

## **Reinforcing Ideologies about Women: A Critique of the English Texts for Undergraduates.**

**Iqbal Judge**

*Indian society today is ostensibly committed to women's empowerment and gender equality, and vociferously proclaims its support for women. However, beneath much of the adulation heaped upon women, there operates a patriarchal mind-set that in effect subverts and nullifies the women's cause. This is especially seen in some of the texts that are taught to undergraduate students, where regressive ideologies lurk dangerously in the laudatory depiction of the women as mysterious goddesses or sacrificing, self-negating creatures. This paper analyses one such text prescribed at the undergraduate level, and highlights its damaging implications in the context of the 'cultural' criterion which it purports to validate. The need to challenge prevalent stereotypes and develop an analytical, questioning attitude in students has been stressed and suggestions for alternative texts that could be used to sensitize students to issues of gender equality have also been dealt with.*

This paper attempts to reveal the insidious operation of regressive patriarchal ideologies in certain texts prescribed for study in the English course at the undergraduate level in Punjab. It also suggests alternatives that might be fruitfully used to counter the patriarchal mind-set and sensitize students to issues of gender and women's empowerment.

Syllabi for B.A. English courses in the universities of Punjab are largely 'content' based rather than 'skill' oriented. 'What' is to be taught is, therefore, considered to be of paramount importance. Textbooks prescribed are usually selections from the literary canon — poems, stories, prose essays, etc. with introductory notes and questions on the text, assembled by the editor of the book. One such anthology prescribed for the B.A. students is 'Modern Prose: English and Indian' edited by T.S. Gill and Parminder Singh (published by Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar; first edition 1998). The editors claim that their criterion for selection is a 'cultural' one, since the students are in college, where they 'become aware of regional and national identities and need to be charmed and excited by whatever they study of language and literature.' Thus there are articles such as Forster's 'Tolerance,' Tagore's 'Society and State,' Nehru's 'What is Culture' et al. The anthology was first prescribed for the B.A. I Compulsory English course, but after continued vociferous protests from teachers regarding its comprehension difficulties, it was shifted to the B.A. II Elective English course, where it is still being taught.

The essay that is my subject of concern for this paper is 'Woman' (pp.80-89) by Prof. Puran Singh. Having had to teach it for a number of years to my undergraduate students, I found myself increasingly uncomfortable, grappling with a text that was not just linguistically and conceptually difficult for my students, but more importantly, extremely disturbing in what it

was actually saying. In this paper, I have attempted to explore the ideological underpinnings of the essay to show how the patriarchal mindset continues to operate in strength even among the intelligentsia, and its damaging implications in the context of the 'cultural criterion' on which the editors have based their choice.

The essay is ostensibly a lyrical paean in praise of woman, an ode to the mystery and wonder of creation that has enthralled man for centuries. The writer rhapsodizes over the 'dream beauty' (82) who 'was always a mystery to the human race' (83). He waxes lyrical over the beauty of her tresses, her face that shone 'like a moon in black clouds' (83) and states that she has not yet got the honour she really deserves. She is 'responsible' for all that is cultured and civilized in this world — 'for all his (man's) best language, for immortality, for all his religions, for all his arts, and for all his noble wingings above earth and sky' (84). The author also promises freedom to woman — 'she shall be absolutely free' (83).

But a closer look reveals the deception that lies beneath the surface level panegyric. For the entire text is written from the archetypal patriarchal viewpoint that seeks to enslave woman even as it supposedly liberates, traps her in her tresses and clothes which conceal her body but reveal her 'soul,' and denies her all bodily pleasures even as it tacitly approves of man's 'physical indulgences' (85). Let us see how.

In viewing woman as an exotic, mysterious figure, the writer squarely places her in the realm of the 'other' – distant, 'her forehead for centuries contemplated as our sky aglow with the calm sparkle of the moon' (84). She is seen as akin to 'Nature,' and therefore like the Mother Earth, always giving, her 'virgin' territory always explored. Woman is perceived as an embodiment of the soul, 'sought after from eternity to eternity' (83). Man desires to unearth the mystery of woman – 'one wonders what is woman...her tresses suggested a secret, her eyes that loved made it deeper. The virgin was desired by the young man...' (83) Woman, however, through her virtues, was able to alchemize this 'passionate worship' into a 'cultural atmosphere,' so that 'even the savage Afridi' and 'the most brutal of men' were moved to sing' (83). How cultured the ambience would be is also debatable, for the song mentioned refers to 'the *bazar* of the tresses of my Beloved' (writer's italics). One wonders what else of the woman is up for sale in the market. It may also be mentioned that such images and metaphors belong to a tradition and context that has conventionally 'objectified' woman's beauty in this manner, and are common in maudlin and stereotypical Persian/Urdu verse. This tradition continues unabated even in the most trite Bhangra-pop songs today, with umpteen references to women's facial features, hair, clothes and jewellery.

Toril Moi (1989: 112) says that from a phallogocentric point of view, women represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos. From this position, woman is depicted as the refining force that has the power to elevate man from a brute to the divine. We can clearly see the ideological notion of femininity as a civilizing influence being constructed in this essay. 'Woman has contributed to...man's culture and civilisation' (82). Woman is also posited as a goddess, receiving man's worship in the form of his patriotism, honour and defence of the home and land. Indeed,

the male writer rhetorically asks, 'what would freedom itself be if man were devoid of woman-worship?' (83)

Gillian Beer (1989: 79) quotes Mary Hays who had pointed out that 'men have valued women's virtues, such as prudence, patience, wisdom, when they prove convenient to themselves'...the husbands have no objection to the wives acting as principals, nor to their receiving all the honors and emoluments of office, even if death should crown their martyrdom, as has been sometimes.' So the male writer Puran Singh concedes, 'her intuitive omniscience is more developed than man's. Her spirit of self-sacrifice is real and man's is more or less dramatic and unreal' (82). He identifies her essence: 'She was revealed partly to man in her acts of faith, love and noble self-sacrifice. She wore the cross of the whole family as did Jesus, but started no Christianity. Every woman is the Messiah' (84).

Woman is extolled for inspiring man to 'all the heroic efforts to make himself man' (84). She is 'responsible for all his best language for immortality, for all his religions, for all his arts, and for all his noble wingings above earth and sky' (84). It is important to note that the best language, religions and arts are entirely man's — it is **man's** civilization — woman has only been the catalyst 'through her daily life in the service of man' (84). She has no language, arts or religion, at least, none that man recognizes. Significantly, 'she started no Christianity' (84) she only bore the cross! It is typical of the patriarch to expect woman to be grateful that man acknowledges her services. The shift in woman's position from the distant altar to the margins is evident here.

Toril Moi (1989: 112) explains another change in position: 'Because of their very marginality, women will also always seem to recede and merge with the chaos of the outside...will share in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position which has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God.' Interestingly, in 'Woman,' the male writer assigns **both** positions to women by splitting them along the temporal dimension. Thus, the woman of the golden glorious past and the good old days comes to represent the archetypal Earth Mother, while the modern woman is the harlot. The woman of old was the quintessential veiled beauty, decorously draped in yards of clothing — 'her clothes were a universe in themselves' (83). Again we note the image of woman as the mystery, man as the explorer. She had long hair that fell in 'Christ-braids' round her 'swan-like neck'...her face shone in this world like the moon in black clouds' (83). Man worshipped her passionately — she was the sister of the nation, his own dead mother, and the archetypal Mother- 'the mother mysterious, so noble, divine, so full of love that she drew the whole-souled devotion of human men for centuries and was still a mystery (84).' The words 'human men' underscore the woman perceived in contrast as a spirit or soul.

Pitted in stark contrast to this 'pristine' goddess is 'the modern type of woman.' The writer minces no words in explicitly denouncing her: 'Let us look at the modern woman a little and

compare that old with the new. She has certainly lost her beauty and not yet gained her soul' — 'she has denuded her head of hair and her limbs of the mystery of clothes...I fall dead with despair — whither is she going? The world has become emptied of human beauty' (84). The sight of her flesh fills him with revulsion, because 'her flesh and bone' is 'precious only because of her great soul — otherwise all is mutton, mere mutton' (84). From the exalted heights of poetic inspiration to the pit of crude prose — the writer makes his approbation for the mythical Virgin Mother of the past as vivid as his repugnance for the 'modern' woman of the present. Thus woman is acceptable only as a creature distanced from man, a spirit and an embodiment of asexual motherhood. Woman as a body, a presence in the present is rejected outright.

Running parallel to this point-counterpoint between the old woman and the new, the revered Mother and the wanton woman, is the discourse of the concealed and the revealed, the veiled and the unveiled. The woman of the Past is seen as veiled, and her 'soul' is hidden somewhere in the 'universe' of her clothes. The national flags are similar, but only 'dim shadows of the veil-cloth that flies' (83) when woman — the sister of the nation — is in danger. Repeated references to concealed, hidden, mystery, veiled hint at the desire to know, to probe beneath the hidden clothes and the tresses. The veil itself takes on different, contradictory meanings. It is likened to 'the fluttering of someone's heart' (83); later it is described as 'cumbersome' (84); then a reference is even made to the Sikh Guru who chided the Hindu Queen of Mandi for coming to him all veiled (85). Here the veil signifies restriction and curbing of freedom, for the writer asserts unequivocally, 'If Sikhs of today there are who veil their women and enslave them, they are not of the Gurus' (85). But then he adds, 'veils often symbolize the beauty and mystery of the concealed and the veiled is more sacred than the unveiled' (85). The veil is thus seen as an enticement, an encumbrance and also an ennobling item of apparel. To him, the idea of 'sex difference' is crucial: 'But if veils accentuate this sex difference or if unveiling does the same, both are unholy' (85). Thus the modern woman who casts off the 'mystery of clothes' and in aping the western fashions 'reveals' herself, fills him with revulsion, reminding him revoltingly 'of the poultry yard' (85). The simile is from Marie Corelli. Thus he uses the authority of both religion and literature (that too represented by a woman novelist) to fortify his stand.

The conflicting tugs and pulls of the writer's desire to reveal the concealed, yet to veil the unveiled indicate the tension between sexual desire and the attempts to repress it. But there are Freudian slips: Man's love is described as 'divine,' yet it is a 'passion,' albeit 'sexless' (82). Woman is a flower and man's 'glorious hopes and aspirations' are 'bees humming' (82) round it — the archetypal sexual image. It seems to me that for the writer, woman as the Other symbolises man's mind itself, especially the chaotic, impulsive Id — that seething cauldron of the primal instinct for sexual pleasure — the Id that must be repressed by the Ego, the reality principle and the Superego, the morality principle. And it becomes woman's responsibility to do both — to sublimate the dark desires of the Id into socially approved codes of behaviour. (She is 'responsible' for his art, literature and history, remember!) Therefore, the 'young man' desires the 'virgin' but she, as woman — Ego 'was the mother and he the son' (83). Then again, 'Man called her wife, but she stood as his daughter before him and she made a Buddha of her father'

(83). Curiously, man becomes passive here — ‘she made...of him’ (83). His volition seems to submit to the sanity and logic of the Ego so that his ‘worship’ becomes synonymous with ‘all patriotism, honour of a race, war and defence of home and hearth.’ Thus it is also but natural that woman should be the Superego too — ‘woman is the greatest and truest aid to the maintenance of the true spiritual attitude’ (85). So ‘woman’s soul crying to the soul of man’ is the ‘only divine lyric’ that she should sing (85). The ‘modern type of woman who tempts man by unveiling herself and accentuating the ‘sex difference’ is repugnant, because she represents man’s Id — that part of himself which he cannot allow/admit because it violates his ideas of respectability and morality — ‘she wishes me to cling to her flesh’ while he wants to ‘cling to her soul’ (84). The ideological implication is clear—Woman is to blame if man cannot rise above himself. It is Woman who has to ensure that the ‘sex difference’ is not highlighted through her attire and her fleshly desires. Significantly, man’s tripartite self is accepted matter-of-factly: ‘Man’s self-transcendence is as much of him, as his physical indulgence or his intellectual aestheticism’ (85); and it is when ‘his body and his bread, his intellect and his woman’ (note the use of the possessive) are ‘suffused with the discovery of the personal God in man and Nature’ that man becomes the highest Art’ (86). Woman has, thus, to subsume herself in man for the best art, literature and religion to happen.

If woman has to sacrifice her all for man to help create a ‘great and cultural world she must be rewarded with infinite honour’ (82) by the patriarch. She has not yet got the ‘ideal honour—that of being ‘second-best God (need you ask who is First?) or God of intellectuals on earth. She is not yet free; though he admits that this is ‘due to man largely,’ he adds — but ‘*essentially* to the woman herself’ (82) (my italics) He, the benevolent Master, declares, ‘she shall be absolutely free’ (82). She has been ‘man’s beloved slave,’ but he is large-hearted enough to grant her freedom. Really? Yes, well, er-there is a catch....

Just as there is a difference between the pristine woman and the modern type of woman, there is a split created here too — between the freedom that woman (ah! foolish, mistaken woman!) desires, and the kind that is envisaged for her by man. The patriarch declares in the only italicised sentence in the essay, ‘*Only in motherhood does she become free*’ (82). Ironically, when she is bound by the shackles of motherhood — which man perceives to be her ‘essential’ nature — man grants her an elevated status: ‘a divine sovereignty is then conferred on her’ (82). Motherhood is thus projected as the ultimate goal for woman — her absolute freedom lies in her enslaved status, where she is loved and appreciated for her sacrifices and contribution to the ‘major portion of the whole of his culture and civilization’ (82). As pointed out earlier, because it suits him here, he can even admit to a failing in himself and a corresponding virtue in her: her spirit of self-sacrifice is more real than man’s unreal pretence.

Another aspect of the ‘highest’ freedom to be granted to woman is of herself as ‘the Supreme Reality and freed soul’ that of ‘the voice of a wedded woman or a maiden pining in love of the Beautiful’ (82). The writer takes recourse to religion once more, declaring hyperbolically that the ‘*the whole of the Guru Granth* (again in italics) is this voice, in which ‘both man and woman as sexes are forgotten,’ and ‘all disputes hushed’ (82-83). To attempt to refute such an argument

would be blasphemy.

And what is the freedom that a woman desires? The writer likens ‘the modern woman’s movement’ to Bolshevism, dubs them as ‘protests’ and scoffs at the ‘frivolous futility in such ill-balanced movements’ (83). He even denies her a living status — she is only ‘a toy-like thing, ‘aping man’ (83). This modern woman ‘has certainly lost her beauty and not yet gained her soul’ (83). A while later, the tone becomes indulgently mocking: ‘None need quarrel with her experiments with herself’ (84). Like a typical Father, he declares ‘of course, she is absolutely free to do as she wishes’ (84), but there is no mistaking the veiled threat and the concern at the ‘decoration of the temple of the flesh’ (85) where ‘we,’ men in the plural, and the authoritative, royal ‘We’ (?) ‘have worshipped for so many centuries (85). That is why ‘Those who free her and ape the western fashions’ remind him of ‘the poultry yard’ (85). A dire end is predicted for the seekers of such freedom. The writer collapses the ‘ideal of modern art’ and all modernity into woman’s so-called desire to ‘be free of all encumbrances’ and to revel in ‘speed, more speed,’ the horrible end is gloated over — ‘Bang! Dash against the mountain! And to pieces! There lie the mutton pieces! ...Man a corpse! Woman a corpse! To come to such a discovery is the end of civilization.’ (85)

And who is saying all this? It is ‘I’ – the male writer, an established and revered figure on the literary firmament, ‘the most fascinating Punjabi writer of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose ‘visionary sensibility’ traversed lands, periods and cultures (80), according to the editors. It is interesting to note the authorial intrusions at strategic points in the text. The writer establishes his credentials in supposed favour of women by declaring in the opening paragraph, ‘I do not think the ideal honour for women is yet in sight’ (82). The statement is supported by the reference to George Meredith, about whom the glossary states, ‘He regarded woman as fully independent and equal to man’ (86). Thus the writer lulls the reader into a belief in the genuine concern for woman and her honour. He can then assert boldly, ‘I tell you as a beloved slave of man she has contributed to...his culture and civilisation’ (82). The third first-person intervention is an emotional reference to his dead mother. He sees a sun-lit cloud in sky and reminisces in a lachrymose vein, ‘I thought it was the veil-cloth of my mother, and I stood up thinking my mother had come back from the dead. I shed a tear...’ (84). A man in tears, sentimental about his mother! Surely enough to melt the hardest heart! He builds up the lyrical mood with rapturous pronouncements about woman’s mysterious beauty and Messianic spirit, so when he turns to the climactic statement, we are in real danger of sentimentally and unthinkingly agreeing with him: ‘And when I contemplate the modern type.... I fall dead with despair — whither is she going?’ (84) The editors (both men) endorse him wholeheartedly, remarking that woman’s self as flesh and blood is ‘degraded’ (80), ‘the invention of modern times’ which ‘violates her ennobling qualities’ (80).

Thus the ‘cultural criterion’ the editors have set for themselves is actually a validation of the *centuries-old* patriarchal ideology in which woman shall remain man’s beloved slave, realising herself in motherhood and a life of self-sacrifice and regarding man’s possessive protection as her ultimate honour. She must not ever be a creature of flesh and blood — to do so would be the

death of civilisation. Even the 'questions for comprehension' at the end of the essay reinforce this: 'When does woman become really free? How are Bolshevism and modern women's movements equated? How does the depiction of modern woman negate the pristine image of woman?' (88)

How do we teach such a text in class to our adolescent students, at the threshold of 'modernity'? The majority of students in the B.A. classes are drifters, waiting in the wings for the windfalls of money and matrimony. They come from the moffusil middleclass, the upholder of social and moral norms. Their education so far has not encouraged critical, independent thinking, so they usually accept as axiomatic the ideas they are 'taught.' The written word, especially in a 'prescribed' text, carries the stamp of legitimacy, more so when the editors add their comments in approbation of the writer's viewpoint, and all the questions for students reinforce the unequivocal acceptance of the writer's views. While reading and explaining the text, I would find the focus falling on the approbation of the self-sacrificing mother and derision for the girls, especially those dressed in jeans (modern, aping men — chee!) The girls would look confused and shamefacedly hang their heads at the sniggers from the boys about modern fashions in clothes. Most of the boys that I taught subscribed (but naturally!) to the author's viewpoint. They would remark that 'such modern women' deserved to be teased and molested for inciting their passions. Some would even comment '*Aurat to pair ki jooti hai*'.... In their minds, women were categorized either as sacrificing mothers (the revered Past) or as contemptible but desirable objects (the Present). Woman can thus be respected only as a de-sexed mother; as a sexual contemporary, she is deplorable. Today, when we talk of 'women's empowerment,' is this the only power we wish to give to women — the 'freedom' of 'motherhood'? Is this the social change we wish to bring about through education? Are we not then reinforcing the same stereotypes about femininity and masculinity, about specific gender roles ordained by the patriarchs? Is not then the promise of freedom and equality to women mere hogwash?

Given the obvious answer to these questions, it is clear that the contents of our courses of study need to be carefully scrutinised. Texts that legitimise and reinforce repressive and regressive ideologies ought not to be taught,<sup>1</sup> especially in view of the fact that the prevalent teaching methodology (as clearly seen in the glossary, notes and questions in the given anthology) subscribes to an uncritical acceptance of the validity of the ideas inherent in a text. Even if a teacher tries to encourage a critical, questioning stance, it is not taken seriously, because the entire machinery of the system — the text-books, the conventional classroom teaching, the questions asked, the answers to be memorised for the exams — operates on the basis of an unthinking, unquestioning, uncritical rote-learning of a given input. There is, therefore, an urgent need for a strong intervention against reinforcing attitudes that seek to pigeonhole women in damaging categories of the 'wanton modern' and the 'pristine ancient' type, or assign gender-based roles conforming to the feminine mystique.

Further, if we truly believe that education must empower women to become equal with men, and that we need to enable more and more women (and men) to rise up and fight against gender injustice, sexual harassment, dowry deaths, rape, physical assault and mental

torture, and that education means self-growth, then we seriously need to bring in texts that deal with issues pertaining to how women feel, what they hope for and the injustices they are up against. We need to highlight women achievers in the present day, who are mothers as well as professionals; and we need to challenge the stereotypes that project admirable women simply as those who look pretty and cook well, seeking no pleasures beyond domesticity and motherhood. We must also develop the critical and analytical faculties in our young boys and girls and encourage them to think for themselves, so that they may be able to reflect insightfully upon social, cultural, ethical and other issues with unprejudiced, clear minds.

I venture to suggest some ideas. A story I have in mind is 'Girls' written by Mrinal Pande (1991: 56-64). It is written from the perspective of a girl child who feels acutely her own marginalized status vis-à-vis male children in the family, and is increasingly made to feel that her being a girl is the cause of all her mother's problems. The story begins with a trip to the maternal grandmother's, Naani's, house, which the girl child doesn't look forward to because she feels threatened by everyone in that place, much like the mongrel dog who is used to being reprimanded. The girl is ordered to bend down and touch Naani's feet: 'bend properly... you are born a girl and you will have to bend for the rest of your life, so you might as well learn...' (59) In contrast, the male grandchild is made much of — he sleeps with the Naani, and is generally cuddled cosily in her lap, while the girls are shooed away. The ladies of the house fervently pray that the protagonist's mother may be blessed with a son, and so protect the family's honour, as well as relieve Ma of having to endure another pregnancy. The girl child thus longs to be a boy and in one of her moments of frustration, she stubbornly refuses to let her aunt, the mother of a boy, pass till the lady says 'properly' — 'girls are nice' (62). The hapless child looks at carefree birds in the sky and wonders, 'do mother birds too think their girl birds are inferior?' (62) She is derided as a 'witch' for asking questions. The climax is ironic — it is the day of Ashtami, and the girls are suddenly given importance. Their foreheads are anointed with tikkas, for they have suddenly become deified as 'Kanya kumaris.' The little girl, however, rejects this and plays at being an engine — a boyish and blasphemous idea! The mother is furious, and is stopped from hitting her child because it is a 'sin' to hit a 'kanyakumari.' The little girl finally bursts into sobs: 'When you people don't love girls, why do you worship them?' she cries and is sternly rebuked: 'what a temper for a girl to show!' The story ends with the child screaming, 'I don't want to be a goddess' and it is as if a bullet had been fired somewhere (63-64).

This story seems to me to be an ideal choice for exposing the unjustified idolatry of the male child, the silencing of women right from childhood, and the ironic deification of women when they are actually despised and rejected; the deification is also solely because the kanyakumaris will grow up into women — the bearers of male offspring, and therefore upholders of the family honour. When we study such texts, a host of issues pertaining to the actual lives of our young girls and boys are brought into the open. In a language /literature class, where students are taught the nuances of language, the words, sentence structures and the discourse in the text do not simply remain items of grammar, but become instead vital tools for communicating ideas. Discussion of the issues involved would not only provide language practice, but also scope for



understanding a woman's perspective and the hypocrisy of some of our rituals. It is stressed that the teaching methodology would also need to be different, with a great deal of student-student, and student-teacher interaction and focused questioning regarding crucial points in the text. By engaging our young adults in the above-suggested manner, it is hoped that a more analytical stance would be developed in them, especially toward so-called time-honoured rituals and practices, which perpetuate biased and negative attitudes toward women.

My attempt in this paper has been to highlight the potentially damaging effects of prescribing and teaching texts that propagate unjustified and regressive patriarchal attitudes toward women. I have focused my critique on Prof. Puran Singh's 'Woman,' a text prescribed at the undergraduate level, especially since it talks of freedom and honour to women, while simply reinforcing the same mind-set that has shackled and suppressed women for centuries. I have also described the actual effect of teaching this text to undergraduate boys and girls, and suggested a viable alternative that challenges not only the entrenched prejudices against the girl child, but also the hypocrisy underlying the ritual worship of 'kanyakumaris.' My contention is that it's only by revising our attitude toward the issues in question that we can hope to bring about the much-needed change.

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