

## Dalip Kaur Tiwana's search for the ultimate truth in narrative

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Punjabi writer Dalip Kaur Tiwana - File photo



## **Elizabeth Siler**

A middle-aged woman, the mother of a young child, a well-respected professor, a person whose family has been torn by the storms and vagaries of life, lies in bed, holding her child, restlessly awaiting the arrival of her dead father at the time of shraadh, wondering if his spirit is out there in the night, reflecting on how matters in her life came to be in such a state. She is observing this night as a remembrance of his untimely death, reflecting on the ruins of her family. Out there in the night is the wandering spirit of her long-dead father, who recognises her longing for him, for a world of family, spiritual values, and ties now gone. He has come back for this shraadh and acknowledges her tribute to him.

Thus begins ‘Tell the Tale Urvashi’, the award-winning autobiographical novel of Punjabi writer Dalip Kaur Tiwana. On this, the second anniversary of her death, it is fitting to remember the life and works of this ground-breaking novelist. With an over 65-year writing career and recognised with every major Indian literary award, her works reflect upon the experiences of modern, well-educated women in a rapidly changing post-Partition India, specifically in Punjab, as well as upon the struggle for spiritual meaning and hope in a world that is increasingly slipping its moorings.

I had the good fortune to work with Professor Tiwana as an English-language translation editor of two of those books, ‘The Tale of the Phoenix’ and ‘Tell the Tale Urvashi’, the latter of which won the Saraswati Samman prize in 2001. Both feature strong female protagonists, highly educated professors from traditional Sikh families.

These women face the Sisyphean task of balancing careers and intellectual pursuits with traditionally expected duties. Often these tasks involve caring for aging family members and serving as the support beams of families that are unsuccessfully navigating the storm and stress of modern life. Relationships with others, particularly family members, form the essential substance, the very warp and woof, of these women's lives, just as relationships with her large family formed the fabric of Professor Tiwana's life. Although these female characters deal with stressors that are sadly all too common — abusive, alcohol-fuelled relationships, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, adultery, divorce, and single parenthood — they remain unbroken and sustained by a core of inner strength.

In an interview in 2019 with the scholar Amandeep Kaur, Professor Tiwana pointed out that novels can serve as the autobiographies of those who cannot speak freely. Her art often reflected her life, though she also spoke freely in other contexts. Tiwana's works are populated with complex women who, while often in traditionally arranged or negotiated marriages, hold down careers as teachers. She herself was a Professor of Punjabi at Punjabi University in Patiala for 30 years. After her retirement, she was named a Fellow and the writer-in-residence for life.

The marriages of characters in Tiwana's novels are often blistering, divisive couplings experienced by women who are struggling to wear too many hats, to emotionally and spiritually support too many people, all the while experiencing little support from their spouses. However, Professor Tiwana's marriage to sociology professor Bhupinder Singh (aka the poet Sarvan Minhas) was long, fruitful, and collaborative. A skilled polyglot, he was instrumental in seeing many of her works translated into English.

A devout Sikh, in both 'The Tale of the Phoenix' and 'Tell the Tale Urvashi', Prof Tiwana wrestled with the bigger questions of life as she struggled to understand the untimely deaths of several family members,

often crossing religious lines to bring insights from both Buddhism and Hinduism.

Artists also live on in their works. Professor Tiwana wrote, among other works, 50 novels and seven collections of short stories, all in Punjabi, all exploring in some way the themes of oppression and repression of women. Many of the later works explore the search for liberation, transcendence, and release from attachment — moksha — at the personal and spiritual level. The moksha that her characters attain at the end of these two novels transcends the boundaries of their lives to impact the lives of others.

Celtic Christians use the term ‘thin places’ to refer to those places, times and events where the veil between this life and the next seems almost transparent. The ghosts of Punjab’s past, the darkening reality of the present Punjab, and hope for the Punjab come to interact within thin places in these two novels. Pilgrimages are the metaphor of search, struggle, and self-discovery in both novels. The sense of uncontrolled movement of people and events across time allows for articulated reflections on life. Tiwana’s characters find that heaven can begin on earth by searching for release from the flow and encumbrances of the river that is life itself.

In ‘The Tale of the Phoenix’, the sense of the darkness descending on Punjab is palpable, the sense of fear and outrage tangible. Professor Tiwana’s love for India and her fierce outspokenness compelled her to return, in 2015, the prestigious Padma Shri award that she had won in 2004, citing her outrage at the violence against religious minorities, the communalism, and the disregard for free speech rights that were ripping Indian society asunder.

Dalip Kaur Tiwana’s search for the ultimate truth in the narrative ended on January 31, 2020, suddenly and unexpectedly, at the beginning of the pandemic.

— **The writer teaches at Washington State University**