(S)pacing Female Education in the Punjabi Sikh Diaspora: Negotiating Gender and Female Sexuality in Balli Kaur Jaswal's Novels

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The literary classification of global Anglophone writing in our contemporary moment tends to give the impression of a smooth, unstriated world *sans* the obstructive boundaries of nation and local cultural contexts that nevertheless continue to provide the positional basis for many of our notions of identity and identification. Today, writers in English in many of the former British colonies may be separated into two groups: those who are published locally and read within the nation, and those who have secured an international publisher and whose work has 'gone global,' consumed by readers from more than one country including multiply located, metropolitan audiences. Indeed, the difference between being a 'local,' or national, and a global writer when it comes to Anglophone postcolonial literature from Singapore has intensified in the last decade or so, with many younger writers aiming to target as large a market as possible. A writer whose situation and work discloses some of the key tensions in this bifurcation which so crucially informs the interdependent processes of writing, distribution, reading, translation, and interpretation is Singapore-based novelist, Balli Kaur Jaswal, who has written four novels to date focused on the lives of diasporic Punjabi Sikh subjects variously located in Singapore and other parts of the world. In this article, I explore Jaswal's national and global locations as a diasporic author by referring to a few of the main dynamics in critical discourse surrounding contemporary writing and world literature before turning to a discussion of the Punjabi Sikh diaspora and a close examination of two of her novels to see how she represents the feminist education of her Punjabi Sikh female characters in different locations while speaking to local, national, and diasporic concerns.

Jaswal's first two novels, *Inheritance* (2013) and *Sugarbread* (2016), are set in Singapore, and they are easily accommodated within a postcolonial national literary tradition of reading. As self-conscious literary fiction, they would be significant additions to any historical account of the Singapore novel in English. Both books are published by Epigram, a Singapore publisher, so their circulation in markets outside of Singapore is relatively limited.[1] In contrast, Jaswal's third and fourth novels – *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows* (2017) and *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters* (2019) – are popular fiction

aimed at a more disparate global audience and both are published by HarperCollins. The film rights to *Erotic Stories* have been bought by Ridley Scott's production company, Scott Free Productions, and the UK's Film4. The book was also selected by the American actress Reese Witherspoon for her online book club and book sales have been healthy in the US, India, and Singapore. In an interview, Jaswal mused over the trajectory of her work, "[The first two novels] contain many autobiographical elements that felt like training wheels to teach me how to write. But I remember thinking that for my third and fourth novel, I didn't want to write something in Singapore" (Yusof 6). Jaswal's biography indicates an upbringing that could easily make her a poster-child for cosmopolitanism and globalization as she has lived variously in Singapore, Japan, Russia, the Philippines, Australia, and the UK. Although a novel like *Erotic Stories* could be read within the British literary tradition, it is also identifiable as a transnational item that is likely to be read by members of the Sikh diaspora and readers of multicultural or ethnic minority fiction more generally. As Sarah Brouillette notes in her study of the postcolonial writer in the global literary marketplace, there is often no single readership, only "a fragmenting and proliferating set of niche audiences, which are admittedly united by a set of general rules dictated by the major transnational corporations" (24).

While not denigrating Jaswal's choice to write popular fiction or her commercial success, one cannot turn a blind eye to how the publication status and reach of each of her novels reveals the asymmetries of the global literary market and the uneven distribution of cultural capital. Graham Huggan's distinction between postcolonialism and postcoloniality as contesting "regimes of value" (28) is useful for thinking through the dual classification of Jaswal's novels. Postcolonialism "posits itself as anti-colonial, and that works toward the dissolution of imperial epistemologies and institutional structures" while postcoloniality "is more closely tied to the global market, and that capitalizes both on the widespread circulation of ideas about cultural otherness and on the worldwide trafficking of culturally 'othered' artifacts and goods" (28). In so far as Jaswal's first two novels are read within a national literary tradition of critique of the independent nation's policies and colonial legacies, they satisfy "postcolonialism" while her more popular novels, leveraging on diasporic reach, reflect participation in "postcoloniality." Adding a different dimension to the debate by elaborating on the semi-autonomous nature of the world literary space that makes it erroneous to see it entirely reducible to the geography of economic globalization, Pascale Casanova points to the differences between "national" and "international" writers who "fight with different weapons, for divergent aesthetic, commercial and editorial rewards" (81). She further notes that "[c]ontrary to the conventional view, the national and

the international are not separate spheres; they are two opposed stances, struggling within the same domain" (81- 82). While Casanova is more interested in serious fiction rather than popular texts in world literary space, her conceptualization of this space nevertheless allows us to understand what is at stake in the professional choices of a diasporic writer like Jaswal and underscores the need for scrutiny of the particular material and historical conditions of literary production. Whether within the more conventional idea of "literary globalization" (74) or the world literary space, there are undeniable repercussions on readership and scholarship when a writer is perceived as national or international.[2]

In this article, I examine a novel from each of these two categories – *Sugarbread* and *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows* – in order to work with the *national* and the *diasporic* as conceptual terms that are critical for understanding the hegemony of English and the dominant hermeneutical frames used to make sense of contemporary writing today. Comparing these novels also allows for questions about continuities and differences in the thematization of diaspora and enables a comparative perspective where specific contexts cast each other into deeper relief. It underscores the need for a multi-location understanding of contemporary fiction, contesting the underexamined adoption of methodological nationalism. Similarly interested in multi-dimensional, transnational ways of understanding literature, Rebecca Walkowitz has noted how "contemporary literature in an age of globalization is, in many ways, a comparative literature: works circulate in several literary systems at once, and can—some would say, need—to be read within several national traditions" (529). Such a comparative approach aligns with the critical imperative for a literary study that is "constellated" rather than "centralized" (42), as Ankhi Mukherjee puts it, to resist a homogenizing critical method and allow historical and cultural differences to assume a more constitutive role in meaning-making.

In juxtaposing *Sugarbread* and *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows* then, I focus on the spatial politics animating each novel in its specific socio-historical context in order to explore connections and dissimilarities when it comes to issues about gender and female sexuality across the Punjabi Sikh diaspora. Both texts dramatize the education of their respective young female protagonists, especially in relation to their own mothers or to women from an older generation. *Sugarbread*, for example, centers on a ten-year old protagonist named Pin who is discovering how to stake a place for herself in school, her neighborhood, and her own family as she gradually unravels the secret of her mother's past. Confronted by the demands of traditional Sikh femininity, Pin's dilemma is explored within the specific national and disciplinary space of Singapore where the state enforces its monolithic official multiracialism through public housing and the education

system. In contradistinction, *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows* is set in West London where the lives of the local Punjabi Sikh community revolve around the temple and community center. Through her creative writing classes at the community center the main character, Nikki, initially sees herself as empowering her female students to find their voices and their agency. Nikki's own educational journey as a Sikh woman must entail her being chastened for such feminist hubris, however. In both novels, Jaswal explores how Punjabi Sikh women assert themselves amidst the disciplining constraints from familial ties, patriarchal society, ethnic community, and religious orthodoxy in the specific socio-historical national and regional spaces they inhabit. She shows how these constraints—most often enforced in spatial ways and played out in different sites—use the threat and shame of female sexual transgression as their collective ideological center. At the same time, Jaswal also appropriates the fluidity of national and diasporic spaces to explore possibilities for female self-assertion, definition, and independence. Before I turn to the two novels however, I want first to discuss the spatialized notion of diaspora more generally and the Punjabi Sikh diaspora more specifically as a way of contextualizing my examination of the texts.

Like many modern diasporas, the existence of a Punjabi Sikh diaspora is directly attributable to British colonial governmentality and its space-making processes. As Ato Quayson has argued, a fundamental feature of colonialism was the displacement and deployment of local colonized populations to meet specific political and economic needs across the empire. He writes that "colonial governmentality invariably involved the creation of conditions for the dispersal of populations, some of which came to coalesce into diasporas. And in several instances, as in the indentured labor policies that took effect from the 1830s, population dispersal was systematic and designed to meet particular economic ends" (633). The Sikhs are an ethno-religious community originally from the Punjab region of northwestern India. Punjab came under colonial rule in 1849 when it was annexed by the British East Indian Company. Cited for their alleged martial spirit, many Sikhs were recruited as policemen and soldiers between 1860 and World War II. These recruits were deployed throughout the empire, including to Burma, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Between the 1890s and the 1930s, Sikh men also travelled to England and America as students, merchants, and laborers. These historical routes of dispersal initiated the processes of diasporization. With Indian independence and the chaos of Partition in 1947, further emigration from the Punjab and other parts of India ensued, compounded undoubtedly by the failure of Sikhs to establish an autonomous homeland referred to most commonly as Khalistan.

Between 1947 and the 1960s, more Sikh men moved to Britain, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Southeast Asia. In Britain, many Sikhs settled in Southall to work as cheap labor in the numerous industries and factories based there. In his book about the Sikh diaspora, Brian Keith Axel argues that Sikh men who moved during this period were instrumental to the "discursive formation of a global Sikh *panth* (community) that was specifically gendered" (4). Through their use of religious practices, visual and textual representations, and bodily signifiers, they determined who could be recognized and admitted into the *panth*. From the 1970s to the 1990s, a central pre-occupation of the Sikh diaspora was the fight to establish Khalistan, with efforts that ran the gamut from political and cultural organizing to more militant modes of intervention.[3] The Sikh diaspora is now estimated to number around three million with approximately half a million Sikhs in the UK and close to 13 000 Sikhs in Singapore (Department of Statistics 2010). According to the last Indian census in 2011, there are approximately 24 million Sikhs in India, the majority of whom still live in Punjab state. They form only about 1.7 percent of the total Indian population (which is predominantly Hindu).

The political issues and struggles energizing the Sikh diaspora have shifted in the new millennium. The new generation of diasporic Sikhs, as Giorgio Shani notes, have more fluid ethnic identities and are further removed from an older model of diasporic nationalism which regarded the establishment of the territorial homeland of Khalistan as central to Sikh identity (150-151). Shani writes:

> An independent homeland for the Sikhs may not be necessary, if Sikhs can feel at 'home' in Birmingham, Vancouver, Singapore, Southall or New York.
> 'Diasporic' political projects, as opposed to diaspora nationalism, have taken the form of a 'politics of recognition' aimed at facilitating Sikh integration into host societies whilst maintaining the external symbols of the faith: turbans and the Five Ks. (151)

In Singapore, younger generation Sikhs show a willingness to be seen as 'Indian' (McCann 1491), an all-encompassing category in the nation for those with South Asian ancestry where the majority are assigned Tamil as their official mother tongue. Yet within the generic category of 'Indian,' Singapore Sikhs also sought recognition for their ethnic distinctiveness by insisting on differences from Tamil-speaking Indians. By adopting the discourse of the state with regard to mother-tongue and cultural heritage, Sikhs were able to lobby for their school-aged children to study Punjabi as a second language, for example. As McCann contends, "the local politics of recognition indeed socialised Singaporean Sikhs more effectively than almost anywhere in the diaspora" (1495).

Balli Kaur Jaswal's novels bear out these sociological and anthropological conclusions about the heterogeneous aspirations of the

Sikh diaspora and the receding of the idea of a territorial homeland as the defining feature of diasporic Sikh identity. In *Sugarbread* and *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*, both female protagonists take integration in their present societies as the assumed norm and these texts contribute to a sense of diaspora as a dynamic formation not intrinsically or immanently opposed to the national. The question then becomes one about what contributes to a diasporic imaginary if it is not the unrealized ideal of a territorial homeland or nostalgia for a past one. As James Clifford has observed of diasporas in the late twentieth century, "[d]ecentered, lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of origin/return" (250).

In Jaswal's fiction, it is clear that religion, language, cultural practices, and cuisine all play a part in the formation of a recognizable transnational Punjabi Sikh identity that cuts across territorial borders and is multiply located. The conceptual underpinning of diaspora here is convergence rather than essence. As Stuart Hall explains it, the diaspora experience is not defined by purity but "by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference" (235). While Jaswal reveals how the networks of diaspora continue to prove especially fruitful for arranged marriages, her predominant and unwavering focus is a feminist one about Sikh women's right to self-determination and fulfilment.[4] The place of female education, including the development of self-awareness, is important and she pursues this theme through the constant contestation and re-negotiation of historically specific social and cultural spaces that seek to marginalize minority Sikh women. Thus while there is integrity and continuity across space in terms of Sikh ethno-religious identity, subjects are clearly also moved by different centrifugal forces. Jaswal's novelistic representations contribute to a Sikh diasporic imaginary that is dynamic and contingent upon a plurality of factors at active play in specific sites.

Disentangling Overlapping Spaces in *Sugarbread*

Set in Singapore, *Sugarbread* interweaves the narratives of a Punjabi Sikh mother-daughter pair which occur at discrete historical points in the postcolonial city-state. The novel begins with the daughter's story: a first-person account from the perspective of 10-year old Parveen, better known to her family and friends by her diminutive nickname, Pin. Pin's view of her daily life and circumstances is necessarily a partial one since she is innocently unable to appreciate the full import or significance of what happens around her. The novel employs many features of the *bildungsroman* form, tying Pin's education and developing maturity not only to the establishment of a feminine/feminist Punjabi Sikh female identity but also to her eventual

socialization as a female minority subject into modern, multiracial Singapore. Metonymically and metaphorically, Pin's growth is expressed in spatial terms as it is imperative that she learns how to navigate the specific public spaces she finds herself in such as her school, her neighborhood, and the communal Sikh temple.[5] The problem is rendered acute because, as her mother tells her, "[e]verything overlaps in this city" — "[c]oncrete pavements over grass, flats over hawker centres, Malay food over Indian food over Chinese food over McDonald's" (101). Singapore, her mother notes, was "[a] city; an island; a state; a country. Everything overlapping" (102). This idea of spatial conflation and intensification draws attention to the smallness of Singapore and the difficulty of seeing things clearly and on their own terms; it is the main educational challenge Pin needs to confront in order to find her place within her family, community, and country. In the novel, this problem is negotiated and resolved symbolically within the space of the neighborhood wet market—the place for daily grocery shopping found in all housing estates and frequented mainly by women.

Sugarbread opens in the year 1990 with Pin and her mother walking through their heartland housing estate – the organizational unit of public housing throughout Singapore where approximately 80% of the population live – as it comes alive on a Sunday when shopkeepers set up their wares and display their goods for sale. Pin is accompanying her mother to the wet market, which serves a symbolic function in the narrative as a space where the dependent relationship between mother and daughter must be worked out in favor of the latter's eventual independence. It is presented as a phantasmagoria of sights, smells, and sounds that become a surreal sensorium for the child who at this point is merely an extension of her mother. Thus, Pin's mother reminds her before they plunge into the market world that she is to keep holding her mother's hand, to not panic and not cry:

> As the market rushed towards us, my first instinct was to twist away from Ma's grip and run away. Ma knew this —her grip tightened. There was no escape. The world became a stirring sea of people, voices and colours. It took time for my eyes to adjust to the dim lighting and for my nose to adapt to the dampness and smell of blood mixed with flowers mixed with incense mixed with ripe fruit. (7)

Overwhelmed by the apparent chaos of the market, Pin must learn to adjust to this environment which represents a more fluid and less defined space, at odds with the state-driven orderliness of the rest of Singapore. She notes, "there was no order here. All of Singapore was tidy and clean but the market was another world" (7). Pin's short physical stature also presents the reader with a child's bewildered perspective of being rushed and pushed around as she clutches her

mother's hand, noticing details that are beyond the sightlines of taller adults. The visit to the wet market emphasizes not just Pin's disorientation but also her increasing awareness of her own person and her relationship with her mother. She dreads these market visits because they invariably end with her mother telling her, rather inexplicably, not to be like her. That interdiction, delivered after Pin has experienced a desire to emulate her mother in order to successfully find her way around the market space, is especially baffling and disconcerting to her. One measure of how far Pin has attained independence by the end of the novel is represented in terms of whether she has conquered the market space on her own. Pin reports towards the conclusion of her narrative and the calendar year that she now remembers the various lanes and stallholders in the market and can navigate the space without her mother's help – "even Ma was impressed" (268).

The spatialized nature of Pin's wider education in the novel beyond the family is evident as well in the descriptions of her attending school, taking the school bus, and playing football with the boys in her public housing estate neighborhood. These delimited spaces of school, bus, void deck, and basketball court belie a less visible landscape of ethnic, racial, communal, linguistic, religious, and class fissures in Singapore where approximately three-quarters of the total population are ethnic Chinese with Malay and Indian minorities making up the bulk of the rest of the population.[6] As a bursary student at First Christian Girls' School, Pin feels her socio-economic status keenly when she compares herself to the more affluent girls around her. Her best friend is another minority student, a Malay-Muslim girl named Fazilah who fields questions about her various religious observances such as fasting and dressing modestly with the standard answer, "I'm used to it" (87). Fazilah's response suggests how ethnic and religious minority subjects in Singapore resort to various defence mechanisms in the face of normalized and daily micro-aggressions. In school, Pin witnesses the bullying of other ethnic minority students, and even student-led racism against an Indian teacher, who advises Pin to ignore rather than confront the abuse, to choose in effect self-preservation over self-assertion. Similarly, on the school bus, Pin must contend with confronting or ignoring the racist Chinese conductor who calls her "mungalee," a derogatory term for Indians. Among her school mates, she struggles with her Punjabi Sikh identity and must decide if she wants to be religiously observant like Fazilah or less traditional and 'less decorous' by, for example, sporting shorter hair and not wearing her bracelet, or *kara*.[7] With her Chinese friend, Roadside, and the other neighborhood boys, she is presented with the choice of playing football but only if she removes her *kara*. In traversing this social minefield, it is from her father that she learns an indirect lesson about how to function within constraints. As a guard having to keep his

eye always on security camera images, Pin's father draws what he sees in an attempt to cope with the tedium of his job. It is this kind of creative survival skill that Pin must learn in order to live and thrive in Singapore.

The difficulties Pin faces in the public spaces of the school and her neighborhood are further paralleled by private and familial discord. Her life gets complicated when her sick India-born grandmother, Nani-ji, moves in with the family. Pin thinks: "our flat was to become crowded. Nani-ji would take up too much space with her raspy voice, and her mothball-scented clothes and her grumbling about everything" (68). She envisions the move in terms of a colonization of domestic space by the elderly woman. As a concession to Nani-ji, Pin's mother also displays "God's portrait" (56) in the living room, a holy picture which looms large symbolically over everyone and everything in their flat. The atmosphere at home grows tense and oppressive as Pin struggles against the authoritative patriarchal figure of God, desirous of rebellion but also fearful of divine punishment. Compounding God's omnipotent control is Nani-ji's strict insistence on the observance of rules and religious practices in the household such as prayer before meals, adherence to a traditional Punjabi diet, regular attendance at the Sikh temple, and not wearing shorts. These attempts to police her identity only serve to make Pin more self-aware of her developing body. Nani-ji's cryptic advice to her, "don't become like your Ma" (76), pushes the question of feminine inheritance to the fore as the power dynamic between grandmother-mother-daughter is played out in disagreements over food, religious practices, proper feminine behavior, and family history. From Nani-ji, Pin begins to gather clues about her mother's seemingly mysterious past, specifically about how her mother's behavior was tied to the death of a sibling.

The story of Pin's mother, Jini, unfolds in the second half of the novel. Set in the years 1967 and 1970 when Jini is 12 and 15 respectively, and narrated in the third person, the account of Jini's early life is one of poverty, hardship, and familial dysfunction. We learn how her gambler father returned to India, abandoning his wife to support three children including their intellectually and physically disabled youngest child, Bilu. The idea of sexual transgression by Jini emerges more clearly when it had hitherto only been hinted at through comments by various characters about how good-looking Pin's mother was. Because of her physical good looks, the young Jini starts to attract attention from a respected and seemingly religious man, Pra-ji, who agrees to help the family by arranging her brother's marriage to a woman in Malaysia and offering to cure Jini of a chronic skin disorder. Pra-ji turns out to be a sexual predator who subsequently destroys Jini's reputation by alleging misconduct when she repudiates his advances. Additionally, Jini cannot forgive herself because Bilu

accidentally drinks bleach and dies while she had been out visiting Pra-ji.

Pin's education about the past from her mother serves to strengthen the mother-daughter relationship, especially after Nani-ji passes away. Pin's trajectory of growth into young womanhood becomes clearer and is cast within the symbolic economy of the novel as the idea of overlapping spaces is replaced by the temporal concept of linear inheritance. In narrative terms, this is effected by a restoration of family order as Pin's uncle returns Jini's wedding jewellery that had been taken by her aunt. Just as Pin's mother had received the jewellery from Nani-ji, Jini would keep it for Pin until the time comes when she "can melt it down and get something really beautiful made out of it" (275). That Pin promises she would "keep it exactly the way it [is]" (275) reflects her newly found sense of self-determination and certainty about her heritage. The return of the wedding jewellery thus ensures continuity between the female generations and symbolically repairs the rupture between Jini and Nani-ji.

Reinforcing the idea of continuity which complements Pin's eventual ability to navigate the wet market on her own, the novel ends with the revelation and Pin's realization that her father was a boy regarded as an outcast from the Sikh community, a "curly-haired" boy from school called "Blackie" (176), whom her mother had initially thought was a Tamil Indian. The young Jini had been surprised that this boy turned out to be Punjabi and from a non-religious Sikh family. When Pin (and the reader) realize who it is that Jini chose eventually to marry, Pin connects the father she knows to the young boy in Jini's story. Pin discovers the truth, seeing clearly for the first time: "I blinked and I saw him again, this time a rail-thin boy with skin darkened by the sun, a mess of curls on his head, racing down a dusty path that wound through old houses" (278). Pin's clarity of vision – her ability to disentangle times and spaces, and "to be able to see everything on its own" (102) – is made coincident with her embrace of her mother's feminist legacy. Jini's assertion of female agency through her choice of a husband stands as a gesture of independence leading outwards from the close confines of ethno-communalism. Her decision to marry someone marginalized by the rest of the Sikh community finds an echo in Pin's relationship with Roadside, her Chinese friend from the neighborhood. Wracked by guilt for not helping Pin when she nearly drowns trying to retrieve a football from the drain, Roadside seeks forgiveness from her. The possibility of a future reconciliation is hinted at, signifying a progressive openness away from exclusive ethnic ties that is a continuation of the independence and self-assertiveness shown by Jini.

Sugarbread focuses on Pin's coming-of-age as a young Punjabi Sikh girl and a minority subject within the framework of the Singapore nation-state. In this respect, the consciousness of being part of a wider

transnational Sikh diaspora is more muted. There is, for example, hardly any nostalgia for India as mother country as even Nani-ji chose to stay in Singapore after her husband abandons the family. One of the few instances of diasporic consciousness is seen with the arranged marriage of Jini's brother to a Punjabi Sikh girl from Johor Bahru chosen by Pra-ji because her family would be less likely to know of Jini's family problems. Overall, however, the narrative arc finds a telos in establishing Pin and her parents as a unit within their Housing Development Board (HDB) flat—the model Singaporean, heteronormative nuclear family. The importance of the mother-daughter relationship is emphasized and seen as essential for Pin's growth, ethnic identity, and wider social integration. The novel thus affirms the importance of Pin clearly staking out and knowing her place in society while also stressing the need for continuity in inter-generational female relationships in order that imbrication and overlap be dislodged in favor of clear-sighted inheritance.

Moving Outside In: *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*

Unlike *Sugarbread* and her first published novel, *Inheritance,* which are set squarely within the multiracial politics of postcolonial Singapore society, Jaswal's *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows* is her first foray into mainstream popular fiction for a more global Anglophone metropolitan audience. With sensationalist elements as well as a pop feminist twist for a mass-market audience, the novel interweaves various elements from popular genres such as mystery and romance to present a palatable tale of distinctive particularity and multicultural integration. Its suggestive title teases with the idea of the postcolonial exotic and the tension between tradition and modernity, East and West. Notwithstanding its content, the novel's publication by a major international publisher ensured its larger cross-border distribution and circulation – a distinct difference from Jaswal's earlier novels. The novel's appeal is directed not just to disparate local, national audiences (for example, Singaporean or Indian readers) but to the global readers of ethnic minority fiction as well as a transnational multiply located diasporic audience.

Erotic Stories explores similar themes to *Sugarbread*, such as the education and socialization of the female protagonist and the tensions and problems in Punjabi Sikh mother-daughter relationships. Distinct spatial tropes are employed in the novel as the ethnically distinctive world of Punjabi Sikhs in multicultural London is depicted as revolving around binaries like public and private, male and female, young and old. Over the course of the novel and amidst all her misadventures, the education of the main protagonist, Nikki, effectively serves to corroborate her identity as "British and Punjabi and Sikh" (70). It is a narrative trajectory registered spatially as a

movement from margin to center, outsider to insider. Initially seen as the black sheep of her Punjabi Sikh family for not conforming to parental expectations, Nikki drops out of law school, moves out of her family home in London after her father dies, and works in a pub. In contrast to Nikki, her sister Mindi is studying to be a nurse and is keen to settle down through an arranged marriage. In a bid to help cover family expenses, Nikki takes on an additional job teaching writing to Punjabi Sikh women at the community center run by the Sikh temple in Southall. She is hired as a writing instructor by Kulwinder, the administrator who started the class. Nikki soon finds out that her class of widowed Punjabi Sikh women are a motley crew, most of whom can hardly speak, read, or write English. They range from the young, more professional and independent widow, Sheena, who easily becomes Nikki's friend, to Tarampal, the widow feared and disliked by the others for blackmailing fellow Sikhs in the community.

The world of Southall is depicted in the novel as a self-contained immigrant neighborhood, the de facto center of traditional Punjabi Sikh culture in London. In comparison to *Sugarbread*, the sense of spatial segregation according to gender is more keenly felt in this novel. Nikki's university-educated parents had settled in Enfield in North London from where trips to Southall had over time "faded to their pasts along with India itself" (10). Thus Nikki is viewed by the Punjabi Sikhs of Southall as essentially British and the embodiment of cultural assimilation. To Kulwinder, Nikki "might as well be a *gori* with her jeans and her halting Punjabi" (24). The former resented what she saw as Nikki's condescending attitude towards "the Punjabis who washed up in Southall" (42). The antagonistic view each character has of the other represents the classic dichotomy of values and allegiances between first and subsequent generations of migrants. Within Southall, the social spaces are mapped distinctly. At the center of social and religious life is the main temple or *gurdwara* with its *langar* hall where food is served communally. Next to the temple is the Sikh Community Association Centre where Nikki's classes are held. Within temple boundaries, male and female-designated spaces are clear. It is an atmosphere Nikki finds oppressive and distasteful as she remembers an incident from childhood:

> People had turned and stared as she crossed the invisible divide that segregated the sexes even though there were no such rules in the langar hall. What did Mindi see in this world that she didn't? All of the women seemed to end up the same—weary and shuffling their feet. (50)

Besides the segregation of the sexes that is presented here as an unnecessary burden, Nikki also makes plain her ideological separation from Mindi and other Sikh women who choose what she considers to be a more traditional, restrictive, and ultimately diminished path. As the women who make up Nikki's class are widows and not expected to

have any more contact with men, they are rendered even more "irrelevant" (65) and invisible to the rest of the community. While the tight-knit nature of the community means that many look out for each other, members also frequently gossiped, knew "entire histories" (50), and constantly surveilled one another. The community's self-policing reflects an attempt to keep the boundaries of Punjabi Sikh identity in London, if not in England, clearly delimited. The tight-knit nature of the community is thus a double-edged sword; for while the community can offer an individual much-needed support, its clique-ish nature also means that personal privacy is almost always compromised.

If the public spaces of Southall allow for a disciplining of Punjabi Sikh identity and behavior through prying eyes and collective judgement, private spaces within individual homes may be thought to offer some relief. Yet it is precisely not knowing exactly what occurs in private that is the impetus for the novel's dramatic action. The novel's plot hinges on the existence of personal secrets, skeletons in the closet, and what happens behind closed doors and "shuttered windows" (83). The truth about the death of Maya, Kulwinder's daughter, who was in an arranged marriage with a family friend of Tarampal and living in the latter's house, is the text's central mystery that consumes Kulwinder and, later, Nikki.

In the delineation of public and private spaces of the Punjabi Sikh community in Southall, Nikki's writing classroom eventually assumes significance as a safe alternative space for the expression of female sexual desire and female solidarity as, through a comedy of errors, the class begins composing erotic fiction. Morphing from a class on basic literacy in English, the widows use Nikki's lessons to air their sexual fantasies and experiences. The idea of Nikki's classroom as a safe place is mirrored textually in the way the women's stories are reproduced in the narrative interrupting the main diegesis. As word spreads about the class and stories "all over London" (217) and more widows are drawn to attend it, Nikki has to contend with the danger posed by the Brothers, a shadowy vigilante group, or moral police, whom Kulwinder refers to as a "narrow-minded gang of thugs" (285). The Brothers' policing of women and female behavior suggest how Sikh women in diasporic communities in the West may continue to live under masculinist threats. When Kulwinder eventually shuts down the class, Nikki finds an alternative safe space for it in the pub where she works, ironically moving the women out of Southall altogether and into that imagined quintessential space of Englishness. As Monbinder Kaur notes from her study of female characters featured in the work of four diasporic South Asian women writers, "women learn, from sexual awakening, sexual victimization and sexual discrimination, of the gendered oppression that works through their bodies" (75). What links the widows' erotic stories to the main mysteries in the novel is the idea of female sexuality: the former serves as an opportunity for the

expression of 'liberating' sexuality and a comic complement to the latter which explores the tragic potential for shame and dishonor inherent in acts of 'transgressive' female sexuality.

In the novel, Nikki's narrative of education is one of incremental self-discovery as well as an unearthing of the community's secrets as she elicits a plethora of stories from the Punjabi Sikh women in her class. She receives an education in her ethnic community while simultaneously coming to a deeper understanding of her own feminist politics, having thought initially that she would be the one to teach and empower the women. When she first arrives in Southall, she is regarded by the women as an outsider and as someone at best on the fringes of the community. As she establishes friendships with the women, especially Sheena, she is taken into their confidence and learns more about their lives and about the events that had shaken the community in the past. From Sheena, she begins to piece together what had happened in a well-known unsolved case about a murdered Punjabi girl. Sheena was friends with the cousin of Karina Kaur, the girl who had disappeared and had probably been killed by her father in an honor killing. From being an outsider with "layers of things going on that I'm not allowed to know about" (201), Nikki moves closer eventually to an insider position. Her increasing proximity to her students and their lives allows her to see and understand how Southall "could be home, and why leaving would be unimaginable to some" (206). She also uncovers the truth about Kulwinder's daughter, Maya – how instead of committing suicide, Maya had been killed by her husband Jaggi when she found out about his ongoing affair with Tarampal. Through her similarity with Maya as second-generation daughters of migrants keen on integration with mainstream British society and desirous of modernity, Nikki serves in the novel as a surrogate daughter to Kulwinder. Indeed, the mother-daughter tensions explored in the novel are more often between Nikki and Kulwinder than between Nikki and her own mother.

In the end, as Nikki solves the mystery of Maya's death and cements her new-found position in Southall as an insider, an equilibrium of sorts is reached. Loose ends are quickly tied up: the widows are newly empowered and the Brothers are emasculated by women who refuse to be cowed by them. Kulwinder rediscovers her will to live as she and the other women rescue Nikki from a murderous Jaggi. It is a symbolically significant moment, as if Kulwinder had managed to save her own daughter. It is through this incident that she obtains some closure. In return, Nikki's achievement is to bring the childless Kulwinder back into a community of women. As Kulwinder stands at her office window and looks down, she realizes, "from up here, life in Southall shrank to miniatures – people and cars and trees she could collect in the palm of her hand. No wonder the men always seemed so high and might during meetings. They watched the world

from this vantage point and it looked insignificant" (307). The moment marks a change in Kulwinder's perspective and leads to a renewed avowal of female solidarity as she makes a political and social choice to "spend most of her time on the ground with the women" (307). The reciprocity achieved at the end between Kulwinder and Nikki as mother and daughter serves to repudiate the idea of women subjecting their own daughters to the same script of their lives the way Tarampal, for example, had married all of her four daughters off at age 16 as she herself had been betrothed at age ten. Viewed by Nikki with a mix of horror and pity, Tarampal is the victim-villainess who, freed of familial responsibility, indulges her own sexual desires by carrying on a relationship with a man whose marriage she then orchestrates and manages for the sake of appearances. Tarampal's transgressive sexuality is presented as the understandable outcome of repressed sexual desire and of conforming to rigid and traditional sexual and patriarchal social norms about marriage. Kulwinder and Nikki reaffirm the idea that women should bestow a more progressive future to their daughters, just as how a few of Nikki's students had explained that they sought to give their daughters some room for choice while still working within the system of arranged marriages.

Unlike *Sugarbread*, the overall impression in *Erotic Stories* is of the traditional and modern members of the community reaching an equilibrium rather than of the Punjabi Sikhs integrating into British society. The Punjabi Sikh community appears to be a self-contained world as only occasional mention is made of characters who make return trips to India or study trips home to discover their Punjabi identities. Like the reference to arranged marriage in *Sugarbread*, *Erotic Stories* also shows how diasporic affiliations may be profitably tapped in order for one to find a suitable partner. Nikki's love interest in the novel is Jason Singh Bamra, a Punjabi Sikh from America who, unbeknownst to Nikki, was getting a divorce from his wife in Southall. The union is a convenient ending on various levels as Jason is not a stranger to Southall and may be regarded as an insider of sorts. The match constitutes a convenient 'best of both worlds' scenario as it allows Nikki a form of endogamy while simultaneously making the partnership seem one of her own choosing. In this way, a balance is struck and Nikki is re-oriented more closely towards the community than she was at the start of the novel when she had appeared too Westernized and liberal. If Pin's education in *Sugarbread* consists essentially of her integration as a minority subject into multiracial Singapore society, the trajectory of Nikki's educational journey is less about embedment in a heterogeneous national community than about a re-discovery of ethnic identity and a bridging of the gap between autonomous subjectivity and the ethno-religious collective.

Conclusion

Balli Kaur Jaswal's spatial imagination is evident in her exploration of gendered experiences and subjectivities in the diasporic and national spaces of *Sugarbread* and *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*.[8] A significant presence in both novels is the Sikh temple which exists as a site for community building, and the affirmation of ethnic and religious identity in Singapore and London. But it is also seen as a locus of considerable stress for Sikh women given its disciplinary power. These tensions are at work in the education of each of Jaswal's female protagonists. Both novels are structured towards the telos of symbolically establishing a place where the young Punjabi Sikh woman can best view and calibrate accordingly the right balance between an individual sense of self and other competing forces such as family obligations, ethno-religious identity, diasporic affiliation, and national expectations. In both novels, mutually empowering inter-generational female relationships are shown to be paramount for progressive and fulfilling futures. Staging and narrativizing female agency and self-determination across specific spaces like the HDB flat in Singapore and the working and middle-class houses of Southall in London, Jaswal's work underscores the importance of paying attention to locality and the politics of space since experiences and narratives of the diaspora can only be those of "individuals and communities situated very differently within a given diasporic formation" (Campt and Thomas 2). In this way too, Jaswal's novels have different resonances and valences for our understanding of the nation, diaspora, national literature, and even literariness itself. At the same time as examining the thematic content and form of her situated works on the Punjabi Sikh diaspora, being attentive to her authorial positioning within world literary space and today's globalized world would help us better appreciate the particular material and historical conditions that substantially determine what may be written.

Notes

1. Jaswal's novel *Inheritance* was first published by an independent Australian press, Sleepers Publishing, in 2013 and later published by Epigram in 2016.

2. For a more empirically based approach towards understanding audiences, book reception, and reading practices, see Benwell *et al*.

3. See Axel, especially chapter 2.

4. In Jaswal's first novel, *Inheritance*, the family of the female protagonist who suffers from mental illness attempt to arrange a marriage for her with a Sikh man in Canada in a desperate attempt to give her a fresh start outside of Singapore.

5. For more information about the Sikhs in Singapore, see chapter by Kaur and Singh. The first Punjabi Sikh in Singapore was a political prisoner named Maharaj Singh who arrived after the second Anglo-Sikh war in 1850. Although Sikhs tended historically to be associated with jobs in the military and the police, they also engaged in other economic activities including moneylending or worked as security guards or *jagas*. Sikh women started arriving in Singapore in the 1930s.

6. Singapore's population is made up of 74.3% Chinese, 13.3% Malays, 9.1% Indians and 3.2% Others (*General Household Survey 2015*, viii). Punjabi Sikhs are typically categorized as 'Indian,' although the category consists of South Asians whose varied religious affiliations include Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity.

7. Traditionally, observant Sikhs must keep and wear five Sikh symbols—unshorn hair, a wooden comb, an iron bracelet, a sword, and knee-length underwear.

8. Jaswal's use of spatial tropes to imagine future paths for her female Sikh protagonists may be usefully compared to the work of South Asian novelists like Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande who have also challenged the limits on female mobility and spaces based on traditional ideologies of respectability. See Jackson.

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