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A Study of the Conflicting Generations in Gurdial Singh's *The Last Flicker, (Marhi da Diva)*

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ABSTRACT

Gurdial Singh Rahi is a prominent Punjabi novelist and his novels have been translated in many languages. His magnum opus *The Last Flicker, (Marhi da Diva)* through creating microcosm from the real Malwa region of Punjab, depicts the feudal and unindustrialised generation from pre-partitioned Punjab and the capitalist and industrialised generation from the post-partitioned Punjab. The first generation is represented by the lifelike characters of Thola, Dharam Singh's father and Dharam Singh, whereas, the second generation is represented by Bhanta, his wife and his mother Dhano. The paper offers an interesting analysis of the generations at conflict from a sociological point of view.

Keywords: Bourgeoise, Capitalist, Feudal, Haves, Have-nots. Land owner, Landless, Proletariat, *Seeri*.

A Study of the Conflicting Generations in Gurdial Singh's *The Last Flicker, (Marhi da Diva)*

Gurdial Singh Rahi (10 January 1933 to 16 August 2016), a celebrated writer, born in Punjab's small village Bhaini Fateh, near Jaito in Faridkot district, is an established eminent novelist who wrote in Punjabi. Gurdial Singh did not have a smooth and easy childhood. His father who was a carpenter and a blacksmith had to drop out his son from school when he was in his eighth grade. Gurdial Singh had no other option than to be an apprentice, because of his economic condition. Master Madan Mohan, the Headmaster in the Primary School, Jaito, held Gurdial Singh's hand, encouraged him to continue his education and mentored him. With his compassionate and crucial help, Gurdial Singh matriculated and was appointed as a primary teacher. He did not discontinue his studies and was promoted to High School and earned MA in Punjabi in 1967. Gurdial Singh had to leave his village for his teaching, but the village remained in him wherever he was, and, after he retired, he settled in Jaito, for rest of his life.

As he lived a rustic life, he grew to be a rare literary talent portraying an authentic rural Punjab in his fiction. As a successful creative writer of fiction he was honoured with various literary recognitions and awards, such as Language department, Government of Punjab's Sarvottam Pustak Puruskar consecutively for three years in 1966, 1967 and 1968. He bagged this award again in the year 1972. In 1975 he was finalised for the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award and reputed Nanak Singh Novelist Award. In 1976, he was conferred with Punjab Sahitya Academy Award followed by Soviet Nehru Award in 1986, Punjab Government's Best Litterateur Award and Guru Nanak Dev University's Bhai Veer Singh Award in 1992. The President of India honoured Gurdial Singh with Padma Shree in 1998. He was also honoured with the prestigious Jnanpeeth Award in 1999.

Gurdial Singh, through his writings, and especially through *The Last Flicker, (Marhi da Diva)* published in 1964, distinctly championed and represented the cause of unheard, marginalised and unrepresented section of rural Punjab i.e. the farm labour class or *seeri*. Creating a fictional world, in the line of his predecessors like Sant Singh Sekhon, Narinder Pal Singh, Amrita Pritam and Surinder Singh Narula etc, Gurdial Singh has taken social novel to a new height, through his creative acumen. His writings are celebrated for its realistic portrayal of socioeconomic, cultural and historical life of rural Punjab of Malwa region. For being a novelist of his locale, Darshan Singh Maini compares Gurdial Singh with RK Narayan and Thomas Hardy and writes, "Like Hardy in England and RK Narayan in India, Gurdial Singh has given his stories a unique social ambience" (*Parsa V*).

Gurdial Singh's fictional world is available to global readers now, because of its translation from the source Punjabi to target English and other languages as well. But, the fictional world which is imbued in the local rural locale of Punjab is not easily translatable. In this connection, Rana Nayar, one of Gurdial Singh translators confesses:

Translating Gurdial Singh's fiction was an extremely gratifying, though not a less challenging, experience. Perhaps, it was so gratifying only because at every juncture it threw up new and entirely unexpected challenges. . . . There is something about Gurdial Singh's fiction which doesn't submit itself readily to an act of translation and least of all, to an English translation. (Tarsem and Sushil 112-113).

Gurdial Singh's *The Last Flicker* is a literary acclaimed piece of fiction, offering a slice of life from the rural Punjab of Malwa region, with its all-encompassing complexities evolving out of the interactions of its socio-cultural and economic forces. Voicing for the unheard, the plot tersely dares to put forth the tragedy of the farm working class (*seeri*) being exploited by the the farm owners of the changing Punjab, post-independence. The novel is a realistic saga of unfulfilled dreams, desires and wishes of the low caste, farm labourers or *Seeries*, their insignificant life of being even worst than animals. The novel successfully takes the neglected contemporary Malwa region of Punjab to literary scene. Being a social conscious novel, it offers a hard hitting realism, derived from the novelist's deep observation of his contemporary rural life with its complex social structures, and it dares to speak for the underdogs, unconventionally, trying to fetch margins to the centre. Gurdial Singh has a genuine sympathy for the downtrodden characters and he has usually ordinary and marginalised protagonists. His heroes come from that unsung class which is actually the base of the luxury and welfare of the superior class. He is an ordinary man and writes about the common, unsung heroes with empathy. In this context, Dr. Amrik Singh argues:

What is more pertinent however is the literary quality of what gets written. In this case, it would be safe to say that more or less by common consent this novel is regarded as perhaps the best piece of writing done in Punjabi since 1947. Not only has he given utterance to the love and longings of those who, to quote the title of another novel of his, live as if they do not exist, he has also given literary standing and personality to a relatively neglected region of Punjab. (Tarsem and Sushil 39)

The plot deals with the fate of an 'insignificant man' Jagseer, who belongs to *seeri* class, a dalit, a socially, culturally and economically downtrodden segment of society. Jagseer is doubly marginalised as he also has a societal stigma of being a son of parents who not belong to *Seeri* class, but had also married being eloped, and thus socially castrated. Because of this stigma, Jagseer remains unmarried and looked down upon, without any fault of his. The novelist offers a realistic life of many (*seris/dalits*) through Jagseer, who fail to improve their condition and circumstances, not because of their inability or lack of diligence, but, because of oppressive and prejudiced social structure that allows exploitation at the hands of those who own. The novel also offers the tragic love story of Jagseer and Bhani who could not consummate their love because of oppressive societal taboos. Even with his failure in his struggle against the evil landlord and in his love for Bhani, and even after he has died, Jagseer leaves behind a hope for many 'insignificant' like him, through the flickering lamp which is lighted by Bhani in his memory on his tomb.

The novel is short but is rich in depth and philosophy. Gurdial Singh sets the tone of the novel with the philosophic lines, "Man, you were destined for ten turns of fate in your life time. The first one came and consumed you, what happened to the other nine" (11). These lines appear repeatedly throughout the narrative and highlight the fact that whereas destiny is believed to turn a man's life ten times during his life span, ironically Jagseer has only one turn of the fate and is destroyed forever as a *Seeri* a farm labourer, a dalit. Gurdial Singh philosophise that it is not possible for a dalit a *Seeri* to expect socio economic elevation despite unmatched diligence owing to regressive and prejudiced social structure.

The novelist begins the narrative with introducing Nandi, the mother of Jagseer. She is a widow and is despised by her villagers because of the fact that she had eloped with her lover Thola (Jagseer's father) for marriage. In her old age she yearns for getting her son Jagseer married, but, she is unable to find a match as Jagseer has already passed the proper marriageable age, is landless and is a stigmatised son of the parents who had eloped. But, Nandi, even in her old age is desperate to get her son married and keeps trying hard for getting a match.

Nandi had become a chatter-box after her husband's death and the women of the *wehra* were fed up with her. To make things worse, Nandi was also hard of hearing and this forced other women to talk loudly when talking to her. Nandi was aware of the other women's attitude towards her but she was helpless. Sitting alone in the empty house scared her. She would get up and go somewhere at random, but after listening to the sarcastic remarks from others she felt hurt. After only a few minutes she would come back to her mud hut, which was lonely as a cremation ground. (12-13)

Nandi knows that it is the social injustice, the social taboos because of which she is not able to get her only son married. It has been over twenty years now that she has been worshipping gods, goddesses, *pir fakirs*, but, to no avail. She is desperate to get her son married, even to a blind bride. She laments the prejudiced society, in a godless world:

Oh God, I didn't ask for Jewels and horses as a part of the dowry! Only a simple bride. Even a blind would do! And did I ever leave a stone unturned! No damn god or goddess appeared, no peer fakir heard my pleas. What wrong did I do? Did I sow baked potatoes? They say even a dung hill gets a favourable hearing after twelve years, but not a soul heard me in twenty years! Some have had their seven sons married. I couldn't marry even one. Darkness! No justice! No justice from Him! (13)

The novelist weaves in the plot, the objective corelative, a half an acre of land, a tomb with a sheesham tree in the plot which acts as the pivot of the story. Jagseer mentions to Nandi, "Mother, tomorrow I'm going to plough *our* field..." (emphasis mine, 16). This "our field", half acre of land is the main cause of Jagseer's exploitation, the tragedy. This piece of land is very significant in Jagseer's and Nandi's life as Gurdial Singh mentions, "To Nandi tomorrow was a day like an annual sacred day. It was the day when Jagseer went to plough his "own" field every year. And Nandi celebrated it like a holy event" (16). Actually, this half acre of land, which Jagseer considers to be their "own" was given to Thola, Jagseer's father by Dharam Singh, who was Thola's landlord and who treated Thola as a friend. Thola was brought by Dharam Singh's father, and was treated as respectful and equal. Then, times were different, as it was undivided Punjab of India before partition of 1947. Both Dharam Singh and Thola had exchanged their turbans to symbolically mark their friendship, brotherhood, love and gratitude. Thola worked like a family on Dharam Singh's father's farm and the latter reciprocated with the reward of half an acre of land. This land was not legally transferred, but, was emotionally gifted to Thola for his future. After his father's death, Dharam Singh kept on treating Thola and his family with same compassion as his own family, as he belonged to the same generation of Punjab before partition. He treated Thola as an uncle and Jagseer as a brother. But, the relations spoil with the partition, industrialised agriculture, with the next generation, when eventually Dharam Singh gets old and his son Bhanta takes control of the farms and finances. Bhanta, represents the post-independence generation living in globalised and industrialised society, and, is a greedy person of wicked disposition. He, unlike his father and

grandfather, always humiliates and hurts Jagseer and his family, because he thinks that he owns the land and he is the provider and Jagseer and Nandi are parasites draining him financially. When Jagseer realises the humiliation at the hands of Bhanta, the former remembers the old times, when his father (Thola) and Dharam Singh's father were good friends, they treated each other as brothers, Dharam Singh's father once told Thola, "Thola, if you were born of my mother, I would have gladly registered half my land in your name" (19). Jagseer remembers fondly how the two went to the Selwara festival wearing same coloured turbans, similar shoes with golden silk embroidery and same shirts. Both of them, even drank and ate from the same dishes but secretly. The two were envied and praised by people who called them "a pair of swans" (19). Gurdial Singh meticulously underlines the changing society of Punjab from being unpartitioned and unindustrialised to partitioned and industrialised society, through the dynamic dialectics of Dharam Singh's father, Dharam Singh and Thola's relationship and that of Bhanta and Jagseer's. In contrast to the love and affection shared by Thola and his owner, presently Bhanta is very cold towards Jagseer and his mother, because of his blind greed and selfishness. Jagseer is helpless because of his socioeconomic-cultural status, but Bhanta, as a true capitalist is interested in profit only, from his labourers like Jagseer. Bhanta even pesters his father for being softer towards Jagseer and Nandi. Dharam Singh from being united and unindustrialised society of old school Punjab, tries to cool down his son, Bhanta:

Look my son, these little things like half an acre of land, don't matter much. What we own today is not a product of our own labour only. Others have worked hard for it. I'm not sure if we owe more to others or if it's the other way around. God above watches everyone including smart ones like you; Who knows what He wills? Too much pride is not good, everyone lives by his own fate here. (20-21)

Selfish and capitalist Bhanta is not convinced by his father's moral advice. The novelist highlights the deterioration in human values and brings up the clash between generations. He underscores his concern over the loss of the spirit of sympathy, sharing, brotherhood and tolerance. The strained relationship between the powerless and proletariat Jagseer and the powerful and bourgeoisie Bhanta is also exposed and examined through the interactions between both of them. The novelist portrays the fading feudal relationship, between Thola and Dharam Singh's father, which was based on humanity and the newly emerging money-minded capitalist social order (represented between Jagseer and Bhanta), which is profit seeking and has no value for human associations, whatsoever. The novelist makes the readers observe that with the changing times, morality and humanity are the biggest casualties. Money and power have replaced the morality and humanity in human relationships, everywhere.

The plot complicates further with the introduction of another important character, Bhani, Nikka's wife. Nikka is a barber and Jagseer's friend. Bhani's first glance, strikes Jagseer with something that is unknown to him but kind of likeable to love at first sight. Gurdial Singh subtly describes this delicate moment:

As she was trying to pull the veil back, Jagseer saw the left side of her face. As if he had been struck by lightning! Jagseer went numb. Such fair cheeks, such a broad forehead, such beautiful eyes with long eyelashes! He had never seen such beauty before. That a woman could be so miraculously beautiful, he realized only at that moment! As if mesmerized, a haze spread before Jagseer's eyes. (32)

Jagseer immediately falls in love with Bhani, and starts visiting Nikka's house on one pretext or the other, just to have Bhani's glimpse. Jagseer acknowledges change in himself because of Bhani and feels sudden numbness whenever he comes across Bhani. Bhani's response is also conspicuous, but he is unable to respond appropriately. He starts consuming himself in his unfulfilled passion. Gurdial Singh highlights the effect of Bhani's looks on Jagseer, "Jagseer felt as if Bhani's look had drilled a hole between his two eyes. Like a mesmerized snake he kept staring at Bhani" (35). Jagseer never crosses his limits and remains dignified for his character. The love between Bhani and Jagseer remains platonic and Jagseer burns himself in his love for Bhani. The novelist narrates, "Life for Jagseer became like cereal bun : neither sweet nor bitter nor sour, he felt it had no taste.... He simply loved the kind of jests made by Bhani; to reply back would be an insult to Bhani. And he no longer stared into Bhani's eyes, even that would be an insult, he thought" (49-53). Bhani belongs to upper caste, and she is the only one who appreciates and respects Jagseer for his decency. She does not look upon him down just because he comes from *seeri* class. Like others, she is also not judgemental of Jagseer's birth, who has a blot of being a son of gypsy parents who had eloped. Gurdial Singh unravels, "She never doubted Jagseer's loyalty. And only a woman like Bhani could appreciate the way Jagseer had maintained a dignified relationship with her, without caring for what others thought of it" (73). Further, highlighting Jagseer's pious relationship with Bhani, the novelist uses the metaphor of sun (for Bhani) and argues:

Bhani was a sun, shining on Jagseer's grey life. The sun warmed his blood and saved him from freezing. He could worship the sun, bow his head to it in the morning, feel its touch on all the flowers blossoming inside him, but how could he absorb all the sunlight in his two little eyes? No, he wouldn't be able to do that in his lifetime? (74)

But, Bhani's existence in Jagseer's life further complicates Jagseer's tragedy as it consumes him more vigorously for being unable to consummate his love owing to his downtrodden socioeconomic-cultural condition. Bhani is the catalytic character in Jagseer's life that fuels his demise. Jagseer's being is consumed recklessly by not only unfulfilled love for Bhani but also by the capitalist exploitation represented by Bhanta. Jagseer's health deteriorates and he turns pessimistic. Gurdial Singh highlights that without stable economic base any one like or represented by Jagseer is bound to fall. He unravels Jagseer's mental condition, "Dog dens! Jagseer smiled and wondered why today he was thinking about the ghetto houses this way. He was born and had grown up in this ghetto, and was almost forty two now, but these houses never seemed to him like "dog dens" before (59). Exploited by Bhanta his crops weaken, and Jagseer is shocked further:

On reaching the fields, Jagseer looked at 'his' own field first. The wheat plants looked like hungry and hurt children. In the neighbouring fields which Jagseer had watered a few days earlier, the plants were healthy and taller. Jagseer looked at both the fields turn by turn and sat on the dividing ridge. His legs had no strength to support him. . . He had no courage to look at his 'own' field a second time. (75)

Bhanta hatches a conspiracy and sends away Jagseer to weed the twelve acre land for five days and in his absence he gets the *sheesham* tree cut, and the fall off *sheesham* tree means for Jagseer dispossession from his land, his inheritance. Dr. Paramjit Singh Ramanna writes, "For Jagseer and his mother Nandi, the cutting down and selling of the tree is the ultimate act of insult and humiliation of the dead soul who had blindly served that ungrateful family all his life" (Tarsem & Sushil 45). Gurdial Singh also uses Nandi to highlight the generational change that has come in the generation represented by Bhanta. She says, "What good can you expect from these Jat-boors who keep us at a distance, who throw us a morsel whenever they please as if we were dogs: It was only in olden days that people sacrificed their blood for others. Now... (94)".

Gurdial Singh has been exceptionally successful in representing the generational conflict in his magnum opus *The Last Flicker*, (*Marhi da Diva*), through creating microcosm from the Malwa region of Punjab, depicting the feudal and unindustrialised generation from pre-partitioned Punjab and the capitalist and industrialised generation from the post-partitioned Punjab. The first generation is represented by the lifelike characters of Thola, Dharam Singh's father and Dharam Singh, whereas, the second generation is represented by Bhanta, his wife and his mother Dhano.

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