

Imagination of India Post Independence in Gurdial Singh Rahi's The Last Flicker

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“Hindustan ek khwab hai, hum us khwab ke liye hain”

Abstract: The India of the post-independence India resided mostly in the villages, so in order to understand India we cannot ignore the study of literature written about the rural population of the country. Gurdial Singh himself lived most of his life in Punjab and wrote in Punjabi; therefore he has an edge over the educated class, writing from the cities, when it comes to describing the day to day struggle of the agrarian society. The society united by the struggles for Independence left everyone with a question of their identity; and the West, before leaving, left some deep questions amongst people belonging to different sections of the Indian society, lack of trust amongst people, failing moral values and the introduction of western modern concept of equality left people baffled, and the present paper aims to understand all these and more in the light of modern imagination of India.

Keywords: Nation, India, People, Caste, Struggle, Identity, Hierarchy.

Introduction: Literature always originates for the masses and therefore in order to connect to them, it is closely in touch with the daily practices and common parlance. One such form of literature that is closely connected to the people is fiction; it has become a representative of the feelings of the common men, and has emerged as a prominent source of entertainment. There is obviously no doubt about the role of other genres in helping identify the characteristics of a nation, but 'novel' claim the highest position amongst all. "Narratives are attempts to make sense of the world. We need fictions to discover others as well as ourselves"

(Ramakrishnan 12). Ramakrishnan also clears his stand in favor of the novel because of “its ability to represent an interactive and bounded social space where people moved in multiple words

Simultaneously, and become part of a larger community through their social transactions, even as they remained discrete individuals” (*Narrating* 17). Novel helps the ‘mini narratives’ of the minorities or the weak voice themselves and sometimes stand against the ‘meta narratives’ to gain their fair share of representation in the society. Most of the times these narratives are under shadowed by the bigger narratives, but the novel facilitates them a chance to reach the masses, so everyone can be represented as a part of the nation. Brennan comments on the relation of novel and its role in consolidating the concept of nation:

It was the *novel* that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the ‘one, yet many’ of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. Socially the novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardize language, encourage literacy, and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did much more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation.(49)

The different cultures and subcultures and their complexities hardly allows for the formation of an essential ‘Indian’ identity which all the citizens must subscribe to. The ever-changing social and economic conditions and political sensibilities of the individuals do not allow people to have fixed ideas about their ‘Indianness’ and therefore makes an Indian’s experience as a citizen complicated and pluralistic. People often accept the definitions provided by the leaders or parties with vested interests, and it is especially true in the sense of Rural India, as the literacy rate is bare minimum; and the western ideas in disguise of modernity are often ill explained or understood by the individuals with their limited source of knowledge.

Gurdial Singh hailed from Punjab, and wrote in Punjabi, and along with being a

football coach and a migration agent, he turned into a renowned novelist. He began his career with “Bhaganwale”, which is a short story published in a magazine titled *Panj Darya*. He kept publishing short stories, and later he published his first novel *Marhi Da Deeva* after rewriting it for four times in 1964. The novel was translated by the Sahitya Akademi into English as *The Last Flicker* by Ajmer Singh Rode. His works are apparently influenced by Leftist movement, he took inspiration from real life people forming a fictional narrative out of their behavior in this beautiful narrative about Jagseer Singh, and ‘how social hierarchy, caste struggle and economic exploitation’ can break an individual from within and create havoc in his life social and personal interactions. Effects of opium addiction also find a voice in the narrative, which has become a major problem in today’s Punjab. Singh described the novel as the first novel in Punjabi language with “critical realism”. Ajmer Singh in his introduction to the translation comments on the writing style of Singh:

The economy of narration and the treatment of characters is marked by a degree of restraint and artistic skill which was totally unprecedented in Punjabi. It marked him out as a writer who was to be watched. In the hands of anyone else, this novel would have been three or four times bigger but Gurdial Singh believes in terseness and understatement. A good deal is implied and what is said is so suggestive as to set up reverberations that echo in the reader’s mind long after he was finished writing it. (Rahi vii)

The novel has often been equaled to one of the most renowned novels in Indian Literature, Munshi Premchand’s *Godan*. Ajmer Singh also comments in this regard:

One of the critics who read this novel in Hindi translation recalled Munshi Premchand’s *Godan* in one respect. In that novel, a neighbor poisons a farmer’s cow. This is something that can happen only in a village, he said. He also observed in this novel that what brings about a breach between Jagseer, the hero, and Dharam Singh’s family for whom he worked as a tenant is equally characteristic of village life. (Rahi vi)

The novel revolves around a conflict over two acres of agricultural land which was given away to Jagseer's father by Dharam Singh, but is now threatened by Dharam's son Bhanta who is often mean to Jagseer because of his caste. Bhanta belongs to the next generation of Indians with losing moral values and has started distancing away from social contracts, drifting towards a profit driven mindset. Dharam Singh believed in God and fate, "But Bhanta didn't believe in that type of philosophical reasoning. People these days, he thought, murdered each other for a few paisa and my father gave away more than two acres of land to a seerie just for nothing" (Rahi 11). Dharam Singh himself was often pained by the behavior his wife Dhano and son Bhanta, Dharam had always treated Jagseer as his son only, but since he got old, things have fallen apart:

"Things are getting out of hand, Jagsia. That bitch is bent upon ruining the family. She first spoiled Bhanta and then instigated this whole thing. I pray the things stay in control, but these people would not let that happen."

Jagseer understood Dharam Singh's inner pain from his heavy voice. His eyes were tearful at Dharam Singh waited a little and slowly asked Jagseer to lie to Nandi to defuse the situation. Otherwise, she would suffer even more. He advised Jagseer to take heart. But Jagseer saw Dharam Singh himself wipe his tears with the loose end of his turban as he crossed the door to leave. (Rahi 83)

The relationship between a landowner and a seerie was that of trust and mutual respect originating out of the love for the land and expectations and efforts for a good harvest. Dr Smarika Pareek explains:

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 *smahi* 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. (Pareek 314)

Dharam Singh is in a way representative of the United India, when people fought for a common cause of Independence, and Bhanta is the new India, with the underlying insecurities of his future, instigated by his mother, hidden in his behaviour. These insecurities are used by Dhano as a tool to set ablaze the insecurities into Bhanta and thus leading to his hatred and ill treatment of Jagseer. Dharam Singh's worst fears confront him when he heard of Dhano and Bhanta's plan to overthrow him as the leader of the house.

This betrayal can also be compared with the betrayal of Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy by Indian National Congress post-Independence. When Dharam Singh's daughter asks him, "won't you be scared here, bapu, all by yourself?" the word 'bapu', also the name of our own Mahatma, he only responds with a belief that 'my daughter Bhile will be here with me.' Although he gets assurance by his daughter that she'll 'be coming to see' him, he knows, nothing will be the same again. Similar was the case of India after Independence, Nehru was of the scientific temperament and according to him the 'real economic problems' can be solved by a fundamental reconfiguration of the whole process of society's economics. This directly opposed the Gandhian thought of self-sustenance and minimum use of machines. The introduction of newer machines and technologies led to a profit driven economy, with people more interested in their personal gains rather than their social obligation to provide employment and opportunities to all sections of the society. Partha Chatterjee in his book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* ponders upon this betrayal of Gandhian ideas by the congress in his analysis of a paragraph by Jawaharlal Nehru:

The argument, in other words, is that whereas our very knowledge of society tells us that 'we' are powerless, Gandhi's unique and incomprehensible knack of reaching the people makes him powerful; however, for that very reason, our knowledge of the consequences of Gandhi's power enables us to let him act on our behalf for the time being but to resume our own control afterwards. (Chatterjee 152)

The Last Flicker provides an essential portrait of India by portraying all the common

classes of the society in a packed sequence. The use of day to day language, gives the narrative an authority of its own. Even Gandhi said, “India is not Calcutta and Bombay; India lives in her seven hundred thousand villages.” Therefore, to understand India we need to study the people residing in its villages. Through the life of the people of the villages and the interactions between the people belonging to different castes of the society, Singh suggests at the taboos that still plague the Indian society. Caste plays a major role in the interpersonal interactions of people, just because Jagseer is a *seerie* (a sharecropper) also considered an untouchable, he often faces disrespect even from the people far worse than him in every other aspect. We see on multiple occasions where Jagseer is disrespected but the novel also portrays an altogether different perspective, that of Raunki and Dharam Singh. Dharam Singh considers Jagseer as his own Brother in spite of being from a Jat (farmer) family. And Raunki, another upper caste character thinks of Jagseer as his own brother, and even spends Jagseer’s last days tending for him. When Jagseer is finally no more, we see Raunki and Bhani tending to his Mahi and exclaiming at last, “tit a tur giyadhilasa de ke, Sadajago seer muhgiya. [Having given us hope, you departed, And we have lost our stakes in the world.]” This, goes without saying, is a portrayal of the way caste is used to subjugate individuals for the personal benefits of majority class.

Even the type of language used in the novel, the simplicity of the village language portrayed in the novel, is representative of the people of India. The novel opens with such simplicity, with a conversation between two women from the village, discussing matchmaking of one’s son. Use of sentences like “There comes the witch!” and “May your husband live long! May your children live long! May your brothers live long!”

The institute of marriage forms a major theme in the novel. The importance of this social contract is clearly visible in the desperation of Nandi (Jagseer’s mother) to get Jagseer married. She tries really hard to get Jagseer married but is unable to find a suitable match for him. In the Indian culture marriage plays an important role. A person who’s unmarried is often frowned upon in the society and is often made a center of mockery in the villages:

“Hey Raaaam !” she sighed again, and began to speak as if she were talking to someone sitting beside her. “Oh you evil one! I didn’t as for jewels as a part of the dowry! Only a

simple bride. Even a blind or a handicapped one would have done! It has been twenty years and did I ever leave a stone unturned! No damn god or goddess appeared; no *peer fakir* heard my repeated pleas. What wrong did I do? I don't know what baked potatoes did we sow?...They say even a dunghill is cared for every twelve years, but not a soul heard me in twenty long years! Some have had their seven sons married, I couldn't marry even one. This is no justice! O God! This is no justice!" (Rahi 3)

The youth of modern Punjab has fallen victim to drugs, we see the inception of opium addiction stretching its roots into the lifestyle of Punjab in the post-independence India through the novel. The protagonist, Jagseer, in the beginning of his life is shown to be a well-structured, ripped and simple fellow. But, in order to cope with the societal pressure, constant bickering by Bhanta on irrelevant issues and the pain and suffering of not being able to unite with his beloved, he becomes another victim of opium addiction. Jagseer is often seen consuming opium pills to ease of his pressure and the drug becomes a way for him to work harder in the fields:

During these two and a half years Jagseer no longer remained the same person. From one, he progressed to two, to three, and then to four doses of opium a day. He drank every second or third day. And as far as tea was concerned, here was no limit; he didn't mind ten or even fifteen cups a day. But at the same time he worked twice as hard as anyone else did.

But no matter how much he worked, people were still concerned about his health, especially Dharam Singh, who would often exclaim, "Bai Jagsia, you are ruining your health at this age. How will you pass the rest of your life?"

The novel also beautifully captures the relationship between man and the nature which is often seen to disappear in the modern India. The importance of love for the fields and other vegetation is sacred. Cutting of the sheesham tree becomes a big concern for the families, to them the tree is sacred because of its relationship to the father or the head of the family. In fact before his death, Jagseers' father had told Nandi to take care of the tree as her own son: "Look Nandi, I don't care if you light a lamp on my maahi or not, but do look after my sheesham'..."

(81) Since that time, a tree becomes "our sheesham" a sacred symbol for the family. Animals

hold their own value amongst the people, but the materialistic point of view might change it with time. The love of Jagseer for the two bulls is admirable and he even didn't try to kill a snake who passed through his body while he stayed in the fields one night.

Growing population is another concern which has been discussed in the novel. Jagseer ponders upon the people's struggle as a result of increasing number of heads a household has to feed. He especially compares the condition of poor untouchables with that of dogs living in a kennel:

In Jagseer's lifetime, he had not seen anybody build a new room. If the roof or a wall of a decrepit room collapsed in the monsoons, the owner would use the same bricks, timber, wattle and daub to re-erect the walls and a roof on them, just 'enough to shelter' themselves, just 'to pass the days' somehow.

'Kennels, fit for dogs'...Jagseer could not help smiling a little at the thought.

The number of mouths to feed kept increasing every day and the poor get poorer by the day. Family planning or any sort of education related to it was absent in India due to the lack of education left by hundreds of years of slavery at the hands of the foreign invaders, a problem needed to be dealt with on a priority basis. But still the people keep chanting only one thing:

Man life has ten phases fine,
The first one blew away,
Where have gone the other nine?

Conclusion: Obviously there is always a possibility of an alternate narration of the nation which might be less pessimistic and more demanding of the characters moral virtues. In comparison, the present novel is quite stark. But a stark narrative isn't necessarily a completely pessimistic narrative. It just brings out the missed opportunities amongst the society, which if exercised would have led to a different India. Gurdial Singh misses his village, his India, the love and brotherhood, and the nostalgia is clearly reminiscent of the nation which was, and could have been. Singh has poured in all his experience to portray and present struggles and experiences of people

from different sections of society is beautifully spun narrative revolving around an unfinished lovestory.

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