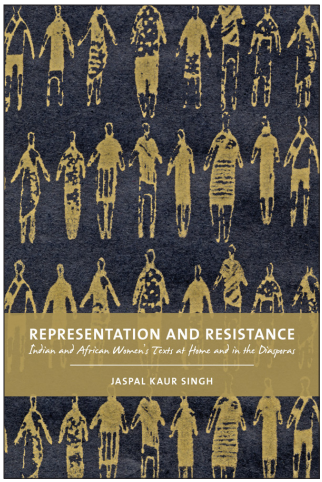

REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE: INDIAN AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S TEXTS AT HOME AND IN THE DIASPORAS

by Jaspal Kaur Singh

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JASPAL KAUR SINGH

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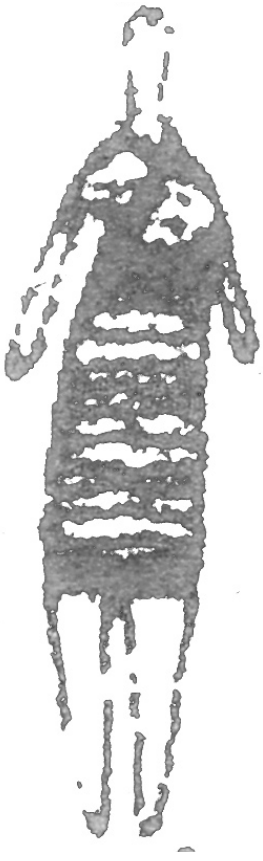

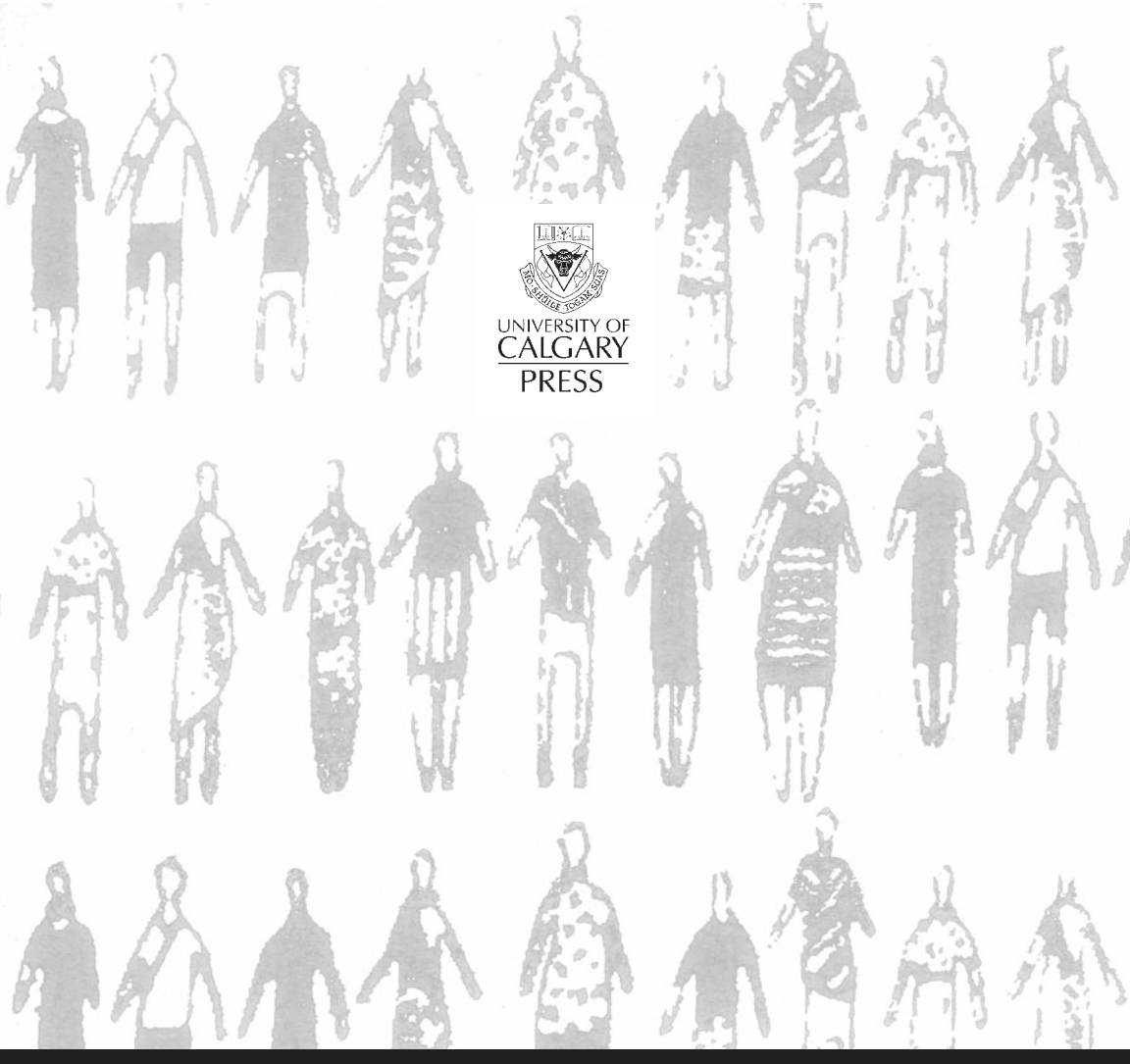

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Preface

My name is Jaspal Kaur Singh. I was born in Taunggyi, Burma. When I was eleven years old, I went to a priest at the St. Joseph Catholic church and said, "Father, I want to become a Catholic." As I stood hesitating, my friend Maria, tall and lanky, with long, greasy plaits hanging down on both sides of her dark, brown Indian face, nudged me forward a bit and I repeated the request.

Maria had told me that Christian children could write a long wish list, that Santa would come down the chimney (although we didn't have chimneys, I was assured he was smart enough to find other means of entry), and that if one had been good, one's wishes would come true. Maria had asked me solemnly, "Are you a good girl?"

Feeling a slight tightening in my chest, for I did not believe I was a good girl, I fibbed, "Yes."

The priest, in his beautiful white habit, smiled kindly at me. "Why?"

"Because I want Santa Claus to come to my house."

"Bring your parents next Sunday to me, and we will take care of that," he smiled kindly at me.

I couldn't imagine my Sikh parents allowing me to convert. Sorely disappointed at not having Santa come to my house, I left the church with Maria, who was still talking about Santa and his sleigh.

I, too, was tall and lanky like Maria, and also equally brown with greasy plaits hanging down my back. My school uniform, a navy tunic with a white short-sleeved shirt, was rumpled from playing in the schoolyard after school.

Maria was a year older than me and got to be the class monitor sometimes. Our school's name was Saint Anne's Convent High School, run by Roman Catholic Nuns from Ireland and Italy, and other Anglo-Burmese or biracial nuns.

Every morning, we children gathered in the schoolyard for hymn singing. Our voices lusty, we would sing, "Comboly Gos send down those beams! Comboly Gos send down dose beams! Whis seefly flow in, in silent steem, from thy bight thone above! Oh, come thy father of thy but

the bather!" The nuns made sure our fingers were clean and our shoes polished.

Oh, but the ones the nuns loved best were the boarders, with names like Daisy, and Rosy, and Margaret! We were merely tolerated. In fact, when my father, turbaned and bearded, took my oldest sister for admission, he was turned away. However, when my maternal uncle, a clean-shaven Sikh who worked in the British administration as a clerk, took my sister for admission, she was accepted. Subsequently, all of my five siblings and I attended the convent. My father said, "You are lucky to be in the convent school. Learn to become like the nuns. They are good women. They will teach you how to become successful in life."

One day, I said to Mother Christine, the Anglo-Burmese supervisor of the kindergarten, "Maria told me all about Holy Communion. Can I too dress up in a beautiful dress and come to church on Sunday?"

"If you can bring your parents, you may."

Maria later said to me that she didn't think I could go for Holy Communion.

"Why not? My mother can sew a beautiful dress for me."

"If you do Communion, you have to confess."

"Confess what?"

"Everything. All your sinful thoughts in your head. Do you hate your parents?"

"Sometimes." I thought about my simple mother with her *salwar kameez* and Punjabi-speaking habits, always working hard, and knew I wanted to be … Christian and English-speaking.

"Well, you must tell the father about those thoughts as well. You have to be a good girl, you know. Because, if you lie and you take the wafer, you will vomit blood right then and there."

I thought about all the blood covering my beautiful dress and decided that the time had not yet come for me to be a Christian.

Every Christmas, all the school-children lined up and waited for hours to get a handful of candies from England. The candies looked beautiful, like colourful jewels. The nuns, in their crisp habits, spooned the candies and dropped them in our waiting palms. They seemed like angels to us. The Anglo-Burmese teachers – Teacher Haig, Teacher Judy, Teacher Jasper – were all so special. They showed us worlds we did not know existed. I wished I could go Christmas carol singing with my friends. They sounded so melodious, singing "Silent Night," playing the guitar, and carrying a

glowing lantern. My sisters and I could only peek surreptitiously from behind the curtains. Father wouldn't let us join them. He said, "You are not Christians!" We hated being left out.

Teacher Maggie, whom I used to adore because she could speak such good English, was quite astringent in her way of speaking to us children. One day, as we were gathered around her looking at some pictures of Indians in the English Reader, she mentioned that the Indians were quite dirty and lived like rats. In my thirteen-year-old brashness, I said, "Teacher, if the Indians are dirty, why do you call all the beautiful furniture and curtains Indian-chair, or table, or curtain?" The term for them was *kalaga*, for curtain and *kala htaing*, for chair. *Kala*, I thought, meant Indian. Her eyes behind her thick glasses gleaming, she said, "Oh, those are not named after you Indians – *kala mai*. They are named after the English – *kala phew.*" *Mai* means black and *phew* means white. *Kala* are the ones who crossed the waters and came to Burma. It could also mean black. I looked down at my skin and realized it was quite dark and greasy. I smiled, foolishly.

It was a sunny day in May. We all went on a picnic with my fourth grade class. Teacher Betty, a Muslim Burmese, cooked coconut chicken noodles for us. The picnic was at the dam built by the Russians. After a whole day of playing games, such as passing the parcel and catch-catch, we were walking back home. My Sikh friend Amarjeet, looking really worried and pale, said, "Jaspal, I think the chicken was *halal*."

"What are you saying! It is against Sikhism to eat that, isn't it?"

"Yes."

I went up to Gurdeep, another Sikh friend.

"Gurdeep, did you eat the chicken noodles? The chicken was *halal*!"

We walked all the way home, worried sick to our stomachs that something ominous would befall us soon. Only Muslims ate *halal* meat.

As soon as we reached town, Gurdeep, Amarjeet, and I ran to my house and walked upstairs to my grandmother's room. She had an altar with the *Gurugranth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book, where she always kept some *amrit*, the holy water.

"Here, let me drink some first."

Taking a large gulp, I passed around the bottle. We all drank the entire bottle of holy water, asked *Waheguru* to forgive us, and, then, looked at each other with fear.

"Do you think we are forgiven?" asked Gurdeep.

"I think we might be thrown in purgatory for all eternity," I answered.

"You think?" said Amarjeet.

"Well, it is better than hell. At least, there will be no hellfire and brimstones there," I said.

Then, when I was fifteen, I cut my hair. While it was just a tiny bit of hair right in the middle of forehead that I had snipped, I was terrified that I would be discovered and punished by my parents. Not to mention the fear of hell that started to plague me as soon as I did that. I took my father's *fixxo*, the glue that he used to keep his beard in place, and stuck the hair back to my forehead. That night, I dreamed of eternal hell.

The next morning, we had to go and get passport pictures as we were contemplating "returning" to our "motherland." The Ne Win military regime was becoming increasingly brutal, particularly to Chinese and Indians. I still remember the passport picture with the hair sticking up on my forehead!

My grandmother, who accompanied us to the photo studio, noticed my hair, and smacked me on my head. "*Badmash kuri,"* she said. Bad girl.

Rubbing my head, I asked, "Why is it that the Burmese are not punished and sent to hell when they cut their hair?"

"They are *junglees*. They don't have religion."

"Where do they go when they die?"

"*Shaitaan*, you ask too many questions! You will go to *Narak!"*

"But why must the Sikhs never cut their hair? Didn't Guru Nanak say we must not believe in blind faith?"

"*Htair ja!* Just you wait!"

And as she lumbered to her feet to come get me, I ran all the way to Khin Mala's house. She was my best friend, and I specially loved her for trying to help me turn into a Burmese girl.

"Khin Mala, I wish I could have a nose like you, flat and Burmese."

"Sit down and close your eyes," Khin Mala would say with a twinkle in her eyes. "Now, wish hard." Then she would bring out the mortar and pestle, pound it seven times, and touch it lightly to my nose. "Tomorrow, when you wake up, your nose will be flatter and you will be one of us." That I never turned Burmese was somehow my fault, I used to think. I was not good enough.

As I reached Mala's house, I asked her mother, Ah Daw Gyi, "Daw Daw, what happens when the Burmese people die?"

"They attain Nibana."

Nibana. Nirvana. Moksha.

"How?"

Ever since then, I have been seeking. My search has led me to many parts of the world. Navigating various cosmologies, ideologies, and economies, first in Burma, then in India, Iraq, and now in the United States, I am mindful of words, meanings, and truths.

What I learned most from the search is that due to the many cultural influences and border crossings, and the various ideological underpinnings that I was exposed to in my childhood, I don't know which answers are right. Or are there things that fall into categories of neither right nor wrong but something else? This book is the culmination of my inquires and sensibilities, where I try to uncover similar pitfalls of language and consciousness in postcolonial writers so that we may all, readers and writers, critics and students, know that there are other realities and truths, as well as other universalisms, that are equally valid.

This book, then, examines how certain postcolonial female Indian and African voices are fragmented and conflicted, formed as they are by oppositional discourses of modernity and tradition, East and West, local and global, and how their representational subjects, too, show their ambiguous and conflicted stances in relation to modernity and tradition.

The collection of mad female voices in this book reveals the ambiguities embedded in their psyches, and more importantly perhaps, their treacherous co-optation by vested interests of globalization and other elite institutions in order to further dangerous strategies. The continued use of the idioms of modernism by many postcolonial female writers and artists writing resistance to gender identity constructions is troubling and, indeed, dangerous in the present global climate. Some of the representational mad subjects of these female-authored texts, who continue to speak in the language of modernity and globalization, when co-opted, contribute to the continued violence against and brutalization of many men and women in the Global South.

One need only examine the situation in Afghanistan and Iraq, where U.S. imperialism's deployment of the rhetoric of civilization – "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 120) – is redolent of colonialist ideals. See, for example, the December 3, 2001, issue of *Time* magazine featuring an Afghani woman on the cover with the caption: "Lifting the Veil: The shocking story of how

the Taliban brutalized the women of Afghanistan. How much better will their lives be now?" Thus, the *burqa*, *purdah*, and the veil are once again seen as the markers of uncivilized nation-states, whose borders need to become more porous for the penetrative need of globalization, the rhetoric of which is then couched in terms of liberation and freedom.

Ultimately, I will posit a methodology of criticism for these female-authored texts representing madness which will encompass the legacy of modernity and globalization and their inter-connections to gender relations in postcolonial nation-states and their ideological and representational spaces.

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As I think of writing this acknowledgment page, I think of hands, old hands, young hands, hands that held mine in encouragement, soothed my forehead, patted my back, wrote critical comments, cooked, folded in prayers, and, today, I shall name them, as they are not separate from the persons who helped me along in writing the book.

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This book is written in memory of my parents, Tej Kaur and Prabjoth Singh, who taught me love and strength through simple living, walking the true path with awareness, and journeying through various cosmologies with dignity and joyfulness. Without their encouragement, their belief in my abilities, their pride in my work, and their eternal presence, I would not have had the courage to start this project, let alone complete it. Thank you, Ma and Papaji.

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