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‘Unlikely Adventures’ in Sacred and Secular Space: India and the Sikh Diaspora

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The Sikh relationship with pilgrimage models is ambivalent and complicated; however, this relationship has been revived and reinvented because of several historical, cultural, and political transitions: the extensive Sikh diaspora; familiarity of pilgrimage in the Indian subcontinent; the effects of Partition and Sikh independence initiatives; and the secular and tourist components of pilgrimage. The shift from adherence to the wisdom of the Guru as the focus of the pious life to a physical journey involving geographical sites is a phenomenon that partly resulted from the partition of the Punjab in 1947; thus, the personal, social, and spiritual intersect intriguingly with political motivations. While pilgrimage narratives therefore have a limited place in Sikhism, diasporic writers can create a fictional response and rewriting of the pattern I have identified in previous studies. Balli Kaur Jaswal’s most recent novel, *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*, focuses on a pilgrimage undertaken by three sisters after their mother’s death. This novel is an uncomfortable interweaving of Western concepts of the ‘dying wish’ and engages the ongoing controversy about the purpose of pilgrimage in Sikhism. It also revisits the paradigm of pilgrimage in the Indian epic *Ramayana* from a feminist perspective. This article engages with both the author’s critical exegesis related to the novel, and her personal reflection on pilgrimage to the ancestral geography of the subcontinent.

Key Words: pilgrimage, Sikh, diaspora, Balli Kaur Jaswal, *Ramayana*, feminism, narratives

Introduction

The Sikh relationship with pilgrimage is ambivalent, made even more complex by the effects of colonisation, migration, and popular culture. The shift from adherence to the wisdom of the Guru as the focus of the pious life to a physical journey involving geographical sites is a phenomenon that partly resulted from the partition of the Punjab in 1947; thus, the personal, social, and spiritual intersect intriguingly with political motivations. While pilgrimage narratives therefore have a limited place in Sikhism, diasporic writers can create a fictional response and rewriting of the pattern I have identified in previous studies. Balli Kaur Jaswal’s most recent novel, *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*, focuses on a pilgrimage undertaken by three sisters after their mother’s death. This novel is an uncomfortable interweaving of Western concepts of the ‘dying wish’ and engages the ongoing controversy about the purpose of pilgrimage in Sikhism. It also revisits the paradigm of pilgrimage in the Indian epic *Ramayana* from a feminist perspective.

The novel begins with a heavily ironic attempt at Sita Shergill’s imagined final letter to her three daughters as she lies in a hospital bed dying of cancer

To Rajni, Jezmeen, and Shirina: By now, I am dead (p.4).

She overhears another patient dictating a letter, which begins:

My dearest children... If you are reading this, you know the end has finally come for me (p.1).

Thus, the reader is hooked immediately in the fantasy of sentiment and uncomplicated maternal love before realising it is the creation of another patient. In Sita’s final draft, she reminds her daughters of her earlier desire to

go to India to do a pilgrimage to honor the principles of our great Gurus ... I am attaching a list of the places that I would like you to visit on my behalf, after I am gone ... You should go together and do all the tasks as instructed: seva, to serve others and preserve your humility; a ritual sarovar bath, for cleansing and protecting your soul from ailments; and a trek to the high peaks of spirituality, to feel appreciation for that

body which carries you through life. I would also like my ashes to be scattered in India (pp.4-5).

The end of the letter emphasises that completing this journey allows Sita to complete her own. Sita recalls the early busyness of her life as wife and mother as she maps the itinerary:

Although Sita prided herself on being too pragmatic for such wishes, she also hoped that her daughters found India just as she had left it (p.6).

This Prologue to Sikh diasporic writer Balli Kaur Jaswal's novel, *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*, weaves several threads I have been tracing throughout my study of pilgrimage narratives: the perception of India as a distinctly spiritual space, the pilgrimage taken at a point of crisis to achieve both deeper spiritual awareness and self-discovery, and the narrative itself typically reconstructing the journey in the past as *memento mori* reflecting, in this case, Sita's

desire to turn back time (p.6).

However, Jaswal simultaneously challenges underlying assumptions, beginning with a darkly comedic and yet poignant counter to the sentimental journey, forecasting a trip to be taken in the future upon the mother's death, and – perhaps most significantly – reclaiming the quest story of Ramayana as a female-centred journey. Sita Shergill authors her own narrative to be undertaken by her daughters in a fictional text Jaswal bases on her own experience of travel.

For writers of Western pilgrimage narratives focusing on India, the pattern overlaps with other colonialist genres such as exploration and travel narratives. Jaswal's fictional exploration reclaims this paradigm; in addition, this paper focuses on the unique and often-uneasy place of pilgrimage within the Sikh tradition, and the influences both of political and cultural elements, and the emergence of a distinct diasporic focus as a response to colonisation and dispossession. Jaswal's novel is the primary focus of her doctoral dissertation, *Rebellious Daughters, Sisters and Wives: Non-Conforming Women in South Asian Diasporic Fiction*. Her exegesis in that dissertation situates her fiction within the context of other female diasporic writers and articulates the complications of pilgrimage for Sikhs. I had an opportunity over the past

2 years to engage in a dialogue with Jaswal, reflecting on her contestation and revision of the pilgrimage narrative, and her own travels with her parents as research. She completed and defended her dissertation at NUS Singapore in the summer of 2020.

Background and Research

In this article, I focus on several elements of pilgrimage, pilgrimage narrative, Sikhism, and diasporic writing. After reviewing my previous mapping of the paradigm, I explore the uneasy place of pilgrimage within Sikhism, emphasising the influences of South Asian culture which in turn is influenced by other religious traditions, the reclaiming of geographical and spiritual space in the context of colonisation and partition, and its growing importance in establishing an 'imaginary homeland,' in the words of Salman Rushdie. I then examine how Jaswal's novel challenges the typical paradigm. In examining the complicated place of pilgrimage in Sikhism, I reviewed the scholarship of Rajinder Jutla, Andrea Pinkney's *What are Sikhs Doing at 'Historical Gurdwaras'?* and recent media reports on the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor in 2019. Sikh scripture and the guidance of gurus downplay pilgrimage as a physical journey and emphasise that devotees should focus on the wisdom of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in relation to living a pious life, acceptance of the world's impurity, and service to others.

Thus, Jaswal's novel interweaves both Western and South Asian traditions of pilgrimage in a fictional story that speaks uniquely to the 21st century Sikh diaspora in a postcolonial context. While the typical pilgrimage is undertaken by Western writers as a reclaiming of the self, the itinerary in Sita Shergill's letter is designed to be neither orthodox nor solitary. In another ironic passage, her daughter Jezmeen explains to a friend that she and her sisters are

doing a pilgrimage in her memory and scattering her ashes there (p.13).

to which her friend replies,

'Oh, that's beautiful. What a tribute' (p.13).

The friend, we are told

probably had an image of three dutiful daughters in matching loose white robes solemnly making their way up a misty mountain as they took turns carrying an urn filled with ashes.

Again, inaccurate. Pilgrimages weren't even a requirement of their religion [Jezmeen had] done some quick Googling on Sikhism... this trip was less about spirituality and more about Mum forcing them to travel together (p.13).

From the prescriptive passages included at the beginning of chapters, we get to know the deceased mother as a character too.

Pilgrimage to India as a Recurring Trope

Western preoccupation with South Asia as a site of pilgrimage—its rehearsal of Edward Said's idea of the 'Oriental' (Said, 1978:158)—is itself fascinating.¹ Typically, Western writers inscribe South-Asian sites as spaces of self-absorption and rarely of interaction—what Victor and Ruth Turner refer to as *communitas* (Lane, 2019). The Indian notion of 'tirtha-yatra' assisted in the forging of a national identity; however, that project was aided by British colonisation. The resulting availability of British infrastructure of roads and railways helped to increase the frequency of visits to tirthas, and the concept of a 'grand tour' of India, which reinforces the association of pilgrimage and colonisation.² The non-Indian pilgrim translates the visits to sacred sites as 'work-related' and potentially lucrative, rather than spiritually meritorious. As Gillian Whitlock recently contends, such narratives can become a

*commodity that is marketed ... to authenticate and legitimate the narrative and secure its reception by the powerful reading communities that range from the metropolitan intelligentsia and the suburban book clubs, to the fans of the best seller (2007:15).*³

1 Steve Clark describes the term 'pilgrimage' as 'over-determined' and argues that this term 'conflates empirical reference to the biblical domain; a residual context of medieval journeying; and an internalization of this as spiritual quest' (1999:11).

2 This identity integrates 'thousands and possibly tens of thousands of *tirthas* throughout India, Nepal, and Tibet' (176); '*tirthas* have been catering to travelers for hundreds, if not thousands, of years and receive far more visitors annually than Disney World, Las Vegas, and Cancun combined' (193). Moreover, as David Gladstone's *From Pilgrimage to Package Tour* (2005) has explored, both local and international pilgrims travel to the same sites (187).

3 Graham Huggan (2001) suggests the connection between popular 'subaltern life narratives' and consumer products.

The narrator alternates between witness and participant—participating in courses, but often adopting an ethnographic approach (Lane, 2019).⁴ While narration pays attention to the past, and bears similarities to the *memento mori*, participation demands dedicated attention to the present. The pilgrimage paradigm I've identified in popular narratives involving travel to South Asia (Lane, 2019) emerges in a unique rewriting in Jaswal's novel, most notably in the letter's unique position as *memento mori*—a memento of the dead mother—and as map for an imaginary bucket-list journey.

Key Elements of Pilgrimage Narratives

First, travel is often inspired by a personal crisis—breakdown of a marriage, death, illness—and therefore a focus on personal need or intellectual curiosity. Western pilgrimage narratives emphasise personal transformation and quest for self-knowledge. In Jaswal's novel, Sita's death note becomes the occasion for the journey, though each of the sisters—living in disparate areas of the diaspora—is also at a point of crisis. The sisters have quite distinct personalities and don't always get along; within a short time, they are already rejigging their mother's itinerary: Jezmeen imagines a music festival in Goa, and then Bombay

after getting through all these holy places (p.31);

Shirina has a own private itinerary; and Rajni, the only daughter who was present during Sita's last trip to India, alternates between heightened awareness of what happened during that trip and ruminating on her son's romantic relationship with an older woman.

The typical narrative also positions the traveller as outsider, and the target audience is also an outsider. The narrative serves multiple purposes, incorporating maps,

4 The notion of witnessing is equated with imperialism, in which 'seeing is not merely seeing; it is ...witnessing'—an act implying a special social function and gravity' (Clark, 1999:32). Stephen Greenblatt summarises that 'everything in the European dream of possession rests on witnessing understood as a form of significant and representative seeing' (Clark,1999:35). Moreover, the 'time lag' between the act of seeing and the recording of the journey undermines self-presentation as 'pilgrimage guide.' The witness is also a participant in various courses, programs, and acts of worship. That contradiction emerges, for instance, in the incorporation of maps, glossaries, bibliographies, and interview-style conversations into the texts I have studied.

descriptions of places, italicized Sanskrit words, and explanations. In Jaswal's novel, the diasporic daughters are both insiders and outsiders, and even Sita has been exiled from India by her late husband, Ram's, family. That said, Western narratives typically distinguish themselves from popular guidebooks and particularly the iconic Lonely Planet. Sita's letter, mapping out the imaginary future journey is woven through the chapters of the novel, both emphasising an idealised gathering of her daughters and ironically revised in the experiences these daughters have. Note that the pieces of the itinerary that appear at the beginnings of chapters are educational as well, identifying the key learning, and the historical / religious significance of places: e.g, service (seva) to others, 'Purity of heart, soul, and mind are all important for achieving spiritual healing' (p.57).

The first piece appears in Chapter One, in Sita's recommendation to

[book] *your tickets and hotels quickly [and] I would prefer that you take this journey during a cooler time of the year* (p.7).

Further in the letter, Sita educates her daughters regarding Day Five:

Visiting the Golden Temple is about recognising the oneness of humanity. You should enter the temple's grounds with an open heart and think about leaving the past behind you. You must take a bath in the sarovar to cleanse yourself of all burdens ... purification is ... also about your thoughts and actions becoming simpler and more purposeful (p.149).

Terms such as seva and sarovar are not italicized in this novel.

The narratives incorporate personal experiences of illness, tragedy, and death on the journey itself, and these traumas provoke an emotional and spiritual connection. Shirina's personal journey to terminate her pregnancy becomes one such turning point in Jaswal's novel, compelling her sisters to rescue her from the medical clinic in Chandigarh.

Most pilgrimage narratives incorporate a return, in which the pilgrim adopts some dramatic change because of the journey (Lane, 2019). In many ways, then, they repeat the circular pattern associated with romance and epic.

The primary distinction is that epic is typically construed as nation-building rather than as life writing. In the case of Jaswal's own travel, and the fictional journey, the return to Delhi and distribution of ashes in the Yamuna River challenges an idealised ascent to Lokpal Lake. The story resists the nationalism of primarily patriarchal stories to focus on tenuous connections between mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives.

Pilgrimage narratives are unique retellings of a journey in the past, but Jaswal reverses that pattern to imagine a journey beyond Sita's death, unravelling in the present but interwoven with the letter's instructions for each day. For Sikhs, pilgrimage is often disparaged, and scripture cautions viewing a journey as contributing to merit of salvation. However, in practice, many Sikhs take journeys of pilgrimage and will say that they experience certain places as more sacred than others. This may in part stem from Sikhism's historical origins, and the fact that many converts to Sikhism came from a Hindu background. As scholars note,

pilgrimage is a very old Hindu cultural tradition that, while not mandated, is widely practiced among followers (Jutla, 2016:264).

In addition, pilgrimage has been affected by tourism and technology:

Modern technology...has brought the Golden Temple into Sikh homes all across the diaspora. Daily live programming of Gurbani, devotional singing and prayers are relayed directly from the Golden Temple. This has further focused the attention and commitment of Sikhs worldwide to the Golden Temple. Sikhs from the diaspora as well as those in India, play an active role in the maintenance of the Golden Temple through significant monetary contributions, service, and volunteering for daily cleaning, the preparation and serving of langar.

The Golden Temple serves langar ... to well over 100,000 visitors (regardless of religion) per day. Free accommodation is provided to visitors in a number of residential buildings in the complex. Recently, Indian Railways has started to run special trains linking all the five takhts, thus facilitating the journey to these sacred places for pilgrims. Furthermore, travel agencies in India and abroad offer 'pilgrim tours' which

start and culminate at Amritsar. These activities are marketed not only to the Sikh community but also to the general public, resulting in a massive increase of visitors (Jutla, 2016:268-269).

Pinkney explains:

Guru Nanak, the first Guru, viewed pilgrimage as an external activity devoid of inner spiritual devotion ... He states that simply bathing at a sacred place of pilgrimage is of no use since the Absolute is the only true place of pilgrimage. He continues to describe his own pilgrimage as an inner one of spiritual wisdom, and contemplation of the Absolute ... Guru Amar Das, the third Guru, continues this thought when he writes, 'the Absolute is my sacred shrine of pilgrimage and pool of purification; and in this I wash my mind ... Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru, affirms that 'being kind to all human beings... is more meritorious than bathing at the sixty-eight sacred shrines of pilgrimage' ... This refers to the sixty-eight places of pilgrimage in India which were visited by Hindus of the time. The Gurus discouraged the ritualistic journey to a sacred place for salvation and explained that the only true pilgrimage is an inner journey. In Sikhism, the emphasis is on truthful living, kindness, sharing, and selfless service within one's family and community while remembering, reflecting, and meditating on the Absolute (Pinkney, 2018).

At the conclusion of her chapter, Pinkney notes that

memorial and devotional motivations intersect at Sikh religious places so that the memory of extraordinary presence effects a qualitative transformation in space and place. For those who visit Sikh religious places to commemorate those presences, materials such as food and drink, dust and water, earth and blood serve to link the immediate experience of the contemporary with the past, and to support the experience of memorial presence. In this theological framework, dust is an extraordinary medium that emplaces the past in the present, through recalling the historical Gurus, saints, and martyrs in those very places once blessed by their footfalls. In such places, the metaphor and matter of 'dust,' with its complex resonances in Sikh texts, Sikh practices, evolving Sikh orthodoxies, as well as South Asian charismatic religious practices (prasādaparṇāḍ), support

multivalent experiences and meaning for Sikhs' religious travel (2018:240)

In Jaswal's novel, these elements are intriguingly combined in the ashes of the mother, the living document of the letter, the female fetus growing in Shirini's body, and the final spreading of Sita's ashes.

Pilgrimage becomes more dominant in the Sikh tradition in the context of political and historical events: first, the bolstering of identity within the context of imperialism; secondly, a reclaiming of homeland by the Sikh diaspora; and finally, a symbolic suturing of a corridor severed by Partition. Gurharpal Singh explains the significance of the opening of the Kartarpur border in his 2019 article: in November 2018, the governments of India and Pakistan agreed to develop the Kartarpur corridor linking the Sikhs' two holiest shrines. The initiative is an important symbolic moment in the access to Sikh sacred spaces in Pakistan. Singh examines critically the efforts to control and manage this access since 1947 and assesses the policies of the two states to control access. The Kartarpur corridor was envisioned as 'bridge of peace' between India and Pakistan, symbolically reconnecting the Punjab split by Partition (Singh, 2019:263). Jutla explains that

Although pilgrimage is not prescribed by the scriptures, Sikhs are pulled to these places because of the historical significance of events and places that shaped the community. They also go on pilgrimages to connect to their spiritual and cultural traditions. The act of pilgrimage provides spiritual satisfaction and a reaffirmation of their faith. This is particularly true among Sikhs living outside Punjab or abroad. Pilgrimage provides a link to the past and a sense of community among Sikhs from different parts of India and from the diaspora at large. Sikh pilgrimage centers create a sacred geography and play a vital role in creating a sense of community among its members (Jutla, 2002:217)

The Sikh diaspora is one of the most prominent examples of migrants throughout the past two centuries, and Jaswal emphasises repeatedly the tensions of tradition and modernity—of Indian identification and situation within a global context—among descendants of these migrants. She comments on Rushdie's term 'imaginary homeland,' but emphasises that Rushdie overlooks women's roles

and perspectives; the diaspora itself typically favoured men until later in the 20th century. Fiction, for Jaswal, thus plays an important role for diasporic women:

female writers also create an idealised world through fiction where they seek to control their narratives and develop autonomous identities [exile can be an] opportunity for liberation and transformation (Kaur, 2020:244).

Jaswal aims to claim space for women's narratives, and to address the effects of postcolonialism, Indian nationalism, and multiple hierarchies. She notes that characters became complex and ambivalent as she wrote:

identities as individuals were inseparable from their relationship to their cultural context as South Asian diaspora women ... I was creating two journeys: a physical quest and an internal quest (Kaur, 2020:249).

One sister becomes enmeshed in a feminist rally in Delhi. Jaswal also notes her efforts in writing metafiction—a reclaiming of the typical road trip, and especially films such as *Darjeeling Limited* that serves as a 'train journey story' (Kaur, 2020:142) of three brothers uncomfortably united after the death of their father. In that film, however, the travellers are explicitly outsiders, unfamiliar with the environment and without a clear sense of its tradition; the film is satirical in its revision of a pilgrimage narrative, but the emphasis is still on the Western male tourist.

Jaswal explains in her dissertation that her novel was deliberately designed to

challenge the idealised journey to India as a salve for the afflictions of the soul (Kaur, 2020:256)

from the opening subversion of the quest journey. In addition, she notes the intersection with the well-known Indian *Ramanyana*, in which Sita is the exiled wife, and Ram is the hero undergoing the journey. Sita's suicide is depicted as sacrificial—as proof of her purity; in Jaswal's novel, Sita takes her own life while lying in the hospital bed, but before doing so authors her own quest narrative. The imagined journey to India is also disentangled from religious traditions of pilgrimage. Rajni, the eldest daughter, organises the itinerary into categories and checklists—Spiritual, Tourism, and Sentimental. At many points, from the initial draft of Sita's letter, the quest is subverted; for instance, when one sister decides

to have her numbers interpreted, she later realises that the numerologist Googled the information and printed it out for her. Adjustments in the itinerary are also significant, especially the daughters' final decision to scatter their mother's ashes, not in the purity of Lokpal Lake, but in the Yamuna River in Delhi before their return home: one of them comments about the dirt and garbage in that river, emerging as it does mythically from the purity of the Himalayas:

there was beauty in searching for a space like this for Mum too (p.296).

The segment from Day Seven, at the beginning of Chapter Twenty-Two is heavily ironic, since it begins with the imagined vision of Hemkund Sahib that Sita never was able to reach; Sita narrates,

You will feel an appreciation for your body, for each other's support, as you undertake this physical and mental challenge (p.278).

She describes Lokpal Lake as

the place where my journey will end. I would like my ashes to be scattered in this lake so that I can rest in the same place where our Guru became one with God (p.278)

The narrative then shifts to the sisters' hotel view of Chandigarh.

The emphasis on dust and ashes in the temporal world meshes with Sikh images as described by Pinkney: it is only by treading in the footsteps of the guru, accepting the dirt as inevitable parts of mortal life that one can approach purity. As the sisters seek a clear area of water to scatter the ashes, the garbage floats to the other side:

The ashes drew together to make a floating shadow on the surface before the water shifted and they broke apart (p.298).

Chapter Twenty-Five opens with Sita's imagining of the return present in most pilgrimage narratives:

the completion of this journey should bring you peace ... I can only leave you with hope that the lessons of this journey will continue after your return home (p.299).

Note the ambiguity of the reference to returning 'home,' given Jaswal's commentary on the complications of first-generation diasporic daughters.

Reflecting critically on the reception and publication of her novel, Jaswal notes that the book cover depicts the Taj Mahal, not visited in the novel, but often considered a standard element in pilgrimages to India; her commentary is insightful, and the blurb on the cover that

Sometimes you have to leave home to find your roots (cover)

seems especially ironic, playing into the typical pilgrimage narrative.

Jaswal's Scholarship and Personal Reflection

As I noted earlier, I had the opportunity to read a draft of Jaswal's dissertation and ask her directly about her travel while 'researching' the novel. I asked her to comment on whether her own journey to the 'imaginary homeland' served as a kind of pilgrimage; she chose not to write that life story, but to empower the characters and narrative strategies to reclaim pilgrimage for South Asian diasporic female writers. Her response to my questions is quoted below:

I took the trip to India with my parents over about ten days. We started in Delhi (to see the city and also visit Gurdwara Bangla Sahib) and then went to Amritsar (for the Golden Temple) and the Wagga Border, and Anandpur Sahib, Chandigarh, and my dad's village in Phagwara, and then returned to Delhi.

The visit to the Golden Temple was inspiring ... seeing Sikhism as the central focus and feature of a place. Having always been a minority within a minority in terms of heritage and religion, this felt significant to me ... The journey certainly became a pilgrimage [for me]. As a daughter, I felt closer to my parents' heritage and especially my father's side of the family, who welcomed us to their village. I could finally put faces and images to my father's history, which was only an abstract concept to me as he had migrated to Singapore with his family when he was a baby. As a Punjabi and Sikh person, I gained a stronger understanding of my roots but I also felt alienated from my culture in the way that diaspora people always feel a sense of 'unbelonging' or at least belonging only partially to a place.

As the writer of this novel, I developed a greater understanding of my characters' perspectives

and how they would interact with their surroundings while also grieving their loss and making sense of their inner conflicts.

Jaswal continues:

I wanted the narrative to culminate in the sisters taking care of each other for once, and that would involve cancelling Sita's plans and going on their own quest ... I decided that if the story's message was going to be that resolutions and awakenings can happen outside of prescribed religious rituals, the sisters searching for a spot of beauty and peace in a clogged city river would be a suitable moment to bring that point home ... it was a truer depiction of working-class Punjabi-Sikh women of that generation in Britain. They cling to customs and cultural traditions more than deep religious knowledge, most of which is dominated by scholars and men and not necessarily accessible to women who have been taught their whole lives to be daughters and then wives (Jaswal, 2021)

Conclusion

In my 2019 article, I examined Martin Buckley's retracing of the journey depicted in the Ramayana—the solitary traveller seeking internal wisdom and clarity, along with spiritual enlightenment. Buckley states:

This book began life as a cultural journey, a literary adventure (Buckley, 2008:355).

Jaswal's novel also ends with an uneasy resolution in the context of diasporic South Asian women; she states that

for first-generation migrants in Britain, going to India is not exactly a homecoming or a return, because they have never physically lived in India (Kaur, 2020:264).

The diasporic 'landscape,' as she terms it, encompasses global Sikhs who often travel to India for summer camps, make donations to gurdwaras, and form a

network spanning from the US and UK to Southeast Asia, another example of the Sikh community and their interconnectedness (Kaur, 2020:265).

In her novel, she aimed to bring each daughter 'a sense of equilibrium in her own identity' (265), culminating in Shirina's imagined future return to finish her mother's pilgrimage with her own unborn daughter.

I have previously suggested that the very act of recording, photographing, or writing often contradicts the ideal of connecting with others, not to mention experiencing the divine; Jaswal's Sikh, migrant, feminist novel focusing on a family of diasporic sisters, wives, and mothers repeats and yet challenges the paradigm I outlined earlier, and thus makes an important contribution to study of the postcolonial pilgrimage narrative. It invites resistance to colonialist assumptions in the postcolonial context of diaspora: the Indian subcontinent as site of spiritual awakening; its associations with pilgrimages; the solitary traveller who seeks self-awareness; the mandated circuit of the journey; and the return to write the narrative for future travellers.

This article has examined some points of tension in the response of Sikh diasporic writers to the pilgrimage paradigm in India: westernised, influenced by both popular and traditional Indian cultures, and in the context of political events in the spotlight currently, such fictional rewritings of the paradigm demonstrate a more nuanced version of the paradigm I have examined in other works of fiction and creative nonfiction.

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