of India” space that is already ridden with negative connotations to explore the male–female dynamics from new angles and complexities.

In her stories, we find a sustained engagement with the discourse of the new emerging category of a woman from multiple angles, exploring the nuances and challenges inherent in the depictions that attempt to contain womanhood in traditional categories. In several narratives, we see empowered women not just breaking the traditional moulds but also exploring their sexuality outside social sanctions. Such migrating female subjects elude fixity, their position is completely untenable within conventional parameters, and yet they attempt to negotiate a certain amount of validity within the existing structures. This is something echoed by Ahmed in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. According to Ahmed,

The narrative of leaving home produces too many homes and hence no Home, too many places in which memories attach themselves through the carving out of inhabitable space, and hence no place that memory can allow the past to reach the present.

(78)

Priyamvada entwines the two sites—the female body and the immigrant’s position—to bring out a very local/Indian issue of women’s freedom. Her female protagonists are on their quests for self-fulfilment by wandering in and out of relationships/marriage, seeking companions who can help them in this self-discovery. Themes of sexual infidelity and adultery in marriage are no new subject matters, except this time it is the female or the erstwhile victim who is the philanderer. In a classic subversion, she at once is de-emphasising body purity/chastity of women, which are the building blocks of patriarchal stubbornness, and the faulty male/husband’s attitude is also somewhere made accountable for the crisis. There is a visible shift in Priyamvada’s protagonists after her first novel *Pachpan Khambe Laal Divarein* (1962), in which it is stifling to see the protagonist not pursuing her happiness and resigning to a life of loneliness. In a lecture delivered in Chicago in 1973, Priyamvada took on the conservative portrayal of women in Premchand and his contemporaries, especially their ambivalent attitude towards modern and educated women.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, social awareness and a genuine desire to uplift the status of women added two new types (wife/mother and goddess/beloved being types), the young widow and the fallen woman—both prey to a rigid social order. Bankim Chandra, Rabindra Nath, Sharat Chandra, Premchand, Jai Shankar Prasad, and Jainendra Kumar, all portrayed these women with great compassion.

In Hindi, the writing of the post-Premchand period brought forth another stereotype—which could be described by another cliché—a sex object (Nilsson 17).

She takes up precisely these “fallen” women—the widows and other norm-defying women—who are under the strictest gaze of patriarchy—as her subject matter. Her protagonists are sexual subjects. Radhika (*Rukogi Nahin Radhika*) goes away with a white man against the will of her family; Kiran (“Kitna Bada Jhooth”) is in an extramarital relationship with Max; TT has a fling with Bhaskar in “Toote Hue” (Broken); Vasu breaks her six years of meaningless marriage to be with a younger man in “Pratidhwaniyan” (Echoes); the wife in “Trip” has several sexual flings with the knowledge of her husband, and so on. She takes up the category of “fallen” women centrally and allows them to have desire unapologetically. Granted that these narratives could be seen as elitist as most of the characters are middle/upper-class women who are comfortable in their class privileges, which gives their ventures a safety net to fall back on. However, the circumstances in which these women decide to defy acceptable norms of womanhood emanate from deep-rooted structures that have been marginalising women across class divisions. For most of these characters, personal excursion outside of approved sanctions is their first and the biggest defiance of their lives. Before they take this plunge, their lives have only been acted upon, but with this self-expression, they take control of themselves (for however small a period) and experience a freedom that never existed for them.

Some of the women in the stories have professional careers while others remain on the home turf, but a trait shared by all is an alienation from their surroundings. Those who have lived their lives strictly adhering to the governing moralistic discourses often find themselves wondering at the banality of domestic responsibilities. The diasporic setting plays the role of a catalyst here. What could possibly be amiss in their lives when they have been upholding their roles to the hilt? It is in their occasional bouts of honest musing that one finds their resentment at the choices that have been made for them in their lives and they remain without any agency in the decision-making process. Some of these characters cannot even think of the possibility of existing outside of the social institution of the family such as Birjan (“Banwaas”), Kiran (“Kitna Bada Jhooth”), and Shushma (*Pachpan Khambe Laal Devarein*). Priyamvada particularly attacks the patriarchal impositions of the arranged marriage system that denies women any agency in the selection of their partners. She pushes the category of “wife/mother” into existing as a woman with desires and needs. In her stories, the longing in the feminine psyche is given expression in the form of bodily desires and a need for being loved as desirable individuals. However, such awareness ironically creates a sense of “strangeness” (Kristeva 19) that alienates women from themselves. In many of her stories, the female protagonist is surrounded with outward marital bliss—big houses, a comfortable lifestyle, kids, and a husband who is not difficult to live with for he is affectionate and responsible. But the women in

these stories are looking for passion, romance, and fulfilment that are not necessary conditions of marriage. This passion is overpowering and despite resisting initially, they give in to this all-consuming urge. The stories open up with a crisis and often present two contrasting pictures. The husband and wife share an outwardly functional relationship, the day to day works well, but an invisible wall separates the two individuals sharing the most intimate spaces. “*Kitna Bada Jhooth*”² opens with the end of the love affair of the wife. Her secret relationship with Max comes to a sudden end when he marries someone else. She is distraught and is grieving like a widow who has just found out the distressing news. This was not a plain physical fling, but a strong companionship that had been going on for a while and Max had wanted more: “*Main kya sada tumhare jeevan ki paridhikebaharrahunga*” (Will I forever remain outside the periphery of your life?) (Priyamvada, *Kitna Bada Jhooth* 41, my translation).

One can see a progression in the range of characters and the shifting personal limits as one move along the author’s expansion of desire in her protagonists. Birjan’s (“*Banwaas*”) mundane life gets a fresh breath of life with the occasional running into the janitor, whose compliments make her reminisce about her lost beauty and youth. Kiran’s story is probably an extension of Birjan’s desire, which could not take any shape. While these characters do not jeopardise their marriage, in Priyamvada’s narratives, female sexual infidelity is not seen through a moralistic discourse, and she lets her characters seek outlets for their latent desires, even if it is for a short while. In those short moments of self-assertion, be it Shushma’s (*Pachpan Khambe Laal Devar-ein*) relationship with Neel or Kiran’s bond with Max, they attain a level of an all-consuming intimacy that defies all social mediations. Priyamvada’s narratives sustain an engagement with complex situations and expressions, as well as the containment of women’s sexuality within the institutionalised arranged marriage.

The presence of the West is instrumental in the structure of the narratives because female infidelity in an Indian marriage is palatable (to a conservative reader) only in the “other”-land, which is supposed to be inherently vile. In one’s understanding, the new and unfamiliar atmosphere definitely acts as a catalyst because not only does it open one to newer ways of existence, it also makes one look at the old/familiar from new angles by sharpening their sentience. Transporting untenable situations to the American background is definitely a clever trope, however, she also points to the complexity of the issue that is extremely rooted in the rigid native systems. A case in point is the story of Vasu in “*Pratidhwaniyan*”³ (Echoes), where the wife leaves her husband. The pleasures of the body, the freedom of being, and the heady intoxication of the feeling of love are only some parts of her new experiences. She thinks she is in love with the new man, but in actuality, she is drawn towards the possibilities that he represents—she can finally ascertain her claim over her body. After him, she enters into several long and short liaisons while going about her life alone in the United States.

In Priyamvada's narratives, one sees a visible shift in the personal boundaries when women gradually come out on their own and claim their individuality irrespective of the place they inhabit. Most of these women have understood sexuality only in terms of wifely duties and procreation. They are aware of their own desires and also of the conventional desirability parameters for women within marriage. Except for "Ek Aur Bidaai", the marriages discussed so far have started to deteriorate or become more complex with the shift in the spatial location of the couples. Yet, the narratives don't blame any "western immorality" for the same because taking women out of the rigours of sexual inhibitions is one of her concerns, regardless of the location. Although initially hesitant, Shushma in *Pachpan Khambe Laal Devarein* gradually accepts Neel as a lover; in an unspoken understanding, Kalyani gives herself physically to Hem with only a remote chance of their marriage in "Chandani Mein Barf Par"⁴ (On a Snowy Night). Both the stories are located in India and none of them get to be with the person they love, socially. In a strange turn of fate, Kalyani gets to meet Hem in America as the mentor of her husband. She declines his proposition to meet him in the absence of her husband, eliminating the possibility of maintaining any future relationship. He had left her for another woman, and now it is her chance to reject him. Birjan and Namita do not let their guards down irrespective of their discontent. The place one inhabits is only incidental, not the chief determining factor in the characters' motivations; in fact, Priyamvada subverts deterministic expectations from people and places by weaving some very complex situations and human responses towards them. In the story "Adha Sheher"⁵ (One Half of the City), Ila, a young widow, voices her strong contempt for a society that cannot accept a single/widowed woman's identity/sexuality:

Ek Purush pachas striyon se prem karta firta hai, use tumhara samaj kuch nahi kehta? Ek stri agar akeli, samman se jeena chahti hai to uske charon taraf giddh nochkhane ko taiyyar rehte hain...aur hota kya hai charitraheen hona? Charitra hai kya? Kya hai uski paribhasha? Uska samajik sandarbh diya kisme hai, tumhi purushon ne na? Thik hai—maan bhi lo agar Samay ke baad mere premi rahe bhi to kya? Mujhme koī gandagi laga reh gayi hai? Main janti hun main kya hun, I am a good human being—mujh mein udarta hai, karuna hai, sacchi hai...

A man can go about loving fifty women but your society does not question that. When a woman wants to live alone with respect she is surrounded with vultures, ready to rip and eat her away...And what exactly is meant by "characterless"? What's the definition of "character"? And who gave it a social connotation, but you men? In course of time, even if I want to have a lover, what's wrong with that? Do I carry a sullied body? I know who I am, a good human being—kind, honest and truthful...

(Priyamvada, "Adha Sheher" 72, my translation)

Process(es) of Homing

One can see a discernible thematic pattern (which is not necessarily as per the chronology of the publications) or progression in her writings in the way the author marks the coming-of-age of her characters. Sometimes, there is a movement within a text that replicates a similar pattern when the characters transform over a period of time and also circumstantially, to accept their changing reality.

Priyamvada's early writings are situated in mostly non-urban India, where the woman of the house has just entered or is on the verge of stepping into the world outside of domesticity. The economic potential of the characters is very limited, and they carry the weight of the responsibility of supporting large families. The process of getting the women to don this role is torturous for the male heads because traditionally it chips off their pride and implicates their failure as the provider. For the woman too, there is a sense of victimhood in having to enter the workforce instead of entering the familiarity of matrimony. As this condition is necessitated by a dire economic situation, the "working" woman is strategically placed outside the institution of marriage because of their capitalistic desirability. So, it is Shushma's (*Pachpan Khambe Laal Devarein*) education which seemingly comes in the way of a suitable match, in Minno's ("Chahardiwari" ("The Four Walls")) case, the one suitable "boy" willing to marry her is found to already have a wife and kids and nothing else has materialised.

The small drift of freedom that the characters experience by venturing out of the "*chahardiwari*" is kept in check by the hyper-insecurity of the men/guardians. However, even this little taste of freedom/idea of love is enough to titillate desire. The possibility of love and happiness are remote existences; what drives them is the vehemence stemming from their unending subjugation. In the concrete structures of the house that stands tall, symbolically representing unbending rigidity, Priyamvada opens small (new) windows for her characters in these old structures. Often, it is the idea of love or the hope of new beginnings from which the characters draw some sustenance. Even though the women in the stories are trapped in situations that seem to have no deliverance for them, yet it is not all gloomy and bleak. There are stories that bring out a society undergoing change to be just to women—"Surang" ("Tunnel") and "Toofan Ke Baad" ("After the Storm") depict the beginnings of reconciliation with the bitterness of the past. In the latter story, the elder brother who has crushed his sister's right to love, now readily agrees to his daughter's decision to marry outside the community. He has seen the devastation of two lives because of his rigid stand and now apologises to his sister for the storm he brought into her life.

In the next phase of Priyamvada's writings, her characters are exposed to new worldviews and they carefully tread around these ideas; they are intrigued and, at the same time, alert about their own sensibilities. These are the writings from her early years of stay in America, where women are shocked

and intrigued by the freedom and openness around, but stay steadfast in upholding their moral superiority, such as Birjan ("Banwaas") and Namita ("Ek Aur Bidaai"). This is also the phase where one starts looking at the familiar in new ways, the point when the woman sees the possibility of looking at herself as an individual and not just as an extension of the family. To quote Kristeva, "Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture" (13–14). One starts to feel like questioning the old reality with which one has lived for years not knowing how to articulate the angst that has been piling on. Some of them take a route of dissent finally, such as Vasu in "Pratidhwaniyan"; for others, existing outside the traditional sphere is always beyond their moral compass. However, the big change is that they cannot continue to be at peace with the existing self/reality in the manner in which they have been doing in the past in the final phase of Priyamvada's writings, there is a coming-of-self of her characters and they hold no illusions regarding the realities of their lives, and they achieve a sense of complete sexual liberation where they discover hitherto non-existent feelings. Shymala ("Sambandh" (Relationship)), Vasu ("Pratidhwaniyan"), Amrita "Toofan Ke Baad", and Nimmo ("Chutti Ka Din") are characters from this period. The high point in these narratives is the sexual awakening in her characters when they step out of their marriage and unapologetically have different partners, something that will be unimaginable either to their cherished Indian sensibilities or to the arrogant orthodoxy of their patriarchal husbands. When she is making her characters own up to their sexuality, especially in and around the institution of marriage, her position is certain to draw criticism for being immoral or too Westernised. One wonders if this is one of the reasons why the characters are perpetually in misery, caught in the whirl of abundance and scarcity at the same time. Or is this what Kristeva puts across as:

(n)ot belonging to any place, any time, any love. A lost origin, the impossibility to take root, a rummaging memory... The space of the foreigner is a moving train, a plane in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping.

(7–8)

Why are the characters shown to be suffering even in the choices that they have made for themselves when they have decided to call it quits with the old values? Is it about the nature of this escape that only provides a temporary solution to the actual problem that continues to fester like an open wound?

Priyamvada is often criticised for being influenced by her long Western presence because her stories revolve around love and its physical manifestations, which is too "radical" in the Indian context. The "alterations" in the personality of Indian women in the West, their choices, and the path of their struggle for self-completion can be seen to be happening only under Western

influence. Some critics like Madhuresh find Priyamvada too preoccupied with the theme of love in the context of women: “*Usha Priyamvada ki nayikayein prem ko jevan ka sabse mahatvapurna anubhav manti hain*” (Love is seen as the most important of human experiences by Usha Priyamvada’s heroines) (Madhuresh106, my translation). Some critics maintain that she is upholding Indian sensibilities even while depicting the changing values and beliefs of the time, as Rajni Gupta does in her study on the author. When one talks in terms of Indian sensibility as opposed to the Western one, one is taking recourse to reductive cultural stereotyping which works on polarisation and shuts out the possibilities of overlap:

Sanskritiyon ka prabhav padna lazmi hai. Jab koi ek sanskriti se uthkar kisi doosri sanskriti ki aur bhagta hai. Isliye pati-patni ke beech “divorce” jaisi cheez atapakr ihai. “Wapusi” se “Pratidhwaniyan” tak ke daur mein Usha Priyamvada ki sabhi kahaniyon mein (prayah) rudhiyon, mrit para-mparaon jadd manyataon par meethi meethi choton ki dhvani nikalti hai. Ghire hue jeevan ki ubasi evam udasi ubharti hai. Atmiyata aur karuna ke swar futate hain. Itna hone ke bawzood abhartiya parivesh inki kahaniyon ko abhartiya nahi banata

Being influenced by cultures is very obvious, when one leaves one and enters into another culture. And suddenly you see the idea of “divorce” between the relationship of husband and wife. From “Wapusi” to “Pratidhwaniyan”, almost all stories of Priyamvada carry a soft attack on conservatism, dead traditions and belief systems. What surfaces in these stories is the boredom that stems from stifled existence. And there is rise of intimacy and compassion. Despite all this, the non-Indian set up does not make her stories un-Indian.

(Kanha Singhji Tomar qtd. in Gupta 80, my translation)

In a binary world, separation, divorce, and alienation are negative concepts that are brought from the West because the Indian arrangement of marriage and family is too strong and self-sufficient. If one looks at expressions of individuality only in terms of fallen Western aberration, one misses the point of the entire discourse of individual liberation, especially for women, and undermines the validity of its existence. In one’s understanding, love is a pertinent, and, at the same time, a radical form of self-expression because it is an assertion of freedom that strongly defies institutionalised existence. A strand in feminist thought, though, looks at the impositions of heteronormative romantic love as problematic, keeping “woman as confined in the feminine universe, woman mutilated, insufficient unto herself. The innumerable martyrs to love bear witness against this injustice of a fate that offers a sterile hell as ultimate salvation” (Beauvoir and Parshley 79).

For Priyamvada’s characters, love is an essential requirement for their well-being; they chase love across continents, the failure of which wreaks havoc on their psyche, and they rebuild themselves completely only when they discover

love again. So, love and the ensuing passion has a centrality in these narratives and, at times, appears self-destructive for these females. However, one must remember the context of her writings; her gaze is on the institution of arranged marriage and attempts to bring out the emptiness of a life without the kind of love and companionship that gives a sense of meaning to life. In some stories, the characters (author) experiment with sexual flings outside of marriage, but it is only a temporary break from the existing reality. The affairs come to an abrupt end, leaving the individual caught in the old whirlpool of familiar estrangement. However, the characters do not walk out of their marriages, with the sole exception of Vasu in "Pratidhwaniyan", and perhaps this is the Indian sensibility that many readers want to credit her work with, as the characters continue to hold the marriage together. The affairs come to a sudden end for most of the characters and the erring wife is shown to be restlessly trapped in the loop of her desire, which is a punishment in itself. In the case of Vasu, she discovers that the two worlds, the one she has come out of and the one she is actively a part of, are mere reflections of one another and she is on the verge of ending her life several times. Is this some kind of forced validation by the author for her readership which is looking for some kind of appropriated "Indian" redemption for the husbands?

When Vasu meets her ex-husband after six years, she tells him, "*Ye bhatkan nahi jaati*" (There is no end to this wandering) (Priyamvada, "Pratidhwaniyan" 35, my translation) when her husband, who is sympathetic towards her dilemma, tells her to follow the path she has decided for herself. In one's understanding, the concept of "*bhatkan*", which can be loosely translated as "aimless wandering", is important in understanding Priyamvada's writings. Stories put together in the volume *Kitna Bada Jhooth* extensively deal with women as wanderers. They are forever disconnected from their immediate surroundings and people. Sometimes, they are clinically depressed and seek professional help to get over this brooding. Happiness and peaceful existence are ever-elusive and here we have a conflation of two different kinds of alienation—one created within a relationship and the other from physical dislocation emanating from the diasporic situation. They are often advised to seek closure from their past by a therapeutic revisiting of the past (physically as well as metaphorically). This is an interesting blend of two consciousnesses, of perpetual desiring and feeling dislocated from it. When Vasu spends that one night with her ex-husband before going back to the States, it reminds her of the sleepless nights from her marriage where post-coitus she is consumed by the desire to communicate with him, while he sleeps away. She gets her answer that the past does not hold any solution to her restlessness, even though any reconciliation with him could have been the easiest coming home.

However, Priyamvada denies her characters any easy closure and after the abrupt break from the past, there is a sudden break from the present as well, when the characters cannot bridge the realities that they inhabit. The characters who continue to live the charade of a happy marriage, or even the ones

who really have it, share a similar fate of restlessness and stay conflicted. Priyamvada puts her characters on "*bhatkan*"; it is a painful, confusing, and sometimes self-defeating exercise and its only reward is the individuality that comes from being true to oneself. Shyamala in "Sambandh" lives in a shabby cottage in the outskirts of a city in the US, surviving frugally on the sustenance from (irregular) freelance translation jobs. She suffers from serious insomnia and a general lack of interest in her surroundings, and she is particularly careful to not get attached/committed to anyone. Even if she would like to feed the lone pigeon who comes regularly to her snow-covered windowsill, she desists from doing so, because it will bring it back again and she will be responsible for it. The white surgeon who seeks companionship with her wants her to move into a better place. She, however, would rather live out of her suitcase. This unwillingness to take up newer responsibilities stems from her guilt about ignoring the older ones. Earlier, when she lived in India, her entire family was dependent on her and they all survived on her little salary. Now that her siblings have grown up and she has physically moved away from the burden of being responsible for all, she is free but burdened with guilt. This guilt of breaking free and being herself by cutting them off from her life constantly lives with her. Now, she penalises herself by turning away from any chance of happiness/commitment. She moves from one place to another, wanting to assuage herself of this overwhelming feeling. But Priyamvada makes us wonder, through Shyamala, what this successful surgeon with a million-dollar house and a beautiful family seeks in her hermit-like existence? Shyamala sees her own reflection, the same aimlessness in his eyes. She feels that perhaps it is the shared loneliness that brings them together and in such moments of togetherness they have the comfort of knowing that they are not alone: "*Kyun iss akele, ujjaad, fatehal-si cottage meinakar hi use kuch samay ke liye raahat si milti hai?*" (Why is it that he can find some peace only in this ramshackle house?) (Priyamvada "Sambandh" 13, my translation). At one point, the doctor is willing to leave everything behind if she agrees to be with him. She, of course, cannot commit.

Vasu in "Pratidhwaniyan" undergoes a similar predicament, of a person caught in this "*bhatkan*". Her abandoned world of the past and the new present both seem to be "*pratidhwaniyan*" or echoes of the same ills. While she herself does not contemplate going back to India, her doctor makes her undertake a therapeutic journey to revisit her past. She had attempted suicide when this "*bhatkan*" got the better of her and the doctor mandated her to revisit her family and home that she had abandoned. "*Bhatkan*" is not only a metaphor for an immigrant's sense of up-rootedness or wandering in a distant land. Priyamvada shows that it can easily become an affliction even without a physical dislocation. "Surang" is one such story located in India, where the complexity of daily life and the challenges of a job without any emotional sustenance drives Amrita to the point of suicide. For nine years, she has been living a conflicted existence and dealing with the loss of her brother and a mother who ceased to exist.

Priyamvada is one of the representative writers of the Hindi diaspora, but the thrust of her narratives is on the psychological dislocation of the characters. At this point, it may seem important to ask if her protagonists located in the Western social matrix are the *other* of her Indian counterparts. The *other*, who resides mostly outside the realm of marriage and is educated, economically independent, and sexually liberated, poses a threat to the natural order of patriarchy. Priyamvada expands the range of being a woman, especially in feminist discourses. She busts the myth of the "third world woman" as a passive victim. She crafts strong independent characters emerging out of strenuous circumstances. These are strong, passionate individuals choosing, sometimes chasing, love across continents, who are unapologetic about their choices. They are not in the quest of some big "American Dream", but their own small happiness that is sometimes tangible and, at times, evasive. Priyamvada's success lies not in the domain of international/global discourse of women's emancipation but a very localised and sustained intervention in "local" womanhood, bringing out the difficulties that surround and prevent women from being themselves.

Interestingly, the most often discussed story of Priyamvada's oeuvre, "Wapusi" ("Return") shares with "Zindagi Aur Ghulab Ke Phool"⁶ ("Life and Rose Flowers") the thematic similarity of displaced masculine authority and its resultant effect on the male psyche. In both these stories, the male protagonists have the hardest time accepting their fading importance in the course of things around them. It cannot be coincidental that the two stories that give centrality to the male characters and somehow show them to be victims of the changing times are the only two stories that come up in mainstream discussions of the Nayi Kahani period. While the concern of the writers and critics is to push the cause of women, changing the balance of power would entail taking away some patriarchal privileges from men and this becomes a tricky domain. The challenge with this kind of modernity is that one is ready to accept the empowered woman but not at the cost of any disadvantage to men!

Priyamvada's stories are rightfully categorised in the Nayi Kahani Movement, for she is participating in a long-sustained discourse of women's freedom from social mores along with economic independence. She is conceptualising the changing times, placing women in non-traditional environments and behavioural patterns and looking at the effect on their psyche. The resultant dynamic is one where women, after transcending the physical boundaries/limitations of their spatial/cultural locations accorded to them, have an uncertain road ahead. However, she would rather place her characters in the uncertain and anxious existence instead of the familiar certainty that comes with adherence to the normative order. In her stories, especially the ones coming out in the later phase of her writings, women are conflicted not because there is a break in the continuity from the past, but the growing realisation that their present existence is more or less an echo of the old world. Through the diverse spectrum of characters, she is expanding the range of

being a woman, in life and in literature, even though the way she is co-opted in mainstream literature is problematic. Given the concerns of the movement—of bringing out foundational nuances inherent in the selective modernity of the time and to look at the changing man–woman dynamics—Priyamvada's oeuvre provides for numerous stories that delineate multiple probe points. The characters in these narratives defy moral precepts to the extent that various social taboos become inconsequential in their realities.

Moreover, it is extremely liberating to see women transgressing externally defined limitations of the self, but for the erring or cheating Indian wife to become a mainstream protagonist, she has to be situated under the sway of Western presence in these stories. Her stories are popular and the characters are accepted *despite* this “un-Indian” sensibility, precisely because of the location of the characters and, to some extent, the author. Any analysis of her writings focuses as much on the *reading* of the West as on her adherence to Indian sensibilities.⁷ The diasporic lens can simplify the complex issues the characters are grappling with in these narratives by deferring them unto the *other* and, therefore, not treating it as their own.

Priyamvada has been successful in problematising the “working” women paradox by questioning the selective modernity accorded to women. She provides individuality to her characters by often situating them outside patriarchal sanctions. This provides them with an existence independent of institutionalised identity even though they are not completely at ease with themselves. On this long and winding road, they may feel lost, or the pain might become overbearing, and sometimes the character desperately would like to go back to the familiarity of a monotonous existence. Priyamvada deserves the credit for putting women on this “*bhatkan*” of various kinds, which is sometimes rewarding and most of the time an uphill challenge; however, through the churning, there is the emergence of an individual who has realised her potential and pushed her boundaries.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on my PhD thesis submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2015.
- 2 From the volume *Kitna Bada Jhooth* ([2008] 2010).
- 3 From the volume *Banwaas* (2009).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 From the volume *Shoonya Tatha Anya Rachanayein* ([1996] 2007).
- 6 From *Banwaas* (2009).
- 7 Rajni Gupta in her dissertation on Priyamvada extensively studies these Indian elements in her writings.

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