

**Fashioning the New Citizen: Exploring Common Images of Migrant Women  
from Punjab in the Post-Partition City in Anis Kidwai's *In Freedom's Shade*  
And Yashpal's *This Is Not That Dawn***

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**Abstract**

This paper examines some common images of migrant women from Punjab in post-Partition Delhi from Anis Kidwai's memoir *In Freedom's Shade* and Yashpal's novel *This is Not That Dawn*. These images of women performing public rituals of mourning or walking on streets wearing excessive jewelry serve simultaneously to signify the strangeness of the migrants as well as the absence of modernity among them in the texts. This paper explores the ways in which concerns with migrant women's bodies in the post-Partition city reflect ideas of reformist groups of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century on the conduct of women in private and public spaces in the cities of Punjab. In constituting a nationalist and moral urban femininity these texts invoke the familiar paradoxical demands of modernity and tradition in migrant women.

**Keywords:** *Partition, Migrant women, Modernity, post-Partition city*

In her memoir *In Freedom's Shade* (2011), when writing about the death of a Hindu refugee from Punjab in Delhi, Anis Kidwai expresses her shock and horror at the mourning rituals that she witnesses at his home. She describes a gathering of the dead man's relatives and neighbors 'beating their chests, wailing loudly. The widow had beaten herself virtually senseless; her breast was a glaring red, so fiercely was it pummelled.' (Kidwai 205) As the widow picks up a shoe and slaps it against her face, Kidwai writes,

What horror was this? The wailing, the distress, the moans made me faint... that the dead could be mourned thus I never knew. I'd read of the customs of an unlettered world but not in my wildest dreams could I have thought that in the twentieth century, a section of India would practice them with such devotion, even sophisticated men partaking of it. The mourning carried on for days, but I couldn't summon the courage to behold that spectacle again. (Kidwai 205)



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A description of the same ritual, sketched in great detail, constitutes the beginning of Yashpal's novel *This is Not That Dawn* as he writes about the *syapa* (mourning) ceremony in the pre-Partition Bhola Pandhe's Gali in the Shahalmi Darwaza of old Lahore. On the passing of Tara Puri's grandmother, the women of the household invite Kaula the *naun* (of the barber caste) to lead the mourning rituals, held in a common open space at the end of the narrow *gali* (street). They dress in 'black lehengas and large cotton chadars made of thick muslin, coloured with diluted ashes' (Yashpal 5), and along with neighbors and relatives they sit around the *naun* in orderly circles for four days, chanting laments and 'beating their chests with both hands' (Yashpal 5).

Kidwai's memoir and Yashpal's novel are among the numerous literary works that dwell on imaginaries of migrant women from Punjab in post-partition Delhi. The memoir, written in 1949 was published as *Azaadi ki Chaon Mein* in 1974 and in English translation as *In Freedom's Shade* in 2011. It is a record of Anis Kidwai's work with the partition-displaced populations in Delhi between 1947 and 1948 and has been an important resource in the writings of Partition scholars working towards recovering women's histories of this period. Yashpal's novel *Jhootha Sach*, published in two volumes titled *Vatan aur Desh* (1958) and *Desh ka Bhavishya* (1960), and translated as *This Is Not That Dawn* in 2010, traces the lives of siblings Tara and Jaidev Puri from the *galis* (lanes) of the old city of Lahore during the years preceding Partition to the post-Partition cities of Delhi and Jalandhar up to the late 1950s. In writing of the life of partition refugees in the camps, streets, markets, and residential neighborhoods of Delhi, both writers engage with the ways in which migrant women appear in city spaces. On the one hand, they appear culturally alien in their ethnic dresses and jewelry, speaking the local dialects of west Punjab, and recreating ways of living in their pre-Partition homes in the spaces of Delhi. On the other hand, as abject and grieving women looking for shelter and the means to survive, as curious newcomers exploring the city, or even as eager opportunists, migrant women unsettle and often threaten notions of feminine behavior in public spaces.

As the writers explore the future of the uprooted people in the new nation and the various meanings of belonging and citizenship, imaginaries of migrant women's place in the city often indicate the ways in which the writers envisage their place and role in the nation. In dwelling on their out-of-place bodies, the writers invoke a normative urban femininity in their works. While

in Kidwai's memoir normative femininity is constituted through the narrativization of her own journey and growth during this period, in Yashpal's novel the standard of urban feminine behavior is constituted through discourses that are linked to the reformist and revivalist movements of the late nineteenth century Punjab. As he traces the journey of Tara Puri from the *galis* of Old Lahore to the elite neighborhoods and government offices of post-partition Delhi, the ideas of the reformists regarding women's education, sexuality, and relationship to private and public space that govern women's lives in pre-partition Lahore play an important role in shaping the ideal of middle-class urban femininity in the independent nation.

The ritual of mourning described in the passages above was among the common cultural practices of Punjabi Hindu women till the late nineteenth century and continued to be performed by sections of the community even into mid-twentieth century. Performed by women on the death of a relative or neighbor of the same community, the custom entailed the coming together of women who sat in an open space for days, chanting laments while beating their breasts and thighs in a rhythmic manner, and led by a woman of the lower caste who was invited for this specific custom. They would often tear their clothes or wear less restraining ones during the *syapa* which involved frenzied and loud wailing for many hours each day.

However, by the late nineteenth century, as Anshu Malhotra has shown in her book *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab* (2002), this ritual of *syapa*, like many customs and practices of the middle class, upper-caste women of Punjab, was brought under censure by the rationalist and reformist men of the community. In a period of growing sectarian rivalry and criticism from the colonizing state, as religious and caste identities began to be consolidated, modernity and tradition were reconstituted, women's behavior and role in 'private' and 'public' spaces became a subject of grave concern for movements like the Arya Samaj. Women's conduct came to be understood as the measure of the prestige, modernity, and honor of the community in comparison to the colonial state on the one hand, and Muslim and Sikh communities, as well other Hindu groups on the other. The reformist and revivalist groups sought to control anew women's education, dress, mannerism, their interaction with the lower castes, their participation in mourning and marriage rituals, their visits to Pirs, wearing of jewelry, and the practice of *parda*. Women themselves were required to be simultaneously traditional and modern and were signifiers of the identity of the collectivity.

While a certain amount of schooling and education was seen as necessary to encourage a scientific, economic, hygienic, and rational management of the household for upper-caste women, a highly educated and independent woman was feared as a ‘westernized’ one. Malhotra has written how the reformists sought to control women’s cultural and everyday practices, and their ‘popular and eclectic religiosity’ (Malhotra 167) in order to regulate their interactions with the lower castes on the one hand, and with women and men of other religions on the other. As ideas of the ‘private’ and ‘public’ sphere began to gain dominance, in demarcating women’s domain as the private they began to see women’s ‘cultural practices performed outside the confines of home as obscene and vulgar.’ (Malhotra 192) She writes of the attempts of the reformist elite to control and prescribe the ‘bodily comportment’ and sartorial aspects of women’s appearance in ‘public’ space, which came to define the ‘mores of “decent” and “obscene”’ (Malhotra 192) behavior. Specifically, in the case of the *syapa* ceremony, Malhotra writes how the

‘Reformers were keen to wipe out this custom, because *syapa* had all the ingredients in it that reformist men had set themselves against: the public display of women’s bodies, large groups of women engaging in the ritual unmindful of men looking on, and inter-mixing with low castes. However, in reformist efforts to expurgate mourning rituals, and expunge *syapa* altogether, was also visible the need to define male respectability and power as against that of women, and ultimately to recast society with their own vision of gender hierarchy and caste propriety’ (Malhotra 194)

Simultaneously, it was an attempt to reconstitute grief as a private experience. The *syapas* were also threatening to men in that they provided an opportunity to women to exercise authority in arranging marriages and determining kin relations. As men attempted to bring under their control all such areas where women interacted with other women outside the supervision of men, ‘Women’s collectivities of all kinds, in fact, came to be looked upon with suspicion, as places where the authority of men was sure to be ridiculed, and imperceptibly overturned.’ (Malhotra 198)

Moreover, as Malhotra has shown in her earlier essay titled ‘The Moral Woman and the Urban Punjabi Society of the Late Nineteenth Century’ (1992), among the various middle-class reformist groups in Punjab at this time, as each tried to outdo the others in adopting ‘an ethic of puritan morality’ (Malhotra, ‘The Moral Woman...’ 37), the construction of the moral woman acquired paramount importance. Among the issues around which morality was debated among

the various groups were vegetarianism, non-vegetarianism, idol-worship, atheism, polytheism, kine-killing, cow-worshipping (Malhotra, 'The Moral Woman...' 38) as well as control over popular culture, which included the wedding songs and mourning rituals of women. As the groups debated, in their attempt to be simultaneously 'traditional' and 'modernist' in order to be truly 'nationalist' (Malhotra, 'The Moral Woman...' 43), what constituted morality among women, the figure of the "new" "traditional-moral" woman' (Malhotra, 'The Moral Woman...' 60) came into being.

These ideas of modernity, tradition, and morality continued to govern notions of respectability as the middle classes from Punjab transitioned into refugees and citizens in post-Partition Delhi. In works of literature of the period, migrant women's bodies became the signifiers of modernity and urbanity, or the provincialism and primitivism, of the Punjabi migrant community as the latter integrated into the middle classes of the new national community. In *Memories and Postmemoiries of the Partition on India* (2020) Anjali Gera Roy has shown how the abject living conditions of the migrants resulting from the lack of shelter and homes, their unfamiliarity with the culture and landscape of the cities of refuge, the trauma of partition uprooting, and the migrants' demands on the resources of cities made Punjabi women's bodies particularly vulnerable to charges of indecency by the host populations. The transition from migrant or refugee to citizen simultaneously demanded the adoption of a more Hindu nationalist cultural identity and the partial invisibilization of the ethnic Punjabi one. The discourses regarding women's education, dress, marriage, and customs, set in motion in the urban societies of Punjab by the reformist and revivalist movements since the early twentieth century enabled many Punjabi women to mold their bodies and their sudden and increased occupation of city spaces in socially and culturally acceptable ways. Simultaneously it helped them to adopt the dress and language of the Hindu nation.

In the passages from Kidwai and Yashpal quoted above, the portrayal of the ritual of mourning invokes all these anxieties about the modernity and morality of Punjabi women in urban contexts. For Kidwai, who compares the grieving of the migrant women to her own experience of grief at the recent loss of her husband Shafi Ahmad Kidwai in Mussoorie during Partition violence, the migrant women's customs appear excessive and distasteful. Comparing the scene to her personal experience of loss she writes, 'Who hasn't seen death? Even that which

befell me was a calamity so unexpected that I wonder why my heart continued to beat.’ (Kidwai 205) The memoir embodies an alternative model of mourning as well as of women’s participation in public space by narrativizing the writer’s entry into Gandhian national service as the way to cope with the trauma of sudden widowhood. Dedicating the self in service to the nation, and occupying public space in a purposeful way, especially for social work, constitutes the ideal of nationalist femininity in the memoir, not only through the example of the writer herself but through numerous others like Subhadra Joshi and Mridula Sarabhai. Moreover, in the memoir, where the migrants from Punjab appear mostly as interlopers and usurpers, responsible for the displacement of the older Muslim residents and for the desecration of the city and its culture, migrant women like the ones performing the *syapa* condemn all immigrants as uncultured, unmodern, and associated with the ‘customs of an unlettered world’ (Kidwai 205).

In Yashpal’s novel, which traces the journey of residents of Lahore from their traumatic uprooting to the gradual rebuilding of lives as refugees, the ritual of mourning occurs as an organic part of the culture of the community. Occurring at the beginning of the novel, the ritual appears as a literary device that signals the everyday life and rootedness of the community in its ‘home’ before the cataclysmic displacement of partition. Within this context of the pre-Partition mundane life of the Punjabi Hindus in Lahore, Yashpal presents the custom as a contested ritual in an evolving community and it is associated with an absence of modernity specifically located in the women of the *gali*. Tara’s father, a teacher at the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic School, and a believer of the Arya Samaj critiques the *syapa* and advises hymn singing and *havan* ceremony as the appropriate rituals for mourning his mother. Sisters of the Buddh Samaj, who arrive on hearing of the death of the old woman, counsel the women of the family to ‘shun the evil custom of *syapa*, and to sing devotional bhajans urging detachment from the world’ (Yashpal 5). It is the daughters-in-law of the dead woman, however, and the ‘women of the *gali*’, who insist on holding the *syapa* ceremony as well as an elaborate decoration of the bier that is well beyond the capacity of the school teacher Master Ramlubhaya. They refuse to listen to the rationalist arguments of the reformists and cling to the custom for the sake of continuity and prestige within the community. Moreover, Yashpal describes the various conversations about marriage proposals, the *syapas* attended in the past, and many other things that take place between the women present, who simultaneously carry on with the handiwork they have brought along.

For the protagonist Tara, however, who is young and unmarried and therefore exempt from participating in the rituals, the *gali* appears as a stifling space with its multistorey one-room houses and meddling neighbors. Instead, the writer describes an enchanting world of education, of friendships and intellectual conversations between girls and boys of all religions and communities, of banter about love and companionship, of political meetings of the Student Federation as well as the Communists, that awaits Tara at the Dyal Singh College of Lahore, that ‘subscribed to the Brahma Samaj ideology’ (Yashpal 17). In the novel, then, the mourning ceremony appears as a practice of the older and uneducated women of the lower middle classes living in the narrow quarters of the old city. For others, especially for the young men and women, the multiple cities of Lahore offer a modern urbanity shaped by nationalist and modern ideas with their origins in institutions like the Arya Samaj, the Buddh Samaj, and the Brahma Samaj.

In the post-Partition city of Delhi in the second volume of the novel, among the numerous migrant women who populate the novel, it is Tara who comes to exemplify the ideal urban femininity. Abducted and raped during the violence of partition, and brought to Amritsar by Indian social workers, Tara makes her way to Delhi where she succeeds, with honesty and hard work, to build an independent home and career, without any support from her family. Despite the advances of predatory men and the censoring gaze of women, Tara uses her education and the cultural capital acquired through her interactions with the educated elite of Lahore to fashion herself into a modern yet moral young citizen in the new country. Her sense of morality enables her to adopt strategies that help her to navigate the unfamiliar and dangerous landscape of the new city as a single woman. Moreover, the colossal grief and trauma of rape and abduction, of betrayal by her own family, and of the loss of homeland are scripted as private and intimate emotions through young women like Tara. Not only does she keep her grief hidden within herself, but she also dedicates her life to a career in honest and upright government service. When Tara and her companion Banti, who is a rural innocent from Chamoki village, meet Banti’s village neighbors in Ambala, and on sharing news of family members the women spontaneously break into the wailing and beating of breasts, Tara is unable to participate in the ritual. ‘Tears came to her eyes also. She did not wail, but cried silently’ (Yashpal 591). In the novel, then, educated migrant women from progressive urban centers like Lahore embody

modernity and belonging in the nation and its cities through a decisive rejection of customs like the mourning ritual. The novelist invokes movements like the Arya Samaj and the Brahma Samaj as instrumental in fashioning Punjabi women's modernity in ways that make them desirable as citizens in the cities of the independent country.

Among other common images that invite charges of 'indecent' (Kidwai 104) in both the memoir and the novel is the figure of the migrant woman walking in jewelry and makeup on the streets of post-Partition Delhi. While Kidwai cites the description of 'a comely young woman walking in Chandni Chowk, festooned with jewelry worth at least Rs 150-200, face shining with powder and lipstick plastered on, chewing on a long stick of sugarcane as she walked' (Kidwai 104), *This Is Not That Dawn* abounds in migrant women 'in silk and satin, decked in gold jewelry' (Yashpal 615) who invite censure from the host population as well as from the cultural elite among the migrants. When Tara accidentally meets her neighbor Sita from Bholu Pande's Gali in Delhi, she feels repulsed by the way the latter's face is 'powdered and rouged, kohl on the rims of her eyes, lips painted, bindi on her forehead and hair done fashionably in ringlets.' (Yashpal 769) To Tara's embarrassment, Sita's 'kameez fitted snugly and made her bosom thrust out' (Yashpal 769). The memoir, as well as the novel, constitute an alternative aesthetic of women's bodies that is closely linked to social class, chastity as well as a nationalist cultural identity.

The wearing of jewelry, as Malhotra has shown, was also among the concerns of the reformist groups of the late nineteenth century Punjab regarding the physical and moral health of women. Fondness for jewelry was argued as being in contradiction to women's prescribed role of exercising thrift and economy within the household (Malhotra, *Gender, Caste...* 144) on the one hand and considered 'sexually provocative' (Malhotra, *Gender, Caste...* 121) on the other. While make-up and jewelry were permissible and even desirable within the confines of the home of a married woman for the benefit of her husband, it was frowned upon in contexts outside the marital relationship. However, as Malhotra argues, the censure of women's desire for jewelry often encroached on the only form of wealth over which they had some control. In the post-Partition representation of migrant women in the mentioned texts, the concerns regarding migrant women's fondness for make-up and jewelry recall some of these ideas. In *This Is Not That Dawn* migrant women's gold jewelry becomes a symbol of the losses of partition, as it is

often the only valuable possession, they have been able to bring with them during displacement. Simultaneously it also occurs as a signifier of their hard work, when they succeed, just within a few years, to acquire more gold. However, women's donning of gold in the streets continues to signify the difference between the educated, urbane migrant of the upper caste and the rural or uneducated one on the one hand, and the moral and immoral woman on the other. Not only are restraint and subtlety in the display of jewelry as well as in the colors and style of dress and make-up constituted as aesthetically and morally appealing in these texts, but the wearing of finery is also legitimized only in spaces that are accessed through the possession of cultural and social capital.

It is argued here that Yashpal's novel *This Is Not That Dawn* and Kidwai's memoir *In Freedom's Shade* represent migrant women from Punjab in ways that reflect anxieties about women's unregulated presence in public spaces. In the context of the sudden appearance of large numbers of migrant women across the post-Partition city with their culturally different bodies and compulsions of seeking shelter and employment, the writers construct an ideal of urban femininity in their texts. This prescriptive figure of the upper caste, higher middle-class woman engaged in socially useful employment, invokes many of the reformist discourses about women's dress and customs that had been in circulation in the cities of Punjab since the end of the nineteenth century.

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