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Why writer Yashpal's feminism provokes thought 50 years on

A new anthology of essays revisits the legacy of the writer, who made ripples in Hindi writing with his depiction of women

Aditya Mani Jha

The plot of *Dada Comrade*, the Hindi communist writer Yashpal's (1903-76) debut novel (originally published in 1941), was informed by the events of his own tumultuous youth. As an idealistic young student in Punjab in the 1920s, Yashpal joined the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) alongside revolutionaries like Chandrashekhar Azad and Bhagat Singh. Some of his colleagues, however, did not appreciate the young Yashpal's romance with the 16-year-old Prakashvati Pal (later his wife) because they viewed marriage and domesticity as obstacles in the road to revolution. After a group of HSRA members unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Yashpal in 1930, the organisation was torn asunder and never really reunited, mirroring the rift between Yashpal and Azad. These events are fictionalised to varying degrees in the book, and the female lead Shailbala is based on aspects of Prakashvati.

In the introduction to her 2022 English translation of *Dada Comrade*, scholar Simona Sawhney had written, "Today, many readers may question the ways in which Yashpal conceived of equality, revolution and gender. Yashpal's feminism, for instance, is not the same as mine, but that does not prevent me from recognizing it as a feminism: a discourse that wrestled, in its own way, with questions of gender, sexuality, power and equality." Sawhney's introduction sought to contextualise Yashpal's unique and complex engagement with gender politics. This endeavour is more fully realised in the recently released essay collection, *Yashpal: On Gender and Revolutionary Thought*, published by Orient BlackSwan and edited by Sawhney alongside Kama McLean.

The 17 essays collected here are based on some of Yashpal's best-known works: novels like *Divya* (1945), *Gita* (1946), *Manushya Ke Roop* (1949), short stories like *Holi Ka Mazaak* ('*The Holi Joke*') and *Tumne Kyun Kaha Main Sundar Hoon?* ('*Why Did You Say I Am Beautiful?*'), as well as landmark essays from the journal *Viplav,* which the writer founded in the 1940s. Three different essays, of course, are devoted to his magnum opus *Jhootha Sach*, a novel published in two parts in Hindi over 1958-60, and translated into English as a single, 1,100-page novel by his son Anand under the name *This is Not That Dawn* in 2010.

What makes Yashpal such a compelling subject of study from both literary and the historiographic points of view? (Sawhney and McLean, after all, are professors of literature and history, respectively.) For one, he was one of the rare male Indian writers of his era—and this is doubly true for Hindi literature—who not only centred women's stories, but through dark humour and satirical techniques, exposed the collective complicity of Indian society in the oppression of women.

Set in the 1st century BCE, *Divya* follows a high-born woman who decides to become a prostitute after realising that she is living in a gilded cage and that, in several meaningful ways, the courtesans and prostitutes of the era have more agency than her. *This is Not That Dawn* begins on the following tragicomic note, where a pair of daughters-in-law are trying their level best to "perform" grief to the satisfaction of the men around them.

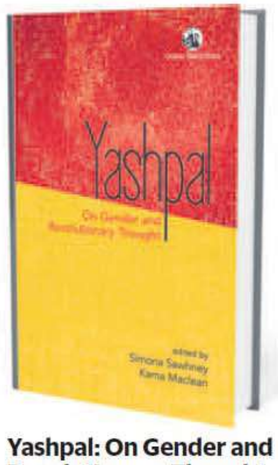
"Both daughters-in-law were present when the old woman breathed her last. The elder told the younger to announce the death of their mother-in-law with a scream of unbearable pain, mindful of the ritual at the hour of terrible grief. The younger one was at such a loss that she could not do this right. To observe the tradition properly, the elder went to the window herself and cried out in the required loud, heart-rending voice, as an eagle might cry in agony when pierced with an arrow."

Second, as some of the essays in *On Gender and Revolutionary Thought* prove, Yashpal's engagement with gender issues was also reflective of the way his overall politics evolved with time. Xiaoke Ren, in his essay *Narrative Critique of the Congress Rule in Yashpal's 'Jhootha Sach'*, shows us how the writer's caricatures of self-centered, predatory politicians use gender relations to underline Yashpal's views on power and its corrupting influence.

Yashpal presiding at the annual function of Coffee House, Lucknow. COURTESY FACEBOOK/YASHPAL

In *Jhootha Sach*, the protagonist Tara Puri, a Partition refugee and rape survivor from Lahore now building a new life in Delhi, is crudely propositioned by a politician who promises her that he can get her a job working in the movies—suggesting, additionally, that Punjabi women ("free with their bodies") like herself have done very well in that industry. The implications about both Tara, in particular, and Punjabi women, in general, are painfully clear.

A bittersweet and touching portrayal of Yashpal and Prakashvati's marriage is provided by their son Anand in *Yashpal, My Father*, which is the last entry in the book. Francesca Orsini, in her essay *On Her Own Terms: Viplav, Women and Prakashvati Pal*, describes how Prakashvati charted her own intellectual path through essays in the journal *Viplav*. Orsini's entry is particularly interesting because *Dada Comrade*, the female lead Shailbala isn't really allowed by Yashpal to develop revolutionary strands of thought by herself—both her romantic and political awakenings follow the lead of her beloved, Harish (based on Yashpal himself).



Yashpal: On Gender and Revolutionary Thought: *Edited by Simona Sawhney and Kama Maclean, Orient Blackswan, 348 pages, ₹2,215.*

My favourite essay in the collection, however, is *Punjabi Refugee Women in Urban Spaces in 'Jhootha Sach'* by Ritu Madan, because it looks at the bigger picture presented by Yashpal's portrayals of Punjabi female refugees in 1950s Delhi. We see how they are viewed with suspicion initially. Many of them are unfamiliar with the gendered social mores of Delhi, especially in terms of what to wear at which place, which lanes are to be avoided after dark, et cetera. But once a section of educated, driven refugees manage to place themselves in "respectable", often English-speaking jobs, their "foreign" bodies (alluring and a-threat-to-the-social-fabric in equal measure) acquire the blunting, assimilatory edge of the white collar. These women, then, have a hand in shaping the very foundation of Delhi's modernity, a modernity that gives them a place in society, but under strictly demarcated terms.

Madan writes, "As Delhi is transformed in the novel from refugee city to capital city by the labour of the Partition migrants who settle into new homes and occupations, Punjabi migrant women become increasingly invisible in the city. By disciplining their bodies into 'normative femininity', they forfeit unconditional access to public space, and inhabit it purposefully, for education, employment or shopping. As they occupy the city with their disciplined bodies, waiting at bus stops in their clean and starched saris to reach places of work where they labour honestly (...), these Punjabi women redefine the city as the modern and developing capital of a new country."

The emphasis on educated, upper-caste characters in Yashpal's corpus, however, is also the key to understanding the limitations of his feminism. As Sawhney explains in her own essay (which opens the book), upper-caste protagonists like Tara from *Jhootha Sach* encounter two kinds of supporting characters quite often—the oppressed lower-caste woman who is usually a peer, and the bitter, long-suffering woman who's usually from a generation above. Both these recurring "types" in Yashpal's fiction are flat, unconvincing portrayals because they seem to exist only to further the education of the young, educated, idealistic upper-caste protagonist.

"If education is the single most important factor shared by the women protagonists of Yashpal's novels, it is also what sets them apart from other women, including their own mothers and aunts who are never able to provide guidance or support to these young women," as she argues.

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