

The Old Quilt

Veena Verma (1960 -)

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An Introduction

Short story writing in Punjabi has established itself as a very important form particularly while depicting the social reality of the land and its people. The consistency of the Punjabi writers speaks volumes about the self-imposed responsibility the writer takes on him/herself for the love of Punjab.

It would not be wrong to say that Punjabi diaspora has also, in a way, been able to connect with the land more profoundly and objectively. More importantly, the tradition of the people finds space amongst these writers, who from a distance, seem to be more nostalgic about the traditional nuances from which they are cut off. Immigration has been an important formula that has governed the land, be it dislocation during partition or immigrations to other countries. Post-partition Punjab witnessed an obsession amongst people concerning immigration to other countries. The diaspora writer connects not to the land alone but also formulates a critic of the social realities once positioned in a foreign land and from amongst the alien society. Some major writers of Punjabi diaspora such as Ajaib Kamal, Rupinderpal Singh Dhillon, Sadhu Binning, Harjit Atwal, Ajmer Rhode, Amarjit Chandan and Veena Verma have highlighted the nuances of Punjabi cultural, traditional practices without ignoring the stereotypes and narrow-mindedness that has been transported into the ghettos which have originated in the foreign lands.

Brought up in Punjab, in Budhlada village in Bathinda district of Punjab, Veena Verma was educated in England (1984 onwards) and has been in London since then. Born in 1960, she is one of the contemporary women writers, who has opened up space for writing by women and about women in literature by Punjabi diaspora. Veena Verma's poems and stories give voice to women who have been exploited and victimized in the overwhelming desire for migrating to foreign countries. She pictures the maddening urge and rush amongst the Punjabi society for relocating to London, Canada and U.S.A, a phase witnessed in Punjab mostly around 1980s onwards. Her stories capture the experience of women either married to an N.R.I and left behind, or about the exploitation of woman in the new land by her husband or by the

white men, or even about the struggle of a single Asian woman often depicted through the clash of value system of the West and the East. She has written three volumes of short stories Mull Di Teeveen, Firangian Di Nooh (2002), Jogian Di Dhee (2009), and a collection of poetry JeeKarde.

The story “Razai” translated as “The Old Quilt” depicts a state of confusion and conflict in the life of an Indian woman who is left behind in India by her husband after marriage. The husband migrates to England and marries a White woman. The wife in India travels to England and manages to reach him with her small children. He refuses to accept her and abandons her to meet her fate in the cold flat of a friend. The woman meets an old Sikh man who had retired from the Indian Army and was now settled in England. He gives her a shelter in his home. They begin sharing the only quilt the old man has. As time moves on, the children grow up. While her daughter leaves after her marriage, the son marries a White woman. Harbans Kaur now an old lady faces language challenges and cultural conflicts with her daughter-in-law. The two women have a rift around the quilt. An old quilt, now a rag, metaphorically, forms a connection between the past and present.

Veena Verma is being widely recognized in the Punjabi literary circles and her stories have been enacted as plays in Chandigarh. It would not be wrong to call her the only woman writer in Punjabi diaspora, who is evolving with such sensibility and sensitivity towards women

The Old Quilt

She was still lying in bed, covered completely, face and head immersed in the quilt. It was already eleven. Her daughter-in-law, Kathy, had uncovered her face several times to check if the old woman was not already dead. Seeing her breathing, she covered her face again and returned. She had offered her tea around nine in the morning, but every time Harbans Kaur turned sides and shook her head in denial.

Kathy avoided much interaction with her primarily due to the language barrier. Every time, Kathy meant to say something, Harbans Kaur misunderstood it as something else. Though, it was twenty years since Harbans Kaur came to England, she was not able to

understand English at all. Her son and daughter-in-law would converse throughout the day in English, but she could not understand a word of what they spoke. Whenever Kathy spoke to her, she replied in ‘Yes, yes-no, no’ several times, without understanding...this ‘yes-no’ was the cause of the frequent quarrels they began having at home.

Kathy had recently married Harbans Kaur’s son Satbir. One day, while cleaning the house, she entered Harbans Kaur’s room when she had gone to the Gurudwara. Kathy cleaned the room and replaced the bedding of her mother-in-law with a new one. She put her old, tattered and worn-out quilt in a black garbage bag and left it outside the house. On her return, Harbans Kaur was shocked to see the changed appearance of her room.

“Me no *razai*’...?” she asked her daughter-in-law.

“Yes Mum, you don’t need that rag anymore. That is too old. I’ve brought this new blanket for you....” Kathy held the new blanket in her hands and showed it to her mother-in-law.

“No *blanket*...Me *quilt* ...” She started weeping like a child.

“What happened...? Why are you crying...?” asked Kathy, perturbed.

“No, No me *quilt*...” weeping, she went out. Kathy anxiously ran behind her. Harbans Kaur searched the garbage bags kept outside the house and brought her quilt back. She picked up the blanket from the bed and put it on the carpet. Kathy, snatched the blanket from Harbans Kaur’s hands in anger.

“This is very dirty...not good for your health....” she shouted.

“No, No...Satbir...Satbir...oh... Satte?” bellowedⁱⁱ Harbans Kaur.

“What happened Mum...?” Satbir came running from the other room. Harbans Kaur had spread herself on the quilt and Kathy was trying to pull it out.

“O son! My *quilt*...” Satbir could not see tears in Harbans Kaur’s eyes.

“How dare you...?” He pulled Kathy’s golden hair like dry grass and slapped her pitilessly.

“What’s wrong with you...?” Kathy was shocked.

“Don’t treat my mother like shit. You bitch....” he looked at her with hatred while picking up his mother from the floor.

“I was just cleaning her room....” Kathy’s brown eyes were hazy.

“Don’t touch her things. Let her live as she likes....” He was very angry with Kathy.

“How can she live in such a dirty room....? And how can we live with her...?” she hadn’t yet completed her sentence when Satbir pulled her hair again.

“Then go to hell....I am going to live with my mother in this dirty place. You get lost....” he lifted his hand to slap her again but Harbans Kaur held his arm with her meek hands.

“No son, don’t fight in English. I don’t understand anything. Don’t say anything to daughter-in-law.” She said in Punjabi and tried drawing Satbir away from the room.

“I am not saying anything to her, Mum. I am only telling her that if she has to stay in this house then she has to respect my mother.” He clarified in Punjabi.

“I don’t need respect. Just don’t fiddle with things in my room... son...with my things....Explain to her in English that she should not throw out anything from my room.... Apart from that, I don’t ask for anything from you....” she was standing with folded hands.

“From today, she will enter your room only after knocking at the door.... after asking you.... I’ll teach her how to behave....” he replied in rage.

“No son don’t fight. Don’t beat the daughter-in-law. How is it her fault, ... poor creature? She doesn’t understand my language, what I say ...” she explained

Kathy went back to her room quietly. After that day, she never entered her mother-in-law’s room without asking her. She would enter only with her permission, clean her room, wash her clothes, help her bathe and wash, cook her favorite food, but she would never touch anything in her room without her consent.

Kathy was very wise. It was a love marriage. She was a clerk in the firm where Satbir was an engineer. Kathy and Satbir’s friendship had resulted in love, both decided to get married.

“I’ll first talk to my mother....” Satbir said.

“Who is marrying? You or your mother...?” Kathy laughed.

“Shut-up. Kathy, I believe you are amature girl. You will not spoil our relationship because of these small and petty things. I have loved only one person in the world, and that is my mother. And if you ever try to interfere in this, that day will be the last day of our relationship.... and trust me,I am not joking.” he said looking into Kathy’s eyes very seriously.

“If your mother doesn’t like me then ...?” Kathy’s pink lips trembled.

“You don’t worry. My mother knows every bit of me. She will not turn you away” Satbir patted her cheeks.

When Harbans Kaur saw Kathy, she was reminded of Kuldeep Singh’s second wife, her co-wife. Not just Kathy, in fact, every white woman, appeared to her as her co-wife, someone who had snatched her husband from her, had not been touched with her pleas and consequently had forced her children to wander around the streets. Harbans Kaur was scared of every white woman. Seeing Satbir with Kathy her heart had sunk. But she didn’t want to wipe out the sparkling happiness on her son’s face. It was for this that she resigned and accepted her.

“I like the girl, son, but just tell her not to swear at me in English. Whatever she wants to say she should say in Punjabi.”. This was the condition she laid down.

“But she doesn’t know Punjabi, Mum....” Satbir smiled.

“If she doesn’t know it, then teach her. Otherwise, when she talks to you, you can translate it for me, like your *Bapuji* did...But let there be no scuffle at home.”Harbans Kaur was lost in her thoughts while speaking to him.

Kathy was married to Satbir. Kathy came and decorated the house. Old paper, carpets, sofas, bed and even the utensils in the kitchen were changed. What did not change was Harbans Kaur’s room.

The room was Harbans Kaur’s world. Whenever she lay on her bed in the room, her life’s story revolved around her like a film. She had come into this house twenty years back. Without invitation, without any invite! Not just the house, actually she had come to this

country without an invitation, with two little children. With a boy, seven years old, and a girl of five. Her husband Kuldeep Singh had moved to this place about five years before her arrival. Her younger daughter was still in her womb then and Kuldeep had not seen his daughter's face.

“As soon as I reach, I'll send you the passport. You will bring the children with you...” saying this, he had left for England on a ship.

But after leaving, neither did he send the documents, nor did he send for them. Initially, he kept writing to his parents but that also stopped gradually with time.

Till Harbans Kaur's parents were alive, she spent a few months with them and some time with her in-laws. After their death her brothers and sisters-in-law shut their doors on her. Both her older and younger brothers-in-law taunted her. Hopelessly, her father-in-law sold off Kuldeep's share of land and bought tickets for her with her children and sent them off to England. He wrote a letter to his friend who had been living in England for several years asking him to pick her up from the airport and drop her at Kuldeep Singh's house. The old man had thought that on seeing his wife and children, he would take up their responsibility. The father-in-law's friend picked Harbans Kaur and her children from the airport and dropped them at Kuldeep's house. But the story was entirely different there. Kuldeep Singh had married a 'mem' ⁱⁱⁱ[an English woman]. Seeing Harbans Kaur, he lost his head.

“For what have you come here?” He was baffled.

“Where else should I go...?” she asked.

“You can't stay here...go back...” ordered Kuldeep Singh.

“Whom should I go back to? My parents are already dead. Your brothers are not ready to see my face. Then, where should I take my children...? Bapuji said that you will take care of your family once you see them...” she narrated her story in a few words.

“But I have another family here.... I got married after moving into this foreign land. What would become of a lonely man in this cold country....? My wife is a white woman, and we have two children...” He said it as if he was turning out an ascetic from the doorstep, telling him that the food is over.

Harbans Kaur couldn't understand what she should do. She had never expected that things would reach this stage-

Kuldeep was quiet.

In the evening, his second wife returned from work. She was surprised to see these new guests. Kuldeep Singh tried convincing her tactfully, saying that this is his first family and that his father had forcibly sent them after him. He would soon send them back to India. But, it seemed that the his wife, the white woman was outraged . She threw the entire family's luggage, including Kuldeep Singh's, out of the house.

"Either she stays or I..." She announced.

"I'll do your domestic chores—washing, cleaning and cooking...everything." Harbans Kaur knelt down and touched the white woman's feet.

The white woman continued to blast her in English, but she hardly understood anything she said.

"Tell her I'll be her servant. I don't ask for any right of equality as a wife...." Harbans Kaur begged her husband.

"She doesn't even want to hear your name. She is throwing me out with you...." He answered with hatred.

Then for some time Kuldeep kept on discussing something with the white woman in English. Finally, it was decided that Kuldeep would send his wife and children back to India in a couple of days.

He took Harbans Kaur with him and left her at a friend's vacant house, promising to return the next day to talk to her. Harbans Kaur didn't find it appropriate to pressurize him. If he had made a mistake in his youth, she was ready to accept him as it is. Anyway, if he arranges a separate house for her and visits her occasionally, that would be enough for her.

But Kuldeep did not show up the next day, or even...on the third day, never. There was no electricity, water or fire in the house. The children were freezing in the cold. Hungry and starved, they kept holding onto their mother for the next two days. There was neither a cloth

nor a piece of rag to cover them at night. Taking both the kids in her wrap, shivering, they spent the freezing nights.

It started snowing. Harbans Kaur was tired of waiting for Kuldeep Singh. She didn't even know where she was living, or where her husband was. On the third night when the cold was unbearable and extreme, she rose and knocked at the door of the neighbour's house. A middle-aged Punjabi Sikh man opened the door.

"What's up...? Who's that...?" He was taken by surprise with the appearance of a strange woman at his door.

"I...ji... I came to live in the house next to yours two days ago. My husband left me there.... But it is two days now, he hasn't returned. There are two little children with me. They are unable to sleep the whole night in cold. Could you please spare a quilt and lend it to me for two days, Waheguru^{iv} will bless you...?" She spoke with folded hands.

"That house...? In that house, even a bird has not flapped her wings for the last ten years; where did you come from...?" He was surprised.

"I don't know ji, their father left us here..." she shook her head helplessly.

"And never returned...! Hmmm...!" sighed, the house owner.

The snow was falling on the children's heads; with blowing noses they clung to their mother's legs.

"Come, come inside." he said, making way.

Harbans Kaur, a bit hesitant, entered the house with her children. The neighbour's house was as warm as a kiln. The moment they entered they felt warm.

"Come sit..." he brought them into the sitting room, where a gas heater was scorching like a burner. The children sat next to the heater and warmed their hands. Harbans Kaur kept standing at the door.

"Come in, you can also sit down..." The neighbour pointed towards the old sofa lying next to them. She collected herself and sat down composed on the chair.

The neighbour went into the kitchen and brought two packets of biscuits and handed them to the children. The children looked at their mother for the approval but immediately grabbed the biscuits. Who knows for how long had they been starving? He went into the kitchen again and brought a kettle full of tea. Harbans Kaur couldn't refuse. She got up and poured the tea into the cups and served it to the children.

"You may also drink..." the man said.

"No, I am fine. The children are hungry..." she said, but she was feeling very hungry and felt desperate at the sight of tea.

"It is okay, you may also take some tea. We can prepare more." The man poured the tea for her in a cup. As the first sip poured down, she felt as if life was returning into her. She finished the remaining tea.

"I'll see if there is something for you inside. I may not have a spare quilt. Yes, there is an old blanket from the days of my job, if that is fine with you..." He entered the room inside and returned with a blanket in his hands.

"Is there a heater at your house?" he asked

"What heater?" She did not understand.

"This kind of fireplace ...?" He pointed towards the gas heater.

"No... there is neither water in the kitchen, nor electricity in that house." She said holding the blanket.

"Then do you want to kill your children there?" the neighbour said assertively.

"What should I do now?" She said looking at the children who had, in the warmth of the heater, fallen asleep on the floor itself. "Ah! They have fallen asleep..."

"Really...? Fallen asleep? Poor kids were hungry...no sooner did they feel the warmth of the heater than they fell asleep." He took the blanket from Harbans' hand and spread it over the children.

"Should I carry them to...?" Harbans Kaur muttered to herself.

“Why pick them up, let them lie here. They have just fallen asleep, poor things. They may fall sick there... in the cold.” The neighbour stroked the head of the children with his hands.

Harbans Kaur also sat next to the children. The neighbour went into the other room and brought his quilt and put it on the floor.

“Here, take this and cover your legs with it....” he told Harbans Kaur.

“But you just have one quilt ji....” She said standing up.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll also spend the night here....we will manage together.” Having said this, he threw the pillow on the ground.

Harbans Kaur sat covering her feet with half the quilt and in the other half were the neighbour’s feet.

“My name is Fauji^v (soldier) Karnail Singh....I live alone here. I am from Faridkot....” The neighbour introduced himself.

Harbans Kaur wept as she narrated her story to the Fauji.

“Even if you hadn’t told me, I had understood your situation” Fauji took a deep breath. “That man who deserted his young wife with her two innocent children, in the dark night, and ran away..., you... must abandon the hope that he will return. Take care of yourself.”

Harbans Kaur, like a statue, kept listening to him. It was past midnight. She was tired for many days and just didn’t realise when she fell asleep while still sitting. She woke up after daybreak. Feeling embarrassed, her yellow face turned red, when she found that she was resting her head on Fauji’s arm. They were lying entangled with each other in the same quilt, and the children were sleeping as carefree as if they were tired having fought a war. She got up slowly being careful not to wake up Fauji. Perhaps he was already awake.

“I was waiting for you to wake up Banso.... I thought you had just slept, so why wake you up.” He said half asleep.

Harbans’ body was shivering. She had slept in the arms of a stranger the whole night. She wasn’t looking into Fauji’s eyes. When she stood up her legs were shaking. She covered her head with a scarf and began waking her children.

“Let them sleep, Banso. They’ll wake up themselves.... Come I’ll take you into the kitchen and teach you how to light the English burner....” He said, getting up.

Both of them went into the kitchen. Fauji taught her how to use the utilities in the kitchen and both of them started preparing tea together.

“I had just come to ask for quilt ji....” She stood bowing her head low.

“It doesn’t matter. There are two innocent children with you. Where will you carry them and wander in this cold. Till something comes up for you, you should stay here....” having said this, Fauji went and sat next to the children.

Fauji Karnail Singh searched all the documents with Harbans Kaur and found Kuldeep Singh’s address in them. Leaving Harbans Kaur and the children at home, he went alone to talk to Kuldeep Singh. Harbans Kaur kept looking at the door till late evening waiting for Kuldeep Singh to return with Fauji. But Fauji came back at night, all alone.

“They have left the house and gone away” Fauji said in a low voice “Somewhere else...?” Harbans’s voice sank.

“Don’t know anything...I kept wandering around puzzled on the roads the whole day but couldn’t find a single trace.” He sat on the sofa with folded legs.

“Now what will happen to us...?” Harbans Kaur banged her head with a hand.

Fauji kept quiet.

“Oh God...for what sins am I paying now ...?” She started banging her head with her hands. And the children also started crying with her.

“Why didn’t I die the moment I was born, Oh my God....Haaye, you should have strangled me the moment I was born, O my mother....” She cried inconsolably.

“Don’t cry, don’t..., my heart sinks....” Fauji, who used guns, canons, and played with bombs and ammunition throughout his life, could not bear two sad words from a woman. He carried the children in his arms.

“Get up and give the children something to eat. What is their fault?” He got up and entered the kitchen.

Harbans Kaur went on crying for a long time. Fauji fed the children and they, like the previous day, went and slept near the heater.

“If these children were not with me, I would have jumped into a well. Men take freedom for themselves but knot their women to children, just like shackles in animal’s feet so that they can’t go anywhere....” She was sitting alone talking to herself.

“Listen to me...come I’ll show you something.” Fauji took her by the arm.

She followed him. Opening the door that led into the backyard of the house, he switched on the light. A big bird was sitting in the dark.

“This bird comes here every year, Banso. Whenever it is expecting it comes here to my garden. I fill up a bowl of water and keep some grains for it. It gives birth to about ten to fifteen chicks. The whole night it keeps protecting them under its feathers. It doesn’t move from here because it’s a mother. Once the children learn to fly, they disappear. A few days after that, it is ready to become a mother once again.” Fauji told her about the bird as if he was narrating a story; but Banso didn’t respond.

“I mean to say that even though this bird is not married to anybody it still keeps delivering babies, one after the other. Motherhood is natural for the female. The female gives birth to the entire world. God has sent her as His messenger on this earth. If the female starts taking revenge on her children for the male’s betrayal and stops giving birth, the entire cycle of nature will stop. Banso.” Fauji went and stood near that bird, who was sitting hiding its chicks under its feathers and watching Fauji – it kept closing and opening its eyes.

“For a woman, children are never like chains tied to the feet of an animal; they are completion for her, a matter of pride that like God, she, too, is a creator. That is why a mother has been given the place next to God in the scriptures. Mother is a masterpiece of God; after creating a mother; God could not create any other thing like her.” Fauji was now caressing the feathers of the bird with his hands.

“But isn’t it said that woman is worth only a shoe in the foot of a man...as written in the scriptures?” Harbans Kaur shot a question like a bullet.

“In which scripture has this been written? Burn such a scripture in which woman is called a shoe. A woman should restrain the entry of such scriptures, not just in her house, but also in

her city....Have you read any such scripture or have just heard about these things...?” Fauji came and stood next to her again.

“Where could I have read? This is what people say....” Harbans told him honestly.

“This is very bad. Actually, you women, since birth, are taught that your husband is your God. Even if the person is not worthy enough to be a human being, even if he is like a donkey, you don’t stop worshipping him. Keep consecrating a donkey with sandal powder.” Fauji laughed.

“What else is a woman? Is she a man’s maid...?a servant?You read English books. What do you know about scriptures...?” Harbans Kaur couldn’t understand the extent of Fauji’s knowledge of the scriptures.

“In Punjabi scriptures, in the Guru Granth Sahib, it is written “Why call her [a woman] bad, the one who gives birth to kings.^{vi} I am not talking of any English book. But people don’t practice what is written in the scriptures.” Fauji nodded his head in disappointment.

“What am I to do with the scriptures? I can’t even understand what you are talking about....” She spoke like a lost soldier.

“You must understand that there is no need to jump into the well. You are a mother and there is a very big responsibility on your shoulders. Take care of your children.” Fauji patted her on the back.

“But with whose support...?” asked Harbans.

“With whose support does this bird look after its chicks?” Fauji countered. “You give them the grains.” said Harbans, as if she was complaining.

“I’ll provide your children also with grains till they are able to fly.... You be strong to protect them under your feathers.” Fauji gave her the strength and they entered the house walking slowly.

Time moved on. Fauji managed to get Harbans Kaur and her children benefits from social security. He got some work for her from a factory and she’d assemble electric plugs sitting at home, earning some 20-30 pounds a week. The children started going to school. She couldn’t overcome her grief but for the sake of her children, she took charge of her life. She hardly left

home. She was not at all aware of what happened outside the house. One day, the children were at school and even Fauji had gone out somewhere. Suddenly, the milk was over, and she went to a corner shop to get milk. There was a very thin man sitting at the shop.

Having bought a bottle of milk, when she paid money to the shopkeeper, he held her hand. The bottle dropped from Harbans' hands and fell on the ground.

"You shameless man, don't you have a mother or a sister at home?" She curtly rebuked him in Punjabi.

"What do you seek from an old Fauji? You need someone hot... matching you, of your age. Just give an order and we'll install a milk stall in front of your house." He replied shamelessly.

Harbans Kaur threw the money she had carried for milk and ran towards her house. After reaching home, she kept weeping.

"So, people talk like this? Along with me, Fauji is also being defamed?" She kept asking herself.

When Fauji returned home in the evening, she wept and narrated the entire episode to him.

"Which shopkeeper...? That weakling....The one who sells the newspapers...?" He inquired.

"Yes..." Banso nodded.

Fauji chuckled.

"Do you find this amusing...?" She was irritated.

"No, this is not amusing. You have never gone out and that is why you don't know how people talk. I hear this every day." Fauji spoke casually.

"They say that to you too...?" she was anxious.

"Yes, they say that I have kept another's wife at my house. I am a wrong person for the world Banso, but sometimes the worst person in eyes of the world is the best person for someone....." He dropped his head while speaking.

"Oh...it is disgusting.... What do we do then...?" Banso was worried.

But Fauji didn't reply. Both of them were silent for a long time.

"If you allow me, can I say something?" Banso's tone was serious.

"Yes, tell me." Fauji raised his head.

"You marry me...." She looked directly into his eyes for the first time.

"Anyway, we sleep together in one quilt even though we remain chaste." Fauji was surprised how Banso had crossed all limits today. He looked at Banso carefully, wheatish, like the shine on gold, hefty body and fire-emitting eyes.

Fauji felt that Banso was flooded with youthfulness.

He kept looking at Banso with hollow eyes for a long time. "Banso ...I would have married you that very night when you had slept like an infant in my arms, but I am not capable" Fauji's face was stiff like a stone, emotionless.

"Why what happened to you?" Banso looked at him with questioning eyes.

When I went to the Burma war, an enemy's bullet hit my groin. Though the doctors had the bullet removed through an operation, I become impotent. I was engaged before the war but when I didn't return, they got their daughter married elsewhere. What could I have done, having returned? My brothers-in-law sent me messages threatening that the day I enter India, they'd kill me, 'you have betrayed our sister', they said. I thought 'How will you kill a man who is already dead.... who was killed by destiny...? That's it Banso, after that I never returned.... the government of England gave me permission to stay here.... Since then, I have lived all alone here...." Karnail Singh sighed.

Harbans Kaur kept listening to him with her head bowed.

"You say that I should marry you. When you slept with me the first night, I didn't abstain because I am an angel. In scriptures, it is stated, that a woman is like fire, she can burn acknowledged saints and ascetics and reduce them to ash...that day this was proved. The whole night I kept lying down...with fire in my arms, my body too was hot, but I didn't have the strength to extinguish this fire. The age difference between us and my weakness kept me away from you, and that which could have happened didn't. Well, you see, I am not an angel...." Harbans noticed that Fauji was getting out of breath.

“You are a young woman, Banso. A young woman is like the wind, where it blows, fragrance accompanies it, and people tend to blame the young woman. If people, seeing you, start pointing fingers, it is not a new thing. Even a great woman like Sita has been defamed here, who despite accompanying her husband to exile, was thrown out of the house. Man, from the beginning has used woman and finally abandoned her. You are not the only one; this is nothing new” Fauji was consoling her.

“But.... but....” Banso wanted to say something.

“I know, at your age, every woman seeks the company of a man. I will get you married Banso, after finding a nice man.... But first you need to get divorced.... Your husband’s whereabouts are not even known....” he said looking in her eyes.

“I don’t need a divorce^{vii}. Such men are worse than the dead. A woman may grieve the death of her husband for her entire life, but for such bastards she finishes the rituals related to mourning in two days....” there was immense hatred in Banso’s heart for her husband.

“If that is what you think, I can find a match for you” Fauji said, lifting himself from the sofa.

“But, I meant, you?” she, once again, stood in front of him like a question mark.

Fauji kept quiet.

“I don’t need anyone else. Nor is the bodily union called love. The way you have taken care of my children and me, I feel like devoting myself completely to you...I don’t need any other man, I need warmth, which you have, and only you have it. I had come to ask for a quilt. Often, I wonder, is it your warmth or that of the quilt? Even earlier, I have been sleeping in quilts for thirty years....” Banso’s tone had softened. “Actually, I asked you to marry me so that the children are able to call you father and people stop defaming us....”

“Banso, why do we have such double standards in our lives? Tell your children about our relationship. Look at the English people, they only call their father as father; they call all others by their names. Our people uselessly indulge in churning out relationships. The relationship would evolve overnight and fade out before the dawn. I have seen relationships wearing out, scrapping off, burning away, breaking down and dying out. Why can’t we live without relationships...? If someone’s brother is wayward, she’d make someone else her

brother. Her children will also call him ‘mama, mama’^{viii}, further, that uncle may as well be the mother’s boyfriend! But for the world he’d still be a brother. Useless hypocrites! Why not straightaway say he is a friend...my close friend? is it an insult to say this?” Fauji thought differently.

“No, I think about people; what will they say?” Banso put forth her logic, very softly.

“See Banso, what will people say? To know this, is not your concern. Until you gain so much strength as to be able to face the crows and the dogs outside, you will be attacked continuously Darwin spoke about the survival of the fittest in the jungle.... A woman needs to learn to protect herself.” Darwin’s theory flew over her head, though.

“With God’s grace, may you, my prosector^{ix}, have a long life.... Haven’t you already prosecuted me enough....?” Banso pronounced protector as prosector.

“How have I protected you? You have taken support of an old tree beside a river Banso, no one knows when this tree may fall, and you shall drown in the storm....” Fauji was anxious.

“I won’t drown in storms now ji. I will learn to swim... and learning from me many more women shall swim across.... You must give me a little support.” she offered her hand to him.

“If this is your desire Banso, then ‘Render your support to them, lay your head for them and never betray.’ I am the son of a Sikh; I’d lay my head to keep faith....” Fauji never expected that Banso could speak so sensibly.

After that day they never spoke about this again. When children addressed Fauji as Uncle ji once or twice, Banso scolded them.

“No, don’t say Uncle ji, call him Bapuji.”

Whatever people gossiped outside, Banso had plugged cotton wool in her ears; it was as if these people never existed for her. Fauji taught her to read Gurmukhi. She started living her life, wore the best clothes, and turned Fauji’s brick and stone house into a home.

Fauji would say:

“What is life for a loner? If there is no woman with him, a man cannot survive. God has sent woman to be the nurturer of a man; one who looks after him throughout his life, sometimes as

a mother, sometimes as a sister, sometimes as a wife;but man is thankless, he exploits this voiceless creature....”

Many new things were brought in everyday, shopping was done for the household after this, but Banso and Fauji’s quilt remained the same.

“The children have grown up Banso, buy another quilt for yourself.” One night,Fauji told her casually.

“It is okay...everybody knows... why spend unnecessarily....” When Banso said that, Fauji understood.

Banso’s elder daughter was seventeen, when Fauji got her married to his friend’s son. The daughter lived happily at her house. She came occasionally to see her mother; her son Satbir studied at the university. He went out to read booksonly;Fauji was teaching him the ways of life. Satbir worshiped his mother. He remembered how his mother had suffered in the past. He knew that Fauji was not his real father, but he never complained to his mother; rather he was proud about how bravely his mother had faced the world and society.

One day, while on the morning walk, Fauji suffered a massive heart attack and could not rise after that. He was on life-support system for several days in the hospital until he passed away. The world turned dark for Banso. The calamity repeated itself once again. She had only one support and that too, was lost. The spiritual and emotional bonding she had with him was missing even with her own mother. She lost herself in grief and kept wailing, sitting at home.

One day Fauji’s lawyer came and handed over some papers to her. In the evening when Satbir came home she showed him the papers. This was a will. Fauji had willed the house as well as the entire money in his bank account to Banso.

“I couldn’t do anything for all that you did for me while you were alive.... Now after death, too, you have obliged us with your blessings. I am very grateful to you. How will I be able to repay you...? I had just come to ask for a quilt to cover my children, you gave us your house and your money Haaye.... the bird that came to collect grains for her children, you built a nest for her! How will I repay you ...? May you get your place in the heaven! O the writer of the will, may God bless you with a position in heaven too, to use your pen to write for a good

cause..... my soul mate.... you should have taken me along with you, ji I am nothing without you...Haaye...” covering her face with her scarf, she wailed.

Satbir was choking with pain. Mother sang her tragic story to her young son He took his mother in his arms. He wept bitterly, and then replied, keeping a strong heart.

“Stop it, Mum... Bapuji’s soul shall be hurt....”

Banso moaned, hugging her son, her head resting on his chest. She felt that Satbir’s and her grief were the same. The difference was that she was crying out loud and he was weeping silently.

Many days passed; what to say of days, an age passed by, but Banso’s sorrow did not lessen. Satbir tried consoling his mother but there was no panacea for her grief. Slowly she detached herself from the world. She had no desire to live and she took to her bed. For her, life was meaningless without Fauji.

She had stopped entering the kitchen and had lost appetite. Satbir cooked English food for himself and abstained from troubling his mother.

“He is an obedient son as *Shravan*, just like his father.” In her mind, she often compared Satbir to Fauji, forgetting that Satbir’s biological father was Kuldeep. After Satbir’s marriage some the house became lively, but for Banso her room was her heaven. She would cover her head with her quilt and keep thinking about Fauji.

This quilt was like a bridge between Fauji and her. She felt as if she still slept in his arms. The fragrance of Fauji’s body and his touch was imbued in every part of her body.

Today, when Banso didn’t wake up till 12 noon, Kathy got worried. She removed the quilt from Banso’s face.

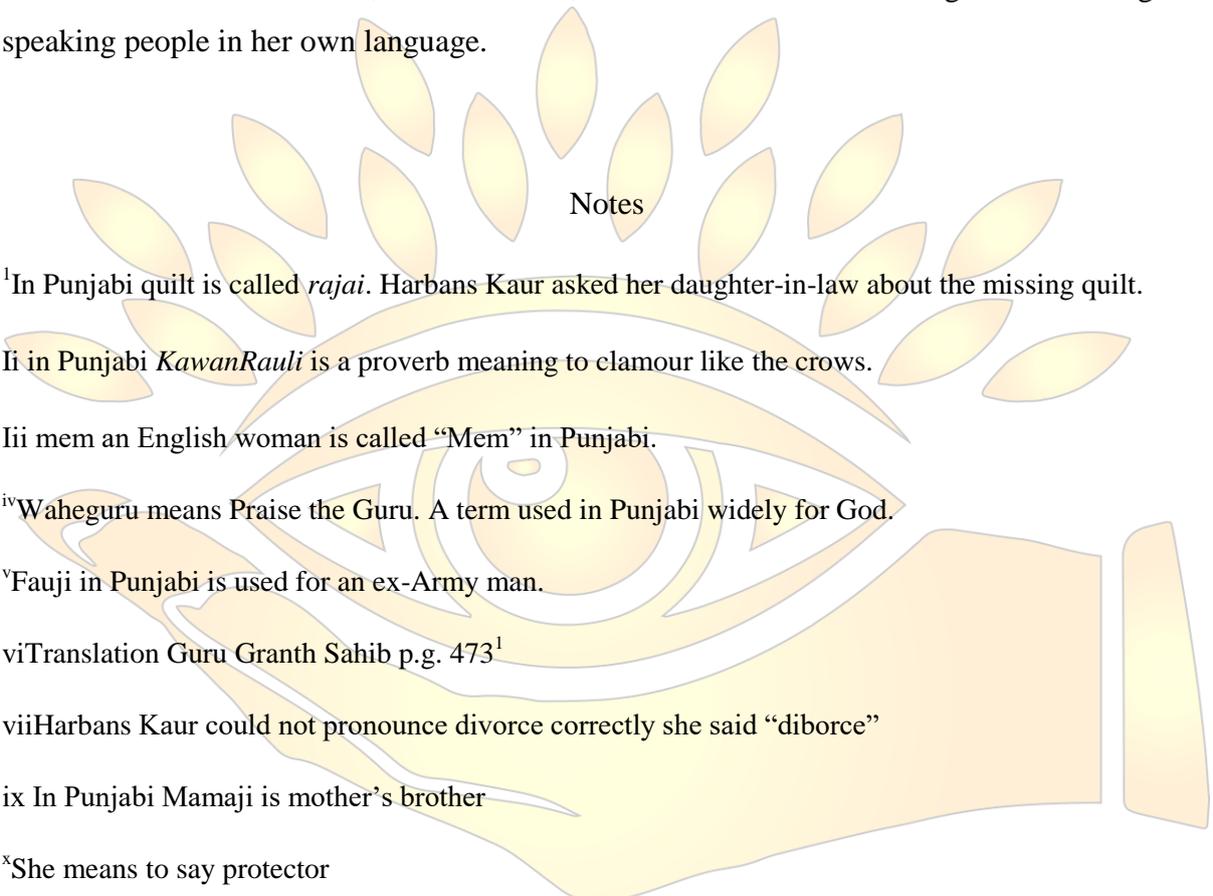
Banso opened her eyes. Kathy was standing a bit away from the bed and smiling.

“Jaas (Yes)...?” getting disturbed, Banso asked her.

Kathy lifted the quilt and made place to sit on the bed, caressing her forehead, she said, “I know Mum, your boyfriend gave you this quilt...Satbir told me that he loved you so much and so did you....” Kathy thought that this was the only way to enter the heart of her mother-in-law.

Banso kept quiet for some time. Kathy repeated her words again.

“If I could speak English, my daughter, I would have told you that, for you, he may be my boyfriend; but for me, he is God himself. This quilt which seems to be garbage for you, is an embrace of that God. And when someone experiences the grace of God’s embrace, then, for him, all other relationships become cold and meaningless” Banso raised her finger like a lawyer and reprimanded her daughter-in-law in Punjabi. However, Kathy could not understand what Banso said, but for Banso, she had now taken a revenge from all English-speaking people in her own language.



Notes

ⁱIn Punjabi quilt is called *rajai*. Harbans Kaur asked her daughter-in-law about the missing quilt.

ⁱⁱIn Punjabi *KawanRauli* is a proverb meaning to clamour like the crows.

ⁱⁱⁱMem an English woman is called “Mem” in Punjabi.

^{iv}Waheguru means Praise the Guru. A term used in Punjabi widely for God.

^vFauji in Punjabi is used for an ex-Army man.

^{vi}Translation Guru Granth Sahib p.g. 473¹

^{vii}Harbans Kaur could not pronounce divorce correctly she said “diborce”

^{ix}In Punjabi Mamaji is mother’s brother

^xShe means to say protector