

The Intricacies of Class and Human Relationships in *The Last Flicker*

Dr Smarika Pareek

Assistant Professor

University Institute of liberal Arts, Chandigarh University

Smarika.uila@cumail.in

Abstract

The present paper attempts a study of Gurdial Singh's The Last Flicker. The novel presents an amalgamation and juxtaposition of the complexities of human relationships within the social and economic frameworks. It also critiques the perpetrators of caste and class-based oppression. The tyrannical social structure which relegates the downtrodden to the status of pitiable characters is also evident in the story. In addition to this, the author exquisitely highlights the impact of various relationships on the lives of the deprived. The paper thus, looks to narrativize the presentation of the subalterned poor peasants by Gurdial Singh.

Introduction

Gurdial Singh is acknowledged as a writer of the downtrodden. His engagement with the issues of the subalterns has been largely celebrated. His fictional world pivots Dalits, poor peasants, the downtrodden and the various subalterns. His contribution to Punjabi literature has earned him various awards like the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1975, the Padma Shri in 1998 and the Jnanpith in 1999. His first novel, *Marhi da Diva* [*The Last Flicker*] depicts the anguish of the Dalit protagonist Jagseer. His second novel, *Unhoye* [*The Survivors*] attacks the exponents of the feudalistic and capitalistic structure. His *Rete di Ik Muthi* [*A Fistful of Sand*] continues to highlight the impact of capitalism on society. The predicament of the deprived is the focal point in his *Adh Chanani Raat* [*Night of the Half Moon*], *Anhe Ghore da Daan* [*Gift of the Blind Horse*] and *Parsa*. In the Preface to *Re-Readings of Gurdial Singh's Fiction*, Amar Tarsem and Kumar Sushil remark: "He is a novelist of the subaltern and downtrodden and captures the inner strifes and struggles faced by the peasants and workers during the fall of feudal era which in turn tries to generate social consciousness in low-class people" (vii).

The title of the novel in Punjabi, *Marhi da Diva* invokes the power of friendship and love in fighting the hegemonies of feudalism, capitalism and casteism. The landless Dalits are oppressed under all structures and it is only because of the exceptional bonding between Dharam Singh's father and Thola that he and his family are able to till the land gifted to him. The closeness of the landowner and the seerie is based on their shared love for the land and combined efforts to raise good harvest. Although feudalism was a severely exploitative system, still it bore certain values like keeping one's word as bounden duty. Bhanta's grandfather had given the small field to Thola without any paperwork but his father's word had sanctity for Dharam Singh, Bhanta's father. Bhanta's act of destroying Thola's marhi is symptomatic of the old worldview giving way to the new capitalistic and materialistic class of people. This shift in how the landowners relate to land—from deep attachment to merely being a rich asset—accounts for Bhanta's actions. It is thus significant that Bhanta can only break the marhi once Dharam Singh is old and on the decline. To him reclaiming possession of the land is more important than his grandfather's word or respect for years of devoted toil that Thola and Jagseer had expended on that land. The felling of the shady sheesham tree stands for the breaking of trust, friendship and promise. In this scenario, Bhani and Raunki stand out as the flame of morality, love and friendship. Raunki's friendship with Jagseer provides him solace and companionship. The tacit love between Jagseer and Bhani transcends the worldly possessive or sexual connotations of love. *The Last Flicker* of the mud lamp shines not only on Jagseer's marhi but also in the hearts of the simple poor people of Gurdial Singh's fictional world.

Writing from the non-Dalit perspective, Gurdial Singh raises many larger issues of humanity and does not keep the spotlight on the caste-based oppression of his protagonist. He gives Jagseer moments of romance and pleasure which are conspicuously absent in much of Dalit literature. When Jagseer meets Bhani for the first time he feels:

As if he had been struck by lightning! Jagseer's whole body went numb. Such fair cheeks, such a broad forehead, such beautiful eyes with such long eyelashes! He had never seen such beauty before. That a woman could be so unbelievably attractive, he realized only at that moment! He

stood there as if mesmerized and a haze began to spread before his eyes.
(25)

Another striking feature of Singh's narration is Singh's narration of the implications of poverty. Jai Prakash Kardam's story "No Bar" also highlights the significance of caste in determining marriages. The Dalit protagonist Rajesh is a post graduate in science and an income tax officer. Through the medium of a newspaper, he happens to meet with a family, who are searching for a match for their daughter. It is mentioned very clearly in the advertisement given by the family that they are progressive and therefore, do not believe in birth-based hierarchy. Thus, when Rajesh meets them for the first time, he does not consider it important to reveal his caste to them. However, when he tells them about his caste, the family is averse to the alliance (qtd. in Meenu). Therefore, it is observed that by highlighting Nandi's failure to find a match for Jagseer, Gurdial Singh exposes the influence of the caste system on the lives of Dalits.

Paramjit Singh Ramana's in *Re-Readings of Gurdial Singh's Fiction* states: "The central thematic concern of the novel-the changing social ethics and human relationships in rural Punjab-is dramatized in the form of Jagseer's claim on half an acre of land and a sheesham tree growing on it. This piece of land and the tree have a special emotional significance for Jagseer and his mother." (45) The role played by caste in the poverty caused to the Dalits is further established in an article by Sukhdeo Thorat, Debolina Kundu and Nidhi Sadana: "One of the important features of the caste system relating to property rights is restrictions on owing business or undertaking production activity for low caste-Untouchables. Except those economic activities that are considered impure and polluting (like those relating to leather and sanitary products), the former untouchables were not allowed to undertake business and/or production activities or own property. This also included restrictions on the ownership of agricultural land for production purposes" (Blocked by 311). Sukhdeo Thorat and Paul Attewell observe: "Historically, because Dalits were viewed by HC [High Caste] people as physically and spiritually polluting, they were not allowed to live close to HC persons, or to use the same water supply, or to enter into temples. They could not own land or be educated and were excluded from many occupations. Even their presence was polluting; in public places they had to keep physical distance from HC persons" (Blocked by 36-37). The writers add: "Many Dalits

worked in stigmatized occupations that handled ‘impure’ materials such as human waste, dead animals, and hides. Tanning, scavenging, sweeping, and cleaning jobs remain distinctively Dalit occupations in India. In the 2001 Census, 167 million Dalits were landless or near-landless labourers in agricultural production or in the lowest paid kinds of manual labour.” (37)

Although Gurdial Singh’s literature is seemingly influenced by the leftist movement, Singh believes that the influence is only indirect as his milieu is different from that of writers like Chekov (*Re-Readings* 31). Singh’s words can be understood in the light of his focus on caste as the reason for the poverty and landlessness of Jagseer. Hence a strong influence of socialism on his writing can be observed. Further, his raising of the issues of the deprived and the changing human relationships highlight an element of humanism in his writings. He can also be perceived to be a realist as he raises the issues of society in a realistic manner. It is therefore evident that there are traits of Marxism, socialism, humanism and realism in his writings.

Raj Kumar Hans, another notable Dalit writer gives vent to his disgruntlement with the discriminatory distribution of land: “Dalits constitute about 30 per cent of Punjab population that happens to be largest proportion in the country, when compared with other provinces, but they occupy the lowest share in the ownership of land (2.34 per cent of the cultivated area). Mazhbis and Ramdasias, the two dalit castes among the Sikhs, particularly the Mazhbis, remain the most deprived. Evidence of untouchability against dalit Sikhs is well established” (“Rich Heritage of Punjabi Dalit Literature and its Exclusion from Histories”). For instance, Umesh Kumar Singh, a Dalit writer presents a story like “*Pehli Raat ka Ant*” [“The End of First Night”], which deals with poverty among the Dalits and the master servant relationship. The outcastes in the village serve the Thakur and are also coerced to send the new wed women of their community to sleep with the Thakur on the first night of wedding. Raunki, who supplied water to the Jat families talks with Jagseer: “Money has great power, Jagsia, it can give a turn to your fate, it can mean a rebirth in one’s life and, as they say, even an idiot becomes smart and witty if his granary is full. The world Jagsia, is after money, without money. . .” (113).

Conclusion

It may be concluded that Gurdial Singh depicts Dalit life with a humanistic perspective. He establishes that caste largely determines Jagseer's misfortune—from his landlessness to his loneliness. Singh's understanding of the caste issues is sound and derives from his close interaction with and observation of Dalit life. Yet, the remedy he suggests is more idealistic than pragmatic. Gurdial Singh also focuses on the changing human relationships with changes in time and societal values. Singh advocates economic upliftment of the subalterns and conceives of friendship between Dalits and Savarnas derived from the oneness of locale, shared labour and similar experiences.

References

1. Gill, Sucha Singh. "Socio-Economic Transformation and Scheduled Castes in Punjab." *Dalits: In Regional Context*, edited by Harish K Puri, Rawat, 2004, pp. 225-40.
2. Hans, Raj Kumar. "Rich Heritage of Punjabi Dalit Literature and its Exclusion from Histories". *www.apnarog.com*.
3. Jodhka, Surinder S. "Caste in the Periphery." *Exclusion*, *www.india-seminar.com*. 2001.
4. Juergensmeyer, Mark. "Cultures of Deprivation: Three Case Studies in Punjab". *Dalits: In Regional Context*, edited by Harish K. Puri, Rawat, 2004, pp. 43-61.
5. Lal, Chaman. "Dalit Life in Punjabi Novel." *Dalits: In Regional Context*, edited by Harish K Puri, Rawat, 2004, pp. 297-306.
6. Madhopuri, Balbir. *Changiya Rukh: Against the Night: An Autobiography*. Translated by Tripti Jain, Oxford UP, 2010.
7. Puri K. Harish. "The Scheduled Castes in the Sikh Community: A Historical Perspective." *Dalits: In Regional Context*, edited by Harish K. Puri, Rawat, 2004, pp. 190-224.
8. Ramana, Paramjit Singh. "The Last Flicker: A Realistic Requiem for Feudalistic Humane Relationships". *Re-Readings of Gurdial Singh's Fiction*, edited by Amar Tarsem and Kumar Sushil, Unistar, 2006, pp. 40-42.

9. Singh, Gurdial. *The Last Flicker*. Translated by Ajmer S. Rode, National Book Trust, 2010.
10. Tanmay. “*Marhi da Diva (The Last Flicker)*”. *HUL 232 Class Blog*, hul232.blogspot.com/.../mar.2012.
11. Thorat, Sukhdeo and Paul Attewel. “The Legacy of Social Exclusion: A Correspondence Study of Job Discrimination in India’s Urban Private Sector”. *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*, edited by Sukhdeo Thorat and Katherine S. Oxford University Press, pp. 2010. 35-51.
12. Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Batkal and Sen Samya, 2003.