Chapter 11

Automatic Autonomy:

Patriarchal Inauthenticity

in Neel Kamal Puri’s *The Patiala Quartet*

Ludhiana-born Neel Kamal Puri is a well-known theatre, dance and music critic for the English newspaper *The Asian Age*. Her debut novel *The Patiala Quartet* is an account of the lives of four characters trying to grapple with the violence which has been part of their existence. In his review of the aforementioned novel, Khushwant Singh praises Puri for depicting the manner in which “Patialvis” are different from other Punjabis and for handling “the theme with the deftness of a born-story teller.” Tara Sahgal says that the novel is “an effective hyperlink into an intriguing world…with its intelligent, feminist twang and anti-feudal fire – though generally unmoving, it’s usually interesting.” Another critic called Anita Roy says that Neel Kamal Puri’s writing is reminiscent of Jane Austen’s thematic style. According to Roy, “like [Jane] Austen, Neel Kamal Puri is all too aware of the limited choices available to women in the society under her lens. She calls the novel a “gentle satire of social mores [for] it generates that these are her [Puri’s] people, their hopes and tragedies are her own.”

The novel is set in Patiala, a city of Punjab, during the nineteen eighties when terrorism was at its peak in the state. The author documents the lives of Minnie, Monty, Karuna and Michael who are bound to each other by ties of blood and of violence. It would, however, be erroneous to narrow the
experience of violence undergone by characters in the novel to the crimes committed by certain terror-spreading propagandists. A critical study of the novel shows the violence surrounding these victims is worsened by various elements like the mute acceptance of physical as well as emotional violence, of society’s expectations with regards to a person’s social situation. Also, the author highlights the fear of flouting the norms that are established for both sexes as well as the huge burden of guilt carried around by those who try and manage to pull themselves out of the stranglehold of all these strictures that violate the codes of humanity.

The author narrates the stories of two sisters whose lives, after their marriages, hurtle onto the path of violence but in entirely different ways. Both are the progeny of Punjab’s aristocracy. While one girl obediently gets married, according to her father’s wishes, to a man of royal lineage, the other stubbornly chooses a bridegroom who comes from the working class and has no connection to the royalty. Consequently, both are victimized in different ways: the sister living in the lap of luxury is exposed to the horrors of sexual violence as well as psychological abuse, whereas her sibling becomes a victim of organized chaos that marks the way of life she is forced to adopt because of her husband who is extremely naïve in business, uninterested in creating a secure environment for his kids and who feels jealous of his wife’s elevated social status. Moreover, they pass all their uncertainties, inadequacies, hopelessness and helplessness on to their children. The author, however, focusses on the offspring of these two sisters’ and their struggle to free themselves from this inheritance of violence.
Among the four children, Minnie takes the most rigid and non-conformist stance against her patriarchal and class-conscious environment. Her inflexible attitude is inherited from both her parents. Minnie’s middle-class father stubbornly refuses to accept any blame for losing money in business. Her mother, on the other hand, shows willfulness by choosing to marry a person from lower rungs of the social ladder primarily to escape the restrictions and responsibilities heaped on the women of patrician lineage. Hailing from a family that provides very little financial, physical and emotional security, Minnie learns to tackle the challenges posed by patriarchal society. She challenges the boys in her school who have been trying to embarrass her with catcalls and rude proposal; she bravely refuses to entertain the advances of lecherous teachers who demand compliance in exchange for good grades; she shuns the institution of marriage mainly because of society’s presumption that tying oneself in a connubial relationship is a requisite for every “nice girl.” Minnie fulfils all her aspirations and ambitions and, finally, manages to get a job abroad and move away from the constricting social and political atmosphere around her. But she is not able to escape the turmoil raging in her heart. The source of the turmoil is her sense of guilt over her flight from her atmosphere. She feels guilty about her freedom because her family still remains caught in a haze of violence back home. Hence, she keeps on reprocessing her violence-filled past.

Minnie’s cousin Karuna grows up watching her mother being physically, sexually and emotionally abused by her extremely violent father. Her mother is the typical patriarchal woman who “schools herself into passivity” and meekly accepts the patriarchal perception that compliance with
the wishes of the men in her life is the only way of living (36). So she stoically bears her husband’s beatings that can be heard by her small daughter hiding under the staircase; the only conscious act of Karuna’s mother after the thrashing is calling for a rickshaw for her sister’s place where she can lick her wounds in privacy. Witnessing her mother’s humiliation and victimization at a young age, Karuna realizes that being submissive and resigned is the only way to escape the wrath of her domineering and violent parent. Her father exemplifies the power that patriarchy invests in a phallus. In fact, this power manifests itself through the phallus usually through the exertion of violence over others. Moreover, patriarchy remains in control primarily by feeding on the fear it seeks to evoke in its victims. Hence, in order to maintain the position of control over his household, Karuna’s father makes his daughter the target of his violence. He hires a man to be her permanent guard outdoors. He also monitors and controls all the activities inside the house. In order to prevent her from bolting for her independence he takes extreme care that Karuna is not brought into close proximity of Minnie. Karuna’s life, in fact, virtually becomes prison with her father as her strict guard. He tries to mould her into his warped idea of femininity in which woman is weak, pathetic and submissive towards every man around her.

Karuna’s father chooses her groom to be a man who is of similar social standing. He turns out to be a lecher, forcing himself upon her at every opportunity. She shakes off his proposal with great difficulty but realizes that marriage is the only way to get out from under her father’s thumb. Hence, she entertains the marriage offer from a boy called Croaky who faithfully follows her on cycle, all the while professing his undying love for her. In reality,
however, Croaky or Gurjeet Singh (his real name) happens to be an opportunist who wants to rise from his middle-class roots and hobnob with the royalty. He takes the same route as several other avaricious grooms-in-waiting do who demand a huge dowry just before marriage so as to force the girl’s family to comply with their wishes. However, the demand for money has a completely different effect on Karuna. It serves as a trigger for the explosion of all her pent-up emotions, for she feels that she must not allow herself to be controlled and manipulated by another man in her life. She dumps her greedy and smug-faced fiancé just days before the wedding. This act, however, provokes a lot of antagonism from her family and relatives. Karuna’s mother, though appreciative of her daughter’s courage, expresses disapproval in fear of her volatile husband who proclaims death as the most apt punishment for his wayward daughter. In fact, Karuna seems to him to be the sole source of his misery including bad weather, a neighbour’s aloof greeting, and even the death of his son Michael. Nonetheless, Karuna does not desist from tasting freedom again and again. By having regular night-outs, consuming alcohol, indulging in casual sexual encounters and, later, eloping abroad with a non-resident Indian, she does everything to escape the misery of her life. But the achievement of her freedom does not eliminate the dissatisfaction that she has always felt in her heart. The change of scene brings no change in her mental state for she cannot forget her oppressive past. Her favourite pastime is visiting Minnie and re-viewing the old and pain-filled memories. Hence, both Minnie and Karuna flee from the oppressive atmosphere of their homes and communities. But they are unable to find solace in freedom because they have no idea about the path they wish to tread in future. In fact, both commit a
masochistic act by willingly refusing to entertain new memories and by choosing to remain trapped in the psychological web of their violent past. Their flight from violence thus turns out to be futile, for there bodies may have escaped but their minds remain caught in the violence of their past.

Minnie and Karuna’s brothers also have to grapple with violence in different ways. Monty, Minnie’s brother, is another victim of the dysfunctional family. He grows up watching his parents quarrel over the meager earnings his father brings home. He is also an object of his school-mates’ taunts; they poke fun at the delicacy of his facial features and his short height, for both belie the look of machismo that is the trademark of the ‘real’ Punjabi men. Monty is neither athletic nor aggressive, which makes him a misfit and a target for bullies in school. His mother’s favourite lament is that her son is not “a swaggering male among men” (63). His studious demeanour makes him an “oddity” among his peers, a situation which leaves him without any close friend (11). The continuous accounting of his imperfections turns Monty into a shy and quiet individual hesitant to share any part of himself with others. The metamorphosis of a rarely communicative Monty into a completely speechless person occurs after a terrorist attack on an engineering college in which several students are massacred. Hundreds of residents of Punjab carry out a silent procession in memory of the killed students, but Monty refuses to be a part of it. In the beginning, he refuses to venture outside his home and never converses with anyone except in occasional monosyllables. Later he takes to roaming the streets, befriending numerous street dogs on the way who trail there in a long procession. He loses all interest in having a career and ruins his business partnership with a friend by
turning up stark naked at an executive meeting. Monty’s family members try everything to awaken him from what they consider to be a zombie-like\textsuperscript{20} state and to bring him back to “the world of the living” (119). However, his silence seems to be an act to confront the vacuity of society. He uses silence like a “defensive weapon” meant to fight the deafening explosions of violence around him.

Žižek argues that the threat in present times is not passivity but pseudo-activity which involves an attempt to disavow the nothingness of everything that takes place in society. In fact, disengagement, according to him, can sometimes prove to be the most violent act (\textit{Violence} 217). Monty’s disconnection from all norms of civility and decorum is highlighted in his act of appearing naked in front of the respectable members of society; these people are complacent enough to go on with their lives despite the mayhem being caused by terrorism, for they are unperturbed as long it does not affect their family. The terrorists, who are also self-proclaimed religious fanatics, forbid the celebration of New Year’s Eve though people carry on with their revelries behind closed doors and in darkened rooms, apparently unmindful of the perils of the whole situation. These men, however, jump up and bolt out of their room at the sight of Monty’s naked body as if he had burst upon them brandishing a weapon. His non-threatening act thus turns out to be more potently violent than all the combined killings of innocent human beings which have failed to touch them. Nonetheless, Monty remains an utter victim of the violent circumstances that mark his life.

\textsuperscript{20}Monty’s behaviour fits the anthropological explanation of the zombie phenomenon which is derived from voodoo lore and refers to the living dead who are punished for some misdeed and doomed to shuffle around mumbling and staring out of dead looking eyes (Dennett 73).
Monty enters into a relationship with Ruby, one of his grandfather’s several mistresses. In reality, Ruby is basically in a non-sexual relationship with the old man, in which she is required to boost his ego by showing to the world that he is still a man in his prime. Ruby too is a victim of circumstances, for she is frequently looked down upon as ‘trash’ by women and is also the target of rich men’s lascivious advances. She enters into a relationship with Monty primarily because she feels that both are misfits in society. Also, the uncommunicative Monty is a far cry from those elite men who blatantly proposition to her. After her rich benefactor’s death, Ruby and Monty start making joint visits to the party circles of the idle rich where alcohol and superficial conversation overflow. Eventually, she becomes pregnant but loses the baby after a night-time encounter with a man wrapped in a dark blanket, an image that greatly frightens her for it is synonymous with the gun-wielding terrorists of Punjab. This incident highlights the manner in which violence deeply affects the psyche of a person. Monty too is deeply upset by Ruby’s miscarriage. Earlier silence was his weapon, now alcohol becomes his crutch. He represents those individuals who are unwittingly and unwillingly swept into a tide of violence. Like several others, he has suffered an identity crisis and faced rejection by his peers in the early years of his life. His complete descent into melancholic silence is made even worse by the senseless acts of violence wrought upon others around him.

In his demeanour and attitude, Karuna’s brother Michael is the antithesis of his cousin Monty. He too is a victim of the peer pressure which asks him to be the stereotype of the elitist macho male of Punjab, full of bravado and dare-devilry but idle-minded. Michael’s bike is the identification
badge that gets him into the popular male gang of his town. He is addicted to speed and his crazy stunts on the bike make him a favourite with girls as well as boys. He has, in fact, no individuality. From his childhood, he has modelled himself on other people’s perceptions. He is like an automated toy that performs in order to give other people satisfaction. For instance, Monty’s mother finds Michael to be a good sounding board because he never has “an opinion contrary to the one being expressed” (63). Michael is, in fact, a “zombie” in the sense suggested by Daniel C. Dennett who states that a zombie is essentially a human being who exhibits “perfectly natural, alert, loquacious, vivacious behaviour but is in fact not conscious at all, but rather some sort of automaton” (73). Michael has inherited this zombie-like behaviour from his abused mother. She too behaves like an automated doll for her husband’s carnal desires and violent beatings, and performs the role of a supportive rich wife like a wind-up toy. She is certainly able to identify with the plight of her daughter but is too worn out to raise her voice against her husband. Michael, on the other hand, refuses to understand the gravity of the circumstances. His penchant for speed is an index of his passive stance in life. Unlike Monty who uses silence as a weapon to tackle violence, Michael’s instinct is to flee both physically and emotionally from anything unsavoury. However, a close encounter with violence is, ultimately, able to penetrate Michael’s passive consciousness. The experience leaves him shattered. When his best friend Balwinder is attacked by the terrorists who leave him paralyzed, Michael is finally forced to face the ugliness around him. He looks into the mirror and finds his cheerful and carefree mask disintegrating before him. This awareness results in his taking a gun, pulling the trigger and
committing suicide. This act is, in fact, the only conscious action by him. Jean-Paul Sartre’s views on suicide have been discussed in the fifth chapter of the thesis in the light of Bhano’s attempt to achieve complete control over her existence and, also, to escape anguish and nothingness. In *The Patiala Quartet*, however, suicide is viewed as the nihilation of the universal contingency of “being” (act of not choosing for oneself) which may also be described as absurdity (*Being and Nothingness* 479). Sartre says that suicide is an “extreme” measure that an individual undertakes in order to destroy one’s violent and irremediable past. Hence, Michael’s taking his own life is an act of violence in response to his glimpse of “facticity in its brute nudity” (83). Michael has grown up watching his mother seemingly behaving as a willing and passive victim in the face her husband’s brutality. Her inaction despite the violence wrought upon her probably leads Michael to believe that withdrawal and complete evasion of violence is the only possible route for survival. However, the paralyzed state of his best-friend Balwinder makes him realize the extent of an individual’s powerlessness in the face of violence. Hence, Michael arguably tries to nihilate this sense of powerlessness by choosing the path of self-destruction.

Jacques Derrida states that most people lead the lives of automatic autonomy. Such an existence entails achieving mechanical freedom and leading a technical life (*Spectres of Marx* 153). In *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences*, on the other hand, Žižek states that every person is a zombie but is not aware of it. In other words, every person is deceived into perceiving awareness about one’s *self* (136). Minnie and Karuna represent the traits mentioned by Derrida in his theory about “automaton” and Žižek’s
concept of the “zombie.” They continue to search for an escape route from their oppressive environment. Both achieve their goal to settle abroad after a lot of planning and sacrificing. But their escape seems to be futile because both carry violence-induced psychological baggage with them even when they traverse continents. They try to compensate for their self-imposed exile by attempting to busy themselves with the normal tasks of everyday life. But in reality, they are leading a life of bad faith. They ultimately resort to finding associations that remind them of their past: they look for their relatives who are living in the West; they befriend a guy named Shanne who has all the quirks possessed by their brother Monty; they keep replaying memories of their past. Hence both women construct the same atmosphere around them, which is a reminder of their violent past. Karuna believes herself to be fortunate for she considers her very survival to have been impossible in her father’s house. The ambitious Minnie takes pride in the achievement of her goals. However, they deceive themselves by putting on a façade of normalcy and contentment whereas their mind is, in fact, still burdened with their past. To that extent, Minnie and Karuna are like zombies who consider themselves as saved although they continue living in a personal hell. Monty’s silence and his several eccentricities start out as an individualistic reaction against the violence permeating society and the inactive resistance like processions and peace-marches carried out as a protest against terrorism. But when Monty becomes part of the elite party circuit, his silent indifference towards the world eventually transforms into apathy that is born out of ennui and alcoholic

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21 Jean-Paul Sartre says that “bad faith” is a state of ambiguity. Here an individual’s present “being” has meaning only in the light of the future towards which he projects himself. A person basically indulges in bad faith when he/she tries to flee the reality of the Nothingness that surrounds him/her (Being and Nothingness xix).
stupor. He becomes a zombie who keeps on frequenting the fun-filled party circuits and guzzling alcohol. Self-awareness eludes him and his personal and social life falls into a rut. Michael’s life turns out to be even more miserable. He spends the entire, albeit extremely short, span of his life running away from reality that is chasing at his heels. But when Michael is forced to confront violence, he suffers a crisis which leads him to take his own life. He has become aware of the seamier side of life. Moreover, he is burdened with guilt over his passive stance in life, be it towards the domestic abuse suffered by his mother and sister, or the societal pressure upon him to mould himself according to other people’s expectations and wishes. Michael has always retreated into a cocoon so as to avoid the viciousness of an encounter with reality. But a deadly attack on a close friend jolts him into taking a good look at himself. However, this act of self-awareness proves to be too much for him, so that he takes his own life. Ironically, each of the four protagonists of the novel adopts a different yet violent method to cope with the violence around her or him.

*The Patiala Quartet* is a study of inauthentic human existence – the consequence and the essence of patriarchy. The concepts of “bad faith,” “automatic autonomy,” and existing as a zombie are, in fact, the interminable traits of an individual’s passivity towards violence. Passivity manifests through various forms of behaviour. Passivity is implied in the almost mechanical living by Michael. His constant indulgence dangerous forms of sport is a direct contrast to his inability to face violence. Michael is always engaged in a flurry of activity. He can never stay at one place for a long time. Because pausing in life would force him to become aware of the violence
around him. Monty is another passive victim of violence. His passivity lies in his silence. His experience of violence forces him to retreat into another world. Monty exists in a limbo. His passivity lies in going through the motions of living. Both Minnie and Karuna are inauthentic beings. They are provided with an opportunity to escape their violent existence. But instead of embracing their new-found freedom they look seek associations that remind them of their violent past. Hence their lives represent inauthenticity – a manifestation of violence.