

## Apples and Oranges? The Importance of Genre in Diasporic Cultural Expression

We have here two very different papers, the first addressing Punjabi's history and profile as a Canadian language/literature and the second looking at a modern reworking of a traditional tale.

Anne Murphy notes that **writing in Punjabi is an inherently political, transnational act**, and that is certainly the case, considering how it must compete to share space in South Asian nations with national languages of Urdu and Hindi, and the dominance of English, Hindi and Urdu in South Asia; and English in British Columbia.

One topic of the discussion to follow might be where Batalvi's *Loona* fits into this formulation and whether that is the most fruitful way of thinking about the work. It is certainly political to reframe traditional tales in feminist fashion, as Gunjeet makes clear Batalvi has done—and as the Vatuks and Kathy Hansen have done both implicitly and explicitly in their earlier analyses of this tale.

Writers like the Lahori *ustad*, Najm Hosain Syed, has also been to address traditional Punjabi literature through the lens of gender and caste/class in way. He goes so far as to declare that the feminine voice—the voice of Hir—is the quintessentially Punjabi voice, and that it is one of protest. (Ik Ranjha Mainun Lorida). This is both interesting and easy to agree with.

But the Punjabi writing taken up by Anne is doing considerably different work. Anne points to feminist concerns highlighted in work like *Watanon Dur*, certainly; but she makes clear that its project is more to claim a space for Punjabi in Canada (and to a lesser extent the UK,) to attract attention to and accommodation of Punjabi as legitimate medium of expression. *Loona* and other reworkings of traditional writing such as Syed's *Akath Kahani : Hir Damodar de Kujh Gal* take for granted a Punjabi readership/audience and focus inward on that community rather than outward from a minority position.

### Genre vs. Gender

But let's focus a bit more on genre than gender. What political work is being done by Batalvi in emulating (if not reproducing) a legend in verse—even free verse? What are the politics, on the other hand, of *Watanon Dur* in using more modern genres? Do the genres in which all these works are composed make a difference in their political efficacy?

The diaspora of British Columbia seems to have given rise to a break from traditional genres; while the case of Batalvi's *Loona*, composed in post-partition India (one might say “in the diaspora of Delhi”) sticks with verse drama (drawing on, but not replicating *qissas* recorded by RC Temple) while addressing the shared social concern of gender oppression, especially within marriage. The risks they take are diverse. *Loona* in 1965 promoted a feminist viewpoint long before it was welcome in almost any modern literature. It is entirely possible that Batalvi wished to mediate the social critique of a beloved Punjabi legend with a reassurance through more familiar genre. The writers in Canada, however, are trying not to reassure an established Punjabi readership, but to reproduce or re-create one from people who may be less steeped in Punjabi culture than in Canadian culture. To them the short story genre would be friendly, neither too

dense, as in verse; nor too concerned with social and familial issues beyond their ken. The stories Anne Murphy discusses offer insights and critique of the parents and older kin of potential new readers, and Murphy has commented on the surprise many of her students feel at what is familiar to them in the literature she introduces in her classes at UBC.

### Discussion Questions:

1. **What caused the state in the UK to reduce its patronage of Punjabi and thereby contribute to the demise of a British “golden age” for Punjabi?**
2. **How is the Sikhification of Punjabi literature in both Canada and India representative of leftist or progressive politics?** (I do agree that Pakistani Punjabi literature movement of the past half-century or so is overtly progressive and largely leftist. *Punjabiyyat* in Pakistani literature creates a space for the secular, the non-religious, and therefore represents a move toward greater inclusion. It challenges the hegemonies of Urdu language and a normative version of Islam that seems to increase with every year in Pakistan.) I'd like to hear more about how making Punjabi the language of the Sikhs works toward greater inclusion than exclusion. We know that with Hindi and English being the official languages of India and Urdu being the national language of Pakistan, Punjabi language becomes officially marginalized, as do all other local languages. **But is it not the case that the Sikhification of Punjabi in India marginalizes non-Sikh Punjabi speakers?**
3. **How should we understand Punjabi language and literary activism connected to the movement for Khalistan, whose intl headquarters used to be on Kingsway in Vancouver when I first moved there in 1979?** Was this movement progressive/regressive; inclusive, exclusive?
4. **How clearly can we distinguish between the cosmopolitan (colorful or otherwise) and the global?** [Intersections of Time, space and language sound more global to me than cosmopolitan, Time less so than the other two]
5. **Re Sadhu Binning's point that political and personal decisions in Canada get scripted as those of 'honor' and 'tradition'—because different things are at stake than they were in the Punjab at earlier moments.**
6. Punjabi is clearly a Canadian language. Interesting to think about how much Punjab fits into it, though.
7. What about other locations within the Punjabi Diaspora (Scandinavia, the Gulf)?