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Resisting and Assertive Stance of Pahari Women in Raman's "Gaachi" and Bhatia's "And a Song She Became"

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Abstract

A woman in society has often found herself in a subservient role long since the evolution of human species. Her role as a mother, daughter and wife has often led to the erasure of her identity as a human being as her freedom is largely circumscribed by these roles. Seen mainly as an object of sex, a woman often encounters insurmountable difficulties. Many feminist works have depicted the vulnerability of women and their precarious situation in a male controlled society. The experiences of Black women in Africa, white women in European countries and Asian women in Asian countries have found expression in major literary works. However, the experiences of Himachali women have not attracted wide attention so far. Though there are writers of repute such as R.S. Harnot, Yashpal, Sudershan Vashisth, Sadhu Ram Darshak, Gautam Vyathit, Sushil Kumar Phulland others who write in Hindi and Pahari languages, they are hardly translated into English and hence do not get the recognition that such works warrant. The present paper attempts to make a study of two Himachali short stories that poignantly capture the poverty and the resultant deprivation, the spirit of resilience as well as assertive and liberating stance of Pahari women. Translated by Meenakshi Faith Paul in *Short Stories of Himachal Pradesh* (2007), "And a Song She Became" by Badri Singh Bhatia addresses the life of the protagonist Mahajanu who tries to seek love in her marriage. However, not getting it from her husband, she enters into two more marriages and asserts her choice. The second story "Gaachi" by Tulsi Raman recounts the poverty ridden existence of Murto who not only takes care of her aged in-laws but also rears her children as her husband often fritters away the money on liquor. It also shows how she defies village customs and tills the field, a male occupation. The paper would also attempt to show how the writer echoes Rousseau (1712-1778) when he blames the cities or so called civilization as breeders of vice and a cause of degeneration. Both the stories bring women to the front stage and make them take their own decisions in adverse circumstances.

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Narrated in a flashback, "And a Song She Became" begins with the nameless narrator being told by her brother about the story of Mahajanu. It takes into account the Raddowal village situated at the height of 6750 feet where now a water project is inaugurated by a minister. The writer here describes the hard life of the Pahari people who earlier had to fetch water from far off places, other villages. Women bore pitchers of water over their heads in sultry as well as cold weather. Mahajanu, the protagonist of the story, is brought to the fore when the brother of the narrator mentions: "Mahajanu used to fetch water from here. She could carry two big pitchers" (155). Women in the hill states would work from dawn to dusk. Mahajanu is known and celebrated in her village and surrounding villages as she lived her life "to the hilt" (156). Her own brother-in-law wants the dancer in his village to sing the song of Mahajanu despite the fact that she had eloped, deserting his brother. The lyrics of the song make Mahajanu a legend:

> Situated in village Gyanu
> Is a temple of the goddess
> Runaway bride, Mahajanu
> Left her weeping *devar* hapless (156)

However, the other people in the village consider it against social norms to sing a song about a woman who deserted her husband: "See how arrogantly these Thakurs have asked for the song that ridicules them? Do they not care for their honour?" (157)

Mahajanu would trudge a distance of two kilometres to fetch water fromVanauni to her village Raddowal. She rues the day she was born in this village at the top of the hill where no one wanted to marry their daughters as the life was too hard. On the contrary, everyone wanted to affect the marriage of their boys with the girls of that village. She further describes the scarcity of water in the village: "One even has to drain off water from the bathroom to give to the cattle" (158). The author delineates the hard life of women in the hills. Mahajanu falls in love with Ramsaran's son, a soldier, as his home was there on the midway between Vanauni and Raddowal. Their love affair becomes the talk of the adjoining villages and the parents hastily marry her off with a middle-aged widower to avoid gibes of the villagers as Mahajanu had conceived from the soldier. Strangely enough, her soldier-lover runs away without any trace of his here abouts. Her fate here is like that of Leela Benare in Vijay Tendulkar's (1928-2008) *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1968). In that play too Leela Benare has to bear the brunt of pregnancy as Professor Damle refuses to marry her and the whole vicious circle of males dissects her personal life to pieces. Like Mahasweta Devi's Dhouli in the short story "Dhouli", Mahajanu is also impregnated by *Fauji* and thereafter deserted.

Mahajanu's fate with her widower husband turns her life colourless. She becomes rather a battered woman who suffers immensely from her marriage as the old husband only demands work and a son from her for procreation. Her husband, immersed in patriarchy, wants her to behave as per feminine aspects and remain a mute spectator.

Leghorn and Parker contend: "Good women are benchmarked as those who keep quiet, don't argue, do their work diligently, and have no needs or demands independent of their families" (114-15). On return to her mother's house, she also questions her daughter's decision to leave her husband as she had conceived from someone else. However, Mahajanu becomes a victim of domestic violence as her husband treats her mercilessly and does not even allow her to buy bangles: ". . . with her husband she lived like a corpse—the cursed fellow knew neither love nor how to honour a woman. He only wanted his household work done. A woman to cook and look after the cattle . . . When he spoke it seemed like he were chopping wood" (162). Judy Brady (b. 1937) in her satirical essay "Why I Want a Wife?" exposes male chauvinism:

> I want a wife who will keep my house clean. I want a wife who will keep my clothes clean, ironed, mended, replaced when need be, and who will see to it that my personal things are kept in their proper place so that I can find what I need the minute I need it. I want a wife who cooks the meals, a wife who is a good cook. (326)

Mahajanu resists the cruelty of her widower husband and makes her will prevail even in the *panchayat* where she refuses to return to the spiteful husband. She is allowed on a condition that her next husband would pay the expenses of wedding to the former husband. The writer here presents women in an empowered state where by a verdict of the local *panchayat* the woman could exercise her choice. Following her heart's desire, she now "was a free woman" (163). Though she thinks for a while of her soldier-lover, but she imagines an impossibility of their marriage as "caste and class stood between them" (162). The writer presents the multiple oppression of caste, class and gender barring Mahajanu to seek the soldier as her lover.

Intent on seeking love, Mahajanu is drawn towards Laxmi, a man who performs *kariyala* and is a replica of her soldier-lover. She dreams of getting closer to him. She confides in her mother who rightly advises her as to how a woman who leaves her husband loses respect in society and people view her suspiciously: "It takes only one blemish for other blots to follow" (163). Overlooking her mother's advice, she marries Laxmi who leaves her in the lurch after adding fuel to her desires. Instead of love and respect, bitterness envelops their relation. She now longs for a child who would have kept her occupied and sustained her as "Laxmi has no time" (164). Mahajanu's wish to find fulfilment even in this marriage yields no fruit as Laxmi does not keep his word: "Does a woman want only two square meals a day or a new set of clothes every six months? A give and take of bodies in the name of love . . . Laxmi does not even have a word of love to spare...men are always used to letting out their frustrations of the outer world on the women at home" (164). She rues the day she fell in love with Laxmi. She echoes Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) who in her *The Second Sex* (1953) also says that a man looks on a woman primarily as a sexual object. But even a man's dependence on a woman for sexual need does not liberate her: "Biological need—sexual desire and desire for posterity—which makes the male dependant on female, has not liberated women socially" (Beauvoir 30). What adds further to her woes is that Laxmi finds about her affair with the soldier and does not allow her a visit

to her parents' home. She even curses *fauji* for having spread the word which renders her life more miserable. Bereft of love, Mahajanu refuses to succumb to the pressures of this loveless marriage: "Love stems from the soul. The heart connects with the heart. The body is only a medium . . . She did not want to become the sheep whose wool is sheared every summer and winter. Nor a cow who at will could be tethered to any stake" (164). Refusing to be confined like an animal to the four walls of the house, she resists oppression of any kind, subtle or overt, and leaves Laxmi. She does not fret over her decision but faces the situation unflinchingly and deserts her husband for mistreating her.

The writer projects Mahajanuas a strong character for whom there always remains a choice to enter into another marriage. After she leaves Laxmi, yet another proposal awaits her. Deviya, whose sister-in-law had just died, wants her to marry with his brother, Sudama. Another proposal from Miyan revives her otherwise sagging spirit, making her feel that "she was not dirt" (166) and lands her in a dilemma of "whom to choose? Whom refuse?" Comparing the two proposals, she finds it advantageous to marry Deviya's brother as Deviya's wife was her friend. Still, her widower husband, Dalpat's threat looms large. She attacks him for demanding only a son from her to perform his *kapaalkriya* during cremation. She asserts her dignity and respect. On the assurance of Deviya of settling scores with Dalpat or even Laxmi if they intervene, she does make up her mind to marry Deviya's brother, Sudama. The ample drinking water in Sudama's village Gyanpur, Sudama's job in Shimla and her fancy about visiting it after their marriage, pull her more towards Sudama but she resolves that if Sudama does not return on the day of wedding, she would choose other way. As per the custom of *gaadar* marriage, three people from the village visit the bride's house to bring her back. This ritual seems to be quite dull and boring as she misses the charm and din of a proper marriage. Since Sudama does not make it to his home on the day of the *gaadar* ceremony, Mahajanu feels betrayed and runs away to Miyan's house unnoticed. Feeling rudderless, she decides to live with Miyan and also gives birth to a girl.

The narrator's brother's further revelation that Mahajanu's daughter has also changed three homes signals towards the question of the exercise of choice. The writer drives home the point that in the hills of Shimla the question of choice often remained open to women who could not otherwise withstand the stifling environment in an oppressive household. The further revelation that Mahajanu later ran away to Shimla as Miyan would 'beat' her is again indicative of the exercise of her will. Mahajanu starts to eke out her living by offering her services to a British woman who did not have anyone left in India as all had gone back to England after Independence and was leaving alone in Shimla. Her bequeathing to Mahajanu her bungalow after she dies is simultaneously the triumph of Mahajanu as readers are led to infer that here she would be the master of her own. Though these customs or *reet* "liberate and chain her simultaneously" (Paul 19), the question of money to be returned to the former husband was anti-woman. In present day, it is the husband who has to pay alimony on divorce, but in the hills it is the woman who has to pay this money. The writer imparts power

to women, nonetheless, as they had the right to leave their husbands if they subjugated them. However, now process is difficult and complex.

Mahajanu's life and her leaving one house for another becomes a legend. She becomes the subject of major social occasions or feasts. It is the same song that Deviya, the wrestler, now wants the singer and dancers to sing despite the fact that she was his sister-in-law and that her elopement was a blot on the family. The writer beautifully captures the narrative of Mahajanu to show the culture of the *Pahars*, the tough life of people and a woman's social position. Though Mahajanu's morality is questioned, she cares a fig about it as she does not want to be subsumed under suffocating, insensitive husbands. Her leaving alone at the end is an attack on the institution of marriage which inhibits women's liberty. "the advantages of matrimony are all on the male side . . . Women debase themselves like animals in marriage and the end they meet is widowhood, poverty and grief" (Laura Cereta qtd. in Ross 152).

II

"Gaachi" depicts the poverty-ridden existence of Murto and her persistent struggle to see her family through trying times. The family has only one room which is used for cooking, sleeping, storing and underneath the room is the cow shed that gives a free passage to flies to buzz around. The very beginning of the story presents the uneasiness of Murto as she wakes up slightly late and busies herself in domestic chores, ranging from milking the cow to giving them fodder or grass. The penury of Murto and her husband Motu may be discerned from the fact that "they were unable to add anything more than a small veranda to the house inherited from their ancestors" (107). Driven by poverty, whenever she borrows flour from the neighbours it gives them "fodder enough to gossip for an entire month" (107).

The writer underpins a crucial aspect of their family as Motu spends the little money on liquor. *Gharaat* is situated at a distance of nearly three miles from Motu's village Devali where people throng to get flour, play cards or buy ration items. He often leaves the house on the pretext of going to *gharaat,* but never returns before four or five days and that too in an inebriated state. What is worst is that after spending the little money on wine, he sells the flour to buy more. The writer attacks this negative trait in Motu's character which aggravates the family's troubles.

Murto's parents-in-law, Parma and Phuli are too old to work while her children Shamu and Resma are also three and five years old respectively. Though initially the mother-in-law would not hear a single word of reproach against her son, but now feels pity for Murto over Motu's indulgence. The narrator reveals how the *Gharaatu* bazaar grew from a small shop of Nasib Chand to many shops sprawled over a large area and that how the vehicles would stop there to relish the fish. The writer like Wordsworth and other Romantic writers show concern for nature and its inhabitants. Since people use dynamite to kill fish and even sell pure ghee, fruits and honey for making money, Tulsi Raman views it a transgression or rather a move from nature to materialism. The aged Hariyasensitizes: "This way the very seed of the fish will rot.

The way big and small, all fish are being blasted thoughtlessly; soon the river will be barren of all creatures" (114). The transformation of this small *hati* to a big bazaar also brings along degeneration in values. The opening of the wine shop and other shops leads to a consumerist culture where Motu unwisely squanders his money: "Motu was lost to the family with the coming up of Gharaatu bazaar"(118). The writer, like Rousseau, reveals the decline in values when one moves from nature to the so called civilization. Rousseau in his *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755) relates how the movement from nature to civilization disrupted the 'nascent society' and thus brought along feelings of jealousy, hatred, greed as neighbours started amassing wealth and vied with each other.

Tilling and sowing the fields at right time yields good crops. As it rains, the farmers plough their fields. However, Motu does not return even after the lapse of four days which makes "Parma's heart shrivelled as he watched the *Aasharh*sun drying up the soil" (116). The old man vomits his anger out at his daughter-in-law for not controlling her husband: "Between Parma's wrath and Motu's worthlessness, Murto's suffering truly broke one's heart" (116). Though Murto entertains for a moment the thought of ploughing the fields on her own, the bragging of her husband thwarts her plan who considers it a manly activity: "These are big and difficult tasks fit for the men. Women can do the remaining light work" (116).

Parma and Phuli, now unable to work due to old age, recall how they would work relentlessly in fields some of which were really hard to till. Moreover, Parma would never remain away from home as his son does. Murto harvests the whole field by afternoon when her daughter brings her food. The whole flavour of food is diminished as she realizes that her husband had not so far returned. However, she loves him dearly and whenever he returns after three-four days, she lets her anger subside. She rues, however, that he had stopped taking any interest in her as well as farming.Sevati, another woman working in the field, hurls insult at Murto: "Why Murto, where on earth is your husband. I hear he wears clothes like a *neta* now a days. Has he found a lady *neta* for himself that he cannot be bothered even about the moistness of Aasharh?" (123) Though the words pierce her like a sword and she prepares to teach her a lesson, Mahajanu placates at her husband's indolence. She prepares *sirkus* to celebrate the rains but it does not whet the appetite of the family as Motu does not return home even that evening and thus spoils the occasion. Miffed by such circumstances and irresponsible attitude of her husband, Murto wishes to get rid ofhim, however, the concern for her children prevents her taking such a step: "These *Devtas* conspired that Resma and Shamu were born, otherwise, if she were on her own, she would never set foot in this house again" (128).

Tulsi Raman also brings to the fore corruption in politics. Raghu, one of the associates of local MLA and childhood friend of Motu, seizes all the public work contracts and instead of "cement, uses sand and mud" (118). Though Raghu was initially skinny, his belly protrudes as he takes too much bribe. Motu feels obliged to Raghu for registering his name in below poverty line families. However, Motu becomes oblivious to his family's worse condition and sells the items of his ration to others at

a bit higher price to save for liquor. He brags about his relation with MLA's friend Raghu. He even wears khaddar outfit to look like a political leader and when people humorously call him a *neta* he puffs with pride. He even loses his last ten rupees in gamble and sells the grain to buy a bottle of wine. Though he thinks for a while of his worried parents and wife, the sight of bottle outweighs all other concerns.

Gaachi is a long piece of cloth that women tie around their waist in hills to support themselves while doing many chores. When things turn hostile, Mahajanugains strength from this *gaachi.* The writer considers Murto the *gaachi* of her family. She signifies hope, strength and a resilient and indomitable spirit against all odds: "Murto is the *gaachi* of this family of five. Without her the land would become fallow. Every stone of the house would fall away. The old parents would die before time and the children fall to begging" (128). However, when her neighbour Shibbi teases her that her husband has got her a new *gaachi*, she overcomes with a feeling of dissatisfaction at looking at her two year old, hole-ridden *gaachi*.Going against the village custom that "did not allow women to touch the runner of a plough", Murto yokes the oxen and tills the field. Though her aged in-laws feel ashamed initially, they take heart as their *bahu* ploughs to save the family from dying of hunger. Since a woman was not allowed to plough while her husband was alive, it invites the condemnation of the villagers. They recall an incident when a widow had ploughed and how it had dumb founded people. A song was then composed and sung many times about the widow, Phul Dei. Murto's unprecedented resolution and its execution also signals her strength and the immortality that she would enjoy as a song would also be dedicated and sung in her honour. Her attempt is a welcome step to discard the yoke of normative feminist servitude and alleviate the burden of poverty. Her act is rather subversive where she not only threatens the male-demarcated boundaries but also supports her family.

Both the women presented in the stories are strong, ready to fight their battles till the end even though slurs or ostracization be the result. Both the women protagonists refuse to accept the fixed notion of identity and rather forge a new one as the situation demands. Mahajanu and Murto transgress and debunk the traditional roles ascribed to them and start a crusade against anything oppressive, thereby charting out their own paths. Refusing to remain passive, disempowered and wretched, the protagonists wrest power to shake commonly received beliefs. Mahajanu asserts her individuality and dignity by rejecting her husbands one after the other who ill-treat her while Murto questions the male-female binaries by undertaking a masculine activity. Both the women, thus, destabilize the patriarchal sphere and assert their will in the face of insurmountable difficulties.

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Glossary

Aasharh	:	Rainy Season
Bahu	:	Daughter-in-law
Devar	:	Brother-in-law
Devtas	:	Gods
Fauji	:	Soldier
Kapaal Kriya	:	Funeral Ceremony
Kariyala	:	A humourous skit
Neta	:	A Political Leader
Panchayat	:	A group of people in a village with a Head deciding on village matters
Sirkus	:	Sweet cake made of wheat

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