

Narratives of Violence against Women in Hindi and Punjabi Literatures (2000-present)

In the last two decades many a time news—often very drastic—about incidents of violence against women in India circulated in mass media globally. Underlying causes of such violence are very complex. All discussions, therefore, need to keep in mind that, regrettably, aggression against women occurs globally.

To make sense of the acts of violence and their fallout in Indian context, one needs first to familiarize oneself with a complex set of interlinked factors characterising culture and society in contemporary India. These factors are usually rooted in India-specific differences and divisions: ethnic, religious, linguistic, political, economic, but also, those based on caste, gender, age, etc. Yet another set of causes is connected to the process of rapid transformations related to modern technological thrust and globalisation—i.e., emancipatory movements, economic changes, inflow of foreign capital and links with global market, advancement of modern media and technologies that facilitate an equal footing participation of many people in public debate. All these collide with traditional values and models based in conservative attitudes of some segments of Indian society or its elites. Viewed from this perspective, drastic incidents of violence against women are both the result of this complex set of circumstances and a catalyst for further changes, as they act as an impulse for protests and new social movements that, in turn, call for legal and social reforms.

Our research may be defined as an attempt to understand the phenomenon of narration of violence against women in literature, and, because of the interconnections mentioned above, to gain through this study an insight into cultural complexity of contemporary India. We shall look closely at the public debate within Indian society, and in particular, how, and also when, violence against women is narrated. We are interested to know how in various literary texts—prose, poetry, drama, non-fiction, life writings—the incidents of violence are being depicted, and how those depictions change the very nature of the Indian society's narration about itself. Our research is directed at two literary public spheres, i.e., of Hindi, the dominant language of North India (but also the language of choice for many disenfranchised social groups speaking in other local languages), and of Punjabi, which, judging by Indian standards, is a minor regional language of North India. We hope that in this manner we will hear the new literary voices and strands of the larger debate that were not heard before and that we will get to know them form a new perspective, i.e., not the one dominated by English speaking elites. We want to discover if there is a difference in a manner of participation in the debate and of developing these narratives depending on whether they take place in Hindi, the dominant language of North India, or in Punjabi, i.e., a more regional language.

We shall develop methodology that involves analysis of a large corpus of selected literary texts, paratexts texts of literary criticism, etc. During this analysis we shall identify narratives and their features, i.e., the ways of storytelling, narrative strategies, stylistic device, who is speaking while telling the story. We will also study texts of literary criticism and conduct interviews with players of the literary public spheres. This 'map of narratives' shall be 'superimposed on' or read along a chronological sequence of events of the last two decades that encompass ill-famous, widely discussed incidents of violence against women and new legal acts protecting their rights. In this manner we shall seek to understand correlations between them, how these incidents and occurrences impact narratives. Interviews with key actors of public literary spheres of Hindi and Punjabi (writers, editors, publishers, critics, literary festival curators) will also facilitate understanding how these texts are selected for publication, edited, and circulated.

Our research work to great extent will consist of collection, selection, in-depth reading, comparative study and analysis of the corpus of selected texts: literary texts, paratexts (introductions, forewords, interviews etc.), texts of literary criticism. Main interpretive framework will be textual and contextual analysis as defined in literary studies research, and more precisely in sociology of literature, understood as a branch thereof.

Significance of our research project lies in the fact that the problem under study is of social and ethical importance, but also in the fact that we propose to read public debate comprehensively, i.e., on the basis of texts in two geographically close languages. We strongly believe that research on texts in Hindi and Punjabi will allow us to gain deeper insight into the problem of representations of violence against women in India and it also will enrich our knowledge of Indian society in the current period of great transformations and globalisation.