

Kuldip Gill – Dharma Rasa Narrative about her parents Bhagwant Kaur Gill (1914 – 1980) and Inder Singh Gill (1901 -1969)

1. Love letters – Canada to India, 1930s

The depth of tranquility and pain as depicted by Kuldip Gill on behalf of her father Inder Singh Gill in the era of 1930s, that mental state of “Chained” has been used to describe the reality of life as a hard worker labourer as well as “Chained” in the life situation, as if stuck tight between the two wheels of “Chakki”, imprisoned in the hands of destiny with the hope that the money he was earning will give better life to her family in India.

His wife’s few unlettered lines, but big unsaid space between those lines told much more than mere simple conversation about wellness of their children, mother and family members. He wanted to express that he could feel it all what she hadn’t said ...that organic pain of long and indefinite separation of ...years, he could feel it all; and their daughter Kuldip, as if standing at one end of the telephone narrating his explanations to her un-asked questions, her undoubtful, helpless and sometimes hopeless anguish which transcribed into equal or more intense pain for not able to meet sooner than desired even though he had endlessly tried reciprocating his longing to meet with his beloved wife (Bhagwant Kaur Gill).

Like a “Chained” labourer working through the black sleepless nights, he had only one hope that there will be light at the end of those black nights when he would get to see her beautiful face with green eyes which was the only gift which could brighten his mind.

Every day and night he waited for the news of his family’s passport in India so that they could fly before the war started (World War 2) as he was imagining a bigger pain if they did not arrive before the war. He was guiding them to come via Hong Kong and Yokohama without delay as soon as they got their passport. The money he was earning through his hard work was saved to send for his family’s travel and without any delay he was ready to send it to the city (Moga) closer to the village as soon as it was needed for purchasing the tickets. He was guiding his wife what to bring with her and made it a point not to miss her Surma (powdered eye liner) that he wanted to see her beautiful green eyes lined with black eye-liner. His very poetic romantic spills remained unhidden in his expressions when he said, “I would spread flower petals for you and fly to you on feathers, if I could”

2. Oud ja Kaliya Kauva (Fly away black crow)

Here in this poem, Kuldip Gill narrates the other end of the story – her mother in the village waiting for her passport so that she could fly to Canada and reunites with her husband. Kuldeep sounds like a moderator, standing in the middle of nowhere.....somewhere in-between the snow laden grounds visualizing the saw mills with green chains and lumbar and on the other end she was visualizing the farms full of corn tassels. She has beautifully narrated the stories her father Inder Singh Gill and mother Bhagwant Kaur Gill in her innocent poetic styles. This poem is written from her mother’s end....

Bhagwant, like any other woman in that era who was living alone for years without her husband and waiting every day that either he would come back one day or her passport will arrive soon

so that she could fly to Canada and re-unite with her husband **after (more than a decade???)**
How many years ?) She was shy, quietened and left out alone in her in-law's house, in her husband's village that she couldn't express her feelings to anyone in the house or the whole village. That was the time when women living without their husbands either talked to the birds, their cows and buffaloes or to their mirror and suffered alone in their indefinite separations when they felt helpless and hopeless.

In this poem Kuldip has described how her mother was talking to the black crow who has been considered as the 'god of love' and the best messenger who used to bring the good news of some loved one's home coming. She was reciting a Bollywood song, telling the crow to go and tell her husband about the news that she was so longing to meet him. That she was so envious of the women who were visiting their husbands daily in the fields of corn and sitting hiding amongst the whirls of corn tassels where couples were seduced by their shades and how lonely and jealous, she was feeling without him

3. My Eyes Hurt When You're Not Here (A husband in Canada to his nineteen -year-old wife in Canada)

Inder Singh Gill sends another letter to his beloved wife expressing how much he was waiting for her and his eyes were hurting when she was not with him. How lonely he was feeling while walking alone from the mill when he knew there was no one at home to welcome him, the scraps and sawdust covering his skin after mill work felt like the shining stars in his wife's eyes when they spent time on the deck back home in the village. He was releasing his stress going down the memory lane and imagining his wife's friends teasing her for her dry and sorrowful eyes singing 'sithniyan' – (the teasing songs at weddings). Kuldip has beautifully depicted the romanticized feelings of her father through imaginary scenes of the weddings and women getting together and talking about the husbands – sometimes good and sometimes evil and laughing out loud remembering their husbands when they go away far from them. His thoughts are taking him to their farms where they had Chemeli flower beds during summer and he was describing it like a Bollywood movie scene, that he imagined sitting close to his wife when she was whispering some romantic dusky words in his ears. He was more than willing to offer his life to his beloved in place of this mill work life. He was drenched in the ghostly memories of his wife which he thought always walked behind him.

4. The Dream Train

This poem took Kuldip to the higher level of spiritual transcendental state of love affair of her parents which was beyond the bodily existence of them but away from all the places on this earth, they met in the dream land and imagined all the intricate and delicate conversations between the two lovers could hold in their true presence of spirits. There is mention of "You ...are Shakti", Vedic Gods, Aum, yogic powers, chanting, sitting cross legged for meditation, burnished body, cool sacred threads, unmixed drops of oil and waterand there is intermix of masculinity and femineity which becomes one which she called "Shakti". In her picturization of dream train, she has crossed all the boundaries of distance of seven seas, chained spirits restricted to the domains of Mill for him and suffocated home atmosphere for his wife and in

the dream, they catch a dream train and meet somewhere ...where there was no one but them alone... where they become Shakti together where there is no need of food and water but their union suffices their hunger and thirst. They were abording the dream train again and again and the feeling was voluptuous, delicious, tantric, licentious and the “Shakti-full” train of thoughts run through their nerves.

5. Love Song

Bhagwant singing the bulbul’s song in her romantic spills imagining their moments together when they were physically entwined around each other as close as they could hear each other’s heart beat and they were lost from the world in their hugs and kisses

6. Kildeer’s dance

(I couldn’t understand what Kuldip is trying to say in this poem) - Kusum

SAMARAN (pp 23 – Dharma Rasa) – Hand to Hand to Hand: Would theirs Be a Life to Disregard?

Here, I (Kusum) am presenting this poem of Kuldip Gill unaltered, unvarnished, raw as it is for the feelings of her mother are oozing out organically pure, (through her word)s as nectar of love, ... though Bhagwant Kaur was physically separated but soulfully inseparable in her thoughts and restricted, shyly actions while living in a big joint family, but around the circadian rhythm of her body and spirit and how her husband’s minutest happenings in his realms seven seas apart, her mother could capture and depict in her hemisphere of love and her wordless inner turbulence followed by peace and then again the ripples of turbulence leading to a long pause of silence, and the interplay of dancing of feelings from dawn to dusk over reading and re-reading her beloved husband’s letters again and again like a lost in wilderness mad young girl in her teens (Bhagwant Kaur was 19 years old when she was left behind and her husband came to Canada to work and earn money so that he could give a better financial life to his family)

“Hand to Hand to Hand.....” Kudip recites to her mother Bhagwant Kaur Gill

“I hold your letters in two hands,
As when in temple receiving prasad
Letters written by my father to my mother,
A Man in Canada to his young wife in India.

His hands wrote these lines
Her hands held these letters
Her eyes eked meanings from the sounds
Of his words, from between the lines
Letters read first by his mother,
Sister, brother, someone who could
Read them fast, get the message, get the tone.

She read them last, slowly,
Eking out each sound,
e-a-c-h v-o-w-e-l

To hear his voice,
To remember how he strung his words,
Breaths and sighs, long sounds
And breaks. She melted words, riddled
meanings, for her alone.

She read them like this
On rose-pink sleepless mornings
Before the house woke,
At the peacock's first shriekings;
She read them in moonlight haze,
On starlit nights, as sheet lightning
Filled the skies.

She folded and unfolded,
Reading the words of a lovesick Canadian husband
Eventually, she tied them into packets,
Placed them locked in boxes
In her trunk. Brought them back to him
With children's sweaters, seeds and chooran and saffron
The books he ordered, the surma for her green eyes,
Their fulkari and their bagh

She read them even in the madness,
When days and nights ran into screams and fits
And tearless fears, the rage.
Between the tearing hair,
The self-afflicted forehead bruises
The despair, the remorse.
In between she unwrapped and read them,
Tied up and saved.

Until the sirens took her away from
Him, Shouting curses in the air,
She cried, don't let anyone near my trunk!
Keep my keys safe!

My mother's hands were younger then
than mine today. I hold the letters,
one the writer and one the reader,
the lover and the loved.
I have moved them then stored them a dozen times.
Now, I hold them in my hands.
I open them.

I have read them, Mama,
And I have discovered love.
It sustained you through those years
Of madness, anger, sickness and tears, rage, lobotomy,
Terror, fear, Crease Clinic, children, aloneness, despair.
It is all here:
Your coal-black hair, green eyes, sweet smile.
My father loved his woman,
My mother, you.

I know because he told you so
At the start of every letter
And at the end of each, in prose,
In poetry, between the lines,
His "cluster of grapes,
Pomegranate blossom,
Gate fruits and my Bhagwant, Bhagwant!"

In Gurmukhi, and Urdu, the language of the poet,
These words, his Music.

Do letters sustain you,
Do they still a heart,
Hug a body,
Wrap themselves around you?
Ink fades,
What happens to their between-the-lines?
These imaginings,
My insights, their outreachings?

When I die, will my death erase
My discovery,
Their love?"

TRAVELLING THROUGH THE BORDERLANDS (pp 32-33)

Bhagwant Kaur travelled through CPR Empress Line when she had to quarantine for a whole month long in Hong Kong. She was twenty-three years old at that time and she travelled with an infant and a four-and-a-half years old girl (Probably Kuldip Gil). They were astonished to see the meat hanging on strings in the ship "pork, grizzled chickens, heaped gizzards, glazed everything, fish, pineapples, small red bananas, peeled tangerines – all smelling of each other" and it was a big cultural shock for the first timer travelling abroad. Bhagwant bought (on the ship??) a granite-pestle to make masala, two saris, a cut-

velvet jacket and dress, and for her neck, a hammered gold gingeeri (hand-made gold chain) to take to Vancouver.

YOUR FIRST MOTHER (PP 55) – A mystery to solve what this poem means as I guess it has some hidden truth (we might need to talk to a family member if this truth is important to us – KS)

THE INDIA CHEST (pp 65) is a poem about the profound memories of Bhagwant Kaur which she preserved in the form of special artifacts she had brought with her when she immigrated. All those memories were caged in that Wooden Chest in their home. She would open the Chest occasionally and show her daughter all the items she brought along with her when she immigrated – the embroidered bagh, phulkari clothes, chadars, saris, family letters and masala spices. After talking a bit about everything, and sitting in awe listening to her stories of beautiful net embroidery and the colours she dyed herself while living in India – Indigo, amber, gulabi (pink) and the alchemy of hundreds of bits of mirrors covering those clothes.

Then she used to tell the stories of her mother -in-law (Wadi-bebbe) and her sisters-in-law (Her husband's sisters) and her husband's older brother and all the lineage; and how the family members lived in the house (sikirian) and carried out the relationships and the stories of arranged marriages. She also narrated the rules of arranged marriages that how the four sets of kinsmen who could not marry within the relationships. Bhagwant also used to share the stories of all that richness of land owning and how they used to lease their lands in the village back home (Dhudike). In her conversations she talked about richness and sense of belonging to their roots no matter where they may go and start living in the world.

After revisiting and narrating her stories to her kids (even after coming to Canada) she would put everything back in the Chest (Peti), teaching her kids to fold the things, letters and tapestries exactly they were folded before, on the same lines and pressed and locked in.

Kusum - What was she missing even after re-uniting with her husband which she longed for such a lengthy period of time??!! Why she was opening her India Chest so often and narrate her stories to kids? These questions have remained un-answered because the answers have gone with the wind which took away the prisoners of time. A big chunk of their life passed waiting to re-unite with their beloved and hiding their emotions in front of family members and the community and working, doing household chores and raising kids as if life only meant to do the chores and go to bed and next day will be a new day. What else is the purpose of a woman's life?