Gurdial Singh: Messiah of the Marginalized

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In the past two months, Indian literature has lost two of its greatest writers; first it was the redoubtable Mahasweta Devi, who left us in July, and then it was the inimitable Gurdial Singh (August 18, 2016). Both these writers enjoyed a distinctive, pre-eminent position in their respective literary traditions, and both managed to transcend the narrow confines of the geographical regions within which they were born, lived or worked. Strangely enough, despite their personal, ideological, aesthetic and/or cultural differences, both worked tirelessly, all their lives, for restoring dignity, pride and self-respect to "the last man" on this earth.

What is more, both went on to win the highest literary honor of India, the *Jnanpeeth*, for their singular contribution to their respective languages, or let me say, to the rich corpus of Indian Literature. Needless to say, the sudden departure of both these literary giants has created such a permanent vacuum in our literary circles that neither time nor circumstance may now be able to replenish it, ever. And it is, indeed, with a very heavy heart and tearful, misty eyes that I bid adieu to both these great writers, and also pray for the eternal peace of their souls.

Of course, I could have used this opportunity to go into a comparative assessment of the works of both Mahasweta Devi and Gurdial Singh, too, but I shall abstain from doing so for obvious reasons. The main purpose of this essay, as the title clearly suggests, is to pay tribute to Gurdial Singh's life and work.

A Personal Note

Let me start off by stating that more than the loss of the literary world, Gurdial Singh's death has been a huge personal loss for me. Though at a professional level, our relationship was that of an author and a translator, at a more personal level, I held him in the same respect and awe that one ordinarily reserves only for one's mentor, guide, philosopher and a friend. Today, if I can claim to know something about Punjabi language, literature, history or culture, I must say, I owe a great

deal of it to the teachings of Gurdial Singh. The manner in which he, very gently and compassionately, led me into the complexities of Punjabi culture, helping me develop its nuanced understanding, also makes me think of him as my 'cultural guru'. I feel that in his passing away, I have lost my 'literary ancestor'; if at all one could posit such a category.

I must confess that before 1992, when my association with Gurdial Singh began in the most fortuitous manner, I had not even read his works. My readings in Punjabi fiction were few and far between, and were limited largely to the short/long fiction and/or poetry of Vir Singh, Nanak Singh, Gurbaksh Singh Preetlari, Kartar Singh Duggal, Amrita Pritam, Mohan Singh, Shiv Batalavi, Paash et al. Having done some preliminary readings in Punjabi literature, I had started narrowing it down to short fiction, a form into which I wanted to make my initial forays as a translator.

This I did mainly because somewhere down the line, I had convinced myself, for a variety of reasons, that the future of Punjabi literature was secure with short, and not long, fiction. Twenty-five years down the line, the short fiction in Punjabi continues to offer startling possibilities and could legitimately be said to have a very promising and a vibrant future in our context. And had Macmillan India not launched its prestigious series *Modern Indian Classics in Translation* in 1992, and not commissioned both Pushpinder Syal and I to translate Gurdial Singh's Sahitya Akademi award-winning title *Adh Chanini Raat* for this series, I would have probably never known or discovered the greatness of Gurdial Singh, both as a man, and a writer.

Gurdial Singh: A Brief Profile

As one reflects on Gurdial Singh's personal life, the first thought that comes to mind is that, in so many different ways, it was far stranger than the fiction he wrote. While his fiction was always enmeshed in social and cultural reality of a very raw kind, from the first to the last; his life reads more like a slice of fiction crafted by not-so-benign a fate. He was born into an extremely impoverished Sikh Ramgarhia family of Jaito Mandi, a small commercial town of Punjab, where he lived for the better part of his life, and where he did most of his writing, too. Though his family lived at Jaito, his birthplace was Bhaini Fateh, a small village in Faridkot, where the maternal side of his family lived. His father, the only bread-winner of a large family, used to double up as a blacksmith-cum-carpenter, hammering out tin or even iron sheets to make trunks and ploughs, or chiseling

chunks of wood into door-frames and windows.

Not being much educated himself, he didn't quite understand the value of education or its transformative potential in human life. Young Gurdial was a bright student and loved going to school, if only to escape long hours of grueling, physical labor his father expected him to put in, in his spare time. Not that he was ever shy of doing physical labor, but his weak constitution and fragile frame, something that dogged him all his life, is what made him shun strenuous physical work almost like the plague.

It is another matter that once he had taken to writing, he never ever treated it lightly and always pored over his manuscripts laboriously, working hard on chiseling each word and painstakingly refining his craft and skill. In his autobiography (which was published in two parts; *Nyan Mattian* and *Dooji Dehi,* and was later translated into English, too), he mentions how he would either run away to the local gurdvara or just spend hours painting canvases, simply to get away from the overweening demands of his hard-to-please father.

Though his father, whom he called *tayya*, was a stentorian figure, young Gurdial grew up listening to the folk tales of Malwa region from his uncle. His uncle, as he professes in one of the sections of his autobiography, was a charming storyteller, who often made children of the house sit around him in a circle, before rolling out his improvised versions with panache. This is how the seeds of a future storyteller were sown, and young Gurdial's imagination slowly began to take wings.

Despite being studious, he loved playing truant, like other boys his age. On such occasions, he would sneak off with his classmates to the sandy mounds on the outskirts of his village, and spend his time, playing inventive, ingenuous games. These “sweet-sour days of his childhood”, as he calls them, would have continued uninterrupted had it not been for his father's sudden, irrational decision not to allow him to continue with his studies beyond the eighth grade. Gurdial Singh was certainly not prepared for it. This meant that now his dream of completing his education would be in a shambles, and the dreadful nightmare of physical labor would stare him, once again, right in the face.

But for the intervention of his headmaster, Madan Mohan Sharma, whose shaping influence upon his personal life Gurdial Singh never tired of reiterating, he would have probably ended up as a replica of his father. On hearing that Gurdial had discontinued his schooling, Sharma came home, persuaded his father to send him back to school, and later, when his father cited ‘poverty’ as one of the

reasons, even offered to pay his fee from his pocket. This is how Gurdial first completed his matriculation and then his JBT. Interestingly, it was Sharma again, who got Gurdial his first job as a schoolteacher.

Though frail in body and health, Gurdial always possessed a rare firmness of mind and spirit. It was this resilient spirit coupled with his indomitable will that always egged him on, against all odds, to steer ahead in life. It's not that he wasn't happy or content being a school teacher, but he had this irrepressible urge to do better, to improve his lot, a quality that he also imbued all his fictional characters with. Almost all his fictional characters, without an exception, are fighters, in true-blue Punjabi style, and they simply refuse to be cowed down by the forces inimical to them. Their lust for life (incidentally Irving Stone's biography of Vincent Van Gogh *Lust for Life* was Gurdial Singh's all-time favorite) is insatiable, and so is their passionate longing for change and renewal.

Much before Gurdial Singh could evolve fictional strategies to craft such characters, he had, in reality, worked assiduously on himself and his own life to alter his destiny. In his times, marriage was not a personal decision, but always that of the immediate family. He once confessed that had it been left to him, he would have liked to defer it by a couple of years (only to give himself a chance at self-growth), though he was clear that he would have only married Balwant Kaur, his life-long companion and *'sahridya'*, who gave him all the support he needed, without ever making any demands on him. She, indeed, was the woman, who stood solidly behind him all his life is something he never failed to mention in course of several of his informal conversations.

Having been married at a tender age of 14 to the 13-year-old Balwant Kaur, Gurdial Singh found himself confronted with the triple challenge; one, continuing his education despite all odds, two, seeking to harmonize the conflicting demands of domesticity and creativity, three, augmenting his income to support the growing demands of his family. Within a few years of marriage, three children were born to them; Manjit, Rabindra and Sumeet. Apart from his immediate family, he also had to shoulder the responsibility of his extended family. This became the main driving force for him to improve his lot through education, and he started doing translations to augment his income.

It is not a well known fact among his readers that during the period of his literary apprenticeship (though he had started preparing himself for the vocation of a writer way back in 1952, he didn't publish his first story, *Bhaganwale,* in *Panj Darya* until 1957), Gurdial Singh had trained himself to translate some of the

greats among the World Literature into Punjabi. His formidable reputation as a writer has, in many ways, eclipsed his contribution to the realm of translation. He is believed to have rendered as many as 25 literary works from languages as diverse as English, Russian, Bengali, Hindi etc., into Punjabi. Among others, he successfully translated the likes of Maxim Gorky, Emmanuel Kazakevich, Mikhail Sletmakh, Sharat Chandra, Bhagwati Charan Verma, Yashpal, Krishna Sobti et al. His translation work was spread over nearly 30 years, from 1960s to 1990s.

In the midst of it all, he resumed his studies, and first did Gyani and then B.A by parts, completing it in 1964. In 1967, he finished his post-graduation from Panjab University, and was later awarded an honorary D. Litt. degree, first by Guru Nanak Dev University (Amritsar), and then by Panjab University (Chandigarh). As he kept scaling up his qualifications, steadily he kept moving up the professional ladder, too. So from a primary school teacher to a teacher of senior classes, and then from a college lecturer at Faridkot to a University professor at the Regional Centre, Punjabi University, Patiala, it was literally an arduously long, uphill journey for him. In other words, Gurdial Singh really had to struggle rather hard to get most of the things in life that we often take almost for granted. Like so much else, this aspect of his personal life, too, became the 'pièce de résistance' of his fictional characters.

Once while interviewing him, I had asked his wife as to what she thought of his several literary pursuits and/or accomplishments. Her reply was as cryptic as it was profound: "Work is life for him. His world begins and ends with his work. It's his study, his books and his writing, that's all. I have only seen him sitting at his study for long hours, poring over books or doing his own writing. Never in his life has he ever attended any of the family functions, gatherings or weddings. On all such occasions, we invariably have to go without him, but when it comes to my personal needs or those of his children, he is always around with a word of advice or a comforting thought."

Essentially a recluse and a lover of solitude, Gurdial Singh lived the life of a true *karamyogi*, one who never ignored the demands of his family to meet the overweening demands of the writer in him. For him, personal *dharma* as a writer was as important as was his *dharma* towards his family and society. In a way, when he raises similar and other related questions in his magnum opus *Parsa*, for which he was given the prestigious *Jnanpeeth*, too, it doesn't sound facetious at all, as it had all been quite integral to his own living practices. For Gurdial Singh, writing was not merely a vocation, it was the only mode of living he knew. For him, there was no chasm between what he thought and he wrote, what he

believed in and what he practiced or propagated through his writings.

The Writer: An Overview

Though Gurdial Singh started his literary career by writing a short story, initial success came to him as a novelist when he published his first major, path-breaking work *Marhi Da Deeva* in 1964. Translated into English as *The Last Flicker* (Sahitya Akademi, 1991), it was hailed as a modern classic soon after it appeared in print. However, his early success didn't either stand in way of or become a disincentive for his later, equally powerful and significant works of long fiction such as *Unhoye* (1966), *Kuwela* (1968), *Addh Chanini Raat* (1972), *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* (1976) and *Parsa* (1991) et al. His *Marhi Da Deeva* and *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* have been made into internationally acclaimed films by Surinder Singh (1989) and Gurvinder Singh (2011) respectively.

Despite his immense success and popularity as a pioneering novelist in Punjabi, he continued to nurture his first love for short fiction. Small wonder, he managed to produce as many as ten collections of short stories, the more notable among them being, *Saggi Phul* (1962), *Kutta Te Aadmi* (1971), *Begana Pindh* (1985) and *Kareer Di Dhingri* (1991). Apart from ten novels, all of which have been widely read and acclaimed, he authored some three plays, two prose works and no less than nine books for children. In addition to *Marhi Da Deeva*, five other novels of his viz., *Addh Chanini Raat (Night of the Half-Moon*, Macmillan, 1996), *Parsa* (NBT, 2000) and *Unhoye* (*The Survivors*, Katha, 2005), *Rete Di Ik Muthi* (*A Handful of Sand*, NBT, 2012) and *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* (*Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse*, Rupa, 2016) are also available in English translation.

Tall and gangly, Gurdial Singh was modest to a fault, and all his life shunned and resisted media strobes and unnecessary publicity. In fact, he was quite contemptuous of those who wrote only for money and public recognition. Though he never attached much significance to it, recognition came his way in form of countless awards and honours, both national as well as international. Among others, special mention may be made of *Punjab Sahitya Akademi Award* (1979), *National Sahitya Akademi Award* (1976) *Soviet Land Nehru Award* (1986) *Bhai Veer Singh Fiction Award* (1992), and the prestigious *Jnanpeeth* (1999), the highest literary honour in India, all of which always settled rather lightly on his mildly hunched, care-worn shoulders.

Punjabi Literature & Gurdial Singh

Much before we start making an assessment of Gurdial Singh's fiction, we need to put him as well as his work within the wider linguistic, historical and cultural frame to which he essentially belongs. The beginnings of the Punjabi language, it may be pointed out here, lie in the hoary past, going as far back as the 10th century. Its emergence in the Indo-Gangetic plain started in the 13th century, coinciding, strangely enough, with the growth and development of the English language in a far-off island inhabited by the Anglo-Saxons.

It is another matter that the English language, being the favored child of history, has confidently marched on ahead, spreading across several continents (thanks to colonialism), while Punjabi has had to stay confined rather diffidently to the plains of Punjab, place of its birth. (It is only in the past sixty years or more that the Punjabi people and their language have started making their presence felt across the globe). Despite their vast geographical, historical differences in terms of reach and spread, the common lineage of both English and Punjabi can obviously be traced back to the Indo-European family.

Much in the manner of other world languages, Punjabi literature, too, had its early beginnings in poetry. A Sufi strain was very much in evidence in the compositions of Baba Farid, a 12th century saint, often seen as one of the early practitioners of Punjabi poetry. For almost three hundred years thereon, until the advent of Guru Nanak on the scene, Punjab went through an extended, nightmarish phase of foreign invasions, bringing its literary/cultural march to a sudden, temporary halt. However, once the Guru's *bani* had begun to resonate through the fields of Punjab, soaking up and fertilizing its large tracts, there was no looking back. Being both philosophical and mystical in its thematic content, some of this *bani* ultimately found its rightful place in the Sikh scripture, the *Guru Granth,* a true repository of the collective wisdom of the Gurus and other exponents of the *Bhakti* movement.

Making a rather slow start, the novel, however, did not emerge in the Punjabi language until the latter half of the 19th century, initially developing largely in the shadows of its European counterpart. Vir Singh, one of its early practitioners, who was known primarily for his 'historical romances', sought inspiration in the fictional works of Walter Scott and his ilk. His successor Nanak Singh sought to break away from the imitative efforts, rooting the novel in the very soil and substance of Punjab.

Turning to the indigenous modes of storytelling such as *qissas,* popular in the medieval period, Nanak Singh gave to the Punjabi novel a distinct local character and habitation. It was through his efforts that the novel managed to reclaim not only its vital link with the oral tradition, but also its soft, delicate formless texture. In his novels, fluidity of sentimentalism goes hand in hand with the ideology of a social reformer, something that Sohan Singh Seetal and Jaswant Singh Kanwal, who were to come later, also tried to emulate, fairly successfully. Interestingly, it was in the Punjabi language that the *anchalik upnayas* (whose beginnings literary historians often trace back to Phaneshwar Nath Renu's Hindi novel *Maila Anchal*) made its appearance first of all. Kartar Singh Duggal's *Andraan,* a novel written in the *Pothohari* dialect and steeped in the localism of the same region, its geography, economy, ecology, customs and conventions, was published as far back as 1948.

In a way, the emergence of this particular form of novel did help in foregrounding hard-core social realism in the Punjabi novel, which was to acquire its ideological underpinnings from a curious blend of Marxist thought and Gandhian socialism. Sant Singh Sekhon, Surinder Singh Narula, Amrita Pritam and Narinder Pal Singh, among several others, made a consistent and significant contribution towards this paradigm shift. By enabling the fiction to shed its obsessive, maudlin sentimentality, even quasi-romantic character, these luminaries slowly but surely paved the way for the advent of a truly modernist novel in Punjabi, with a psychological/sociological thrust of its own.

Until the times of Gurdial Singh, two diametrically opposed ideologies viz., a brand of naïve romanticism and an indigenous form of realism had continued to exert pressures and counter-pressures upon the content and/or form of the Punjabi novel. Apart from these ideological tensions, which helped shape the aesthetic concerns as well as their articulation, Punjabi fiction had continued to shift back and forth between the rural and the urban, the past and the present, the poetic and the realistic.

The historical importance of Gurdial Singh's fiction lies in the fact that it sought to encapsulate the dialectics of tradition and modernity, even tried to attain a rare synthesis of the two, wherever possible, something that had eluded Punjabi fiction until then. Conscious of his role in re-constituting the novelistic discourse, he ruptured the tradition of Punjabi novel from within, while continuing to nurture it from without. By pulling it out of the morass of bourgeois morality into which Punjabi novel had largely sunk in its post-Independence phase, he opened up possibilities that would have otherwise remained unrealized.

Though not strictly a proponent of *anchalik upnayas*, Gurdial Singh could very well be seen as an exponent of the regional novel in the sense in which Thomas Hardy and R.K. Narayan essentially were. In novel after novel, he has assiduously re-created a fictional replica of an insulated, self-enclosed, provincial world of the Malwa region, where he had lived all his life and whose dreams and desires, folklore and culture he best understood and empathized with. Most of his novels seek to capture the distinctive flavour of the regional dialect and its linguistic angularities.

Malwa comes alive in his novels both as a place in history and as a cultural metaphor. Its stubborn, unyielding land, sandy soil and prickly air, low-roofed mud houses and vast open fields, mingle and overlap with stifling caste prejudices and intriguing questions of land ownership/possession to create a befitting backdrop to this incomparable saga of human courage, resilience and sacrifice. However, the self-limiting nature of the Malwa region didn't in any way prevent Gurdial Singh from giving an artistically wholesome expression to the complexities of life he had set out to explore.

Gurdial Singh radicalised the Punjabi novel or re-inscribed its ideological and/or aesthetic space by infusing into it a new consciousness about the underprivileged and the oppressed. Commenting upon his first ever novel *Marhi Da Deeva,* published in 1964, Namwar Singh, an eminent Hindi critic, is believed to have said: "When the novel was a dying art-form in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century, it was Tolstoy's *War and Peace* that resurrected faith in novel as a form. In a similar fashion, when in Indian languages novel was going through its worst ever crisis, Gurdial Singh's *Marhi Da Deeva* revitalized this form as only he could."

The significance of *Marhi Da Deeva* lies in the fact that for the first time ever in the history of Punjabi fiction, a social and economic outcast, leaping out of his shadowy terrain, made it to the center-stage of fictionscape. While seeking to project the sufferings and agonies of the hopelessly marginalized individuals as well as social classes/castes in a rather involved manner, Gurdial Singh never lost sight of the imaginative/creative demands of his own vocation as a novelist. Often seen as a proponent of hard-core social realism, he was equally at ease with the poetic, symbolic mode of expression, even structuring of his fiction.

His sternest critics also concede, unhesitatingly, that he did plough a fresh ground by turning novel into a trenchant critique of social discourse, without compromising its poeticism. Steeped in history without being explicitly historical,

his fiction mediates its way through myriad, often disparate, crosscurrents of the mainstream and folk traditions of storytelling, latent in both orature and ecriture. Though he did radicalize the novel by infusing greater ideological strength and vitality into its content, at the formal level, he was neither an exhibitionist nor a maverick experimentalist.

Convinced that the form must ultimately follow the dictates of content, Gurdial Singh's favorite self-description, after Georg Lukacs' well-known phrase, was that of a 'critical realist.' Though there is an inherent organicity in all of his fictional work, he didn't return to the treatment of the same subject or style, ever again. An inveterate progressive, he subscribed to the Darwinian notion of continuous, uninterrupted struggle with the environment/circumstances and also to the positivism of the evolutionary principle minus its ruthless competitiveness, as much as his characters often do.

Gurdial Singh's Fictional World

In one of his novels, *Parsa*, a low-caste *siri*, Tindi, requests his benevolent master to tell him an 'interesting story. On being asked as to what really makes for such a story, Tindi first hesitates and then shoots off a counter question: "Why are the stories always about kings and princes?" More than a mere rhetorical question, it's the very raison d'être of Gurdial Singh's counter-narratives. He is no less than a messiah of the marginalized, one who has consistently and tirelessly tried to put the dispossessed, the dislocated and the de-privileged on the centre map of his fiction. From a poor, illiterate farmhand, a small-time workers or peasant to an overburdened rickshaw-puller or a low-caste carpenter, it's always the primal rawness of human life that strikes a sympathetic chord in him.

Conceived as victims of social/historical tyranny, most of his characters fight back even in face of an imminent defeat. He strongly believes that man's ultimate *dharma* is to fight the tyranny and oppression built into his/her situation. This is what often imbues his characters, even his novels with a definite sense of tragic inevitability. And this tragic sense is certainly much more pronounced in his early novels such as *Marhi Da Deeva* (1964) and *Kuwela* (1968) than it is in his later works.

While Jagseer in *Marhi Da Deeva* falls an easy prey to the machinations of a beguiling feudal power play, Heera Dei in *Kuwela* stands firm, refusing to cringe before a taboo-ridden society much too easily. However, the heroic or

revolutionary potential of his characters began to come fully into play only with the creation of Bishna in *Unhoye* (1966) and Moddan in *Addh Chanini Raat* (1972).

Unlike Jagseer, both Bishna and Moddan not only refuse steadfastly to become accomplices in the process of their own victimization/marginalization but also make untiring efforts to rise in revolt against this twin process. They even go so far as to interrogate the dehumanising social/legal practices working against them, but stop short of overturning them. It's their lack of self-awareness that ultimately makes failed revolutionaries out of them.

With Parsa, a Jat-Brahmin, moving centre-stage, the dialectics turns inwards. His consciousness becomes the ultimate battleground. For it is here that the social tensions and conflicts wage their most fierce and acute battle. Parsa seeks to overcome the tyranny of caste and class not through exclusion or rejection, but assimilation and inclusion. In his person, all forms of contradictions find a happy resolution.

It is in recognition of this fact that *Parsa* (1991) has widely been acclaimed as an important cultural text, a real triumph of Gurdial Singh's life-long commitment to the art of fiction. For any writer, it is indeed, very rare to attempt to reclaim the diverse and complex strands of his cultural memory within the scope of a single work of fiction. And if such an attempt has, indeed, been made successfully in the contemporary Punjabi literature, it's in Gurdial Singh's celebrated novel *Parsa.*

In *Aahan* (2008), Gurdial Singh has looked into the ways in which the Praja Mandal Movement and Jaito Morcha, two significant political developments in the history of Punjab, dovetail into the national freedom struggle. Against this backdrop, he has portrayed a very sensitive picture of a village Karamgarh and its hapless people, who first face the natural calamity in form of a swarm of locusts, and then are subjected to economic and political oppression by the establishment.

Unlike *Parsa*, which is an individual-centric novel, *Aahan* is the story of the rise and fall of a village, an entire community, or in short, an entire way of life and ethos. In terms of its thematic scope and broad canvas, *Aahan* is, in some ways, reminiscent of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's famous novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* Karamgarh is Gurdial Singh's Mocando. The canvas of the novel is, undoubtedly, epic in nature; the narration of the story or the treatment of the subject matter definitely has a master's touch.

Marhi Da Deeva (*The Last Flicker*) relocates the twin questions of ownership and dispossession within the ambit of green revolution and redefines them. *Kuwela* probes into the problem of widow remarriage in an orthodox Hindu

society. *Rete Di Ik Muthi* is a sensitive portrayal of how the blind pursuit of materialism leads to slow erosion of human values such as love and fidelity. *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* bemoans the loss of paternalistic culture, casting an oblique look at the issue of shrinking land-holdings and attendant problems of forced migration, unemployment and destitution.

Set in the pre-Independence India, *Unhoye* (*The Survivors*) records the impact of early forays into the industrialization with a rare precision, of how dehumanisation creeps in, almost imperceptibly. Unlike his other works, *Parsa* is not so tangibly located in time-space continuum. As the main focus of the novel is on reclaiming the rich literary/cultural sources and history of Punjab, social reality impinges on it very marginally. It is almost as if, after having created the 'narratives of oppression' in his earlier novels, in *Parsa,* Gurdial Singh finally breaks free, moving rather self-assuredly towards a 'narrative of emancipation'.

Even when he does portray social reality in all its searing passion, as he does in his earlier novels, he takes care not to ever allow it to become either morbid or squeamish. A certain degree of poeticism helps him in smoothing out the jagged edges of social reality. All his novels function the way poetic metaphors do. Loaded with rich cultural signification, the titles such as *Marhi Da Deeva, Rete Di Ik Muthi, Addh Chanini Raat* et al sometimes acquire a suggestive power far beyond their immediate context. It's his poetic vision, which ultimately liberates, offering a transcendent edge to everything he so feelingly portrays.

Gurdial Singh's creative imagination was imbued with a rare sense of synthesising power. Like a true artist, he understood the dilemmas and conflict of both art and life exceedingly well. No wonder, his poetic effusions went so very well with a restrained expression and an economy of detail. He was a minimalist in the true sense of the word, as he managed to make it not just an expression of his style; rather the very texture of his vision and thought. No wonder, he was able to strike a precarious, though fine balance between the narrative and the dramatic, the personal and the historical, the political and the artistic.

Conclusion

Like Sophocles, Hardy and Arnold, Gurdial Singh's view of life was essentially tragic. And for him, tragedy was immanent in the very condition of being human or rather becoming so; resultant of the dialectical struggle between the twin processes. It is an expression, even a triumphant assertion of man's unending

search for the classical values of honour, dignity and self-respect. If such a view of life refuses to confer any heroism; it doesn't induce despair or defeatism either. In novel after novel, Gurdial Singh has renewed our faith in the irrepressible spirit of human nature, and the unspeakable endurance of human will.

Like a true visionary, Gurdial Singh dreamt of an equitable social order, where human beings could actually be valued for who they are, and not for what they have. He was painfully aware of how capitalism was slowly making inroads into our personal, domestic and/or cultural spaces, swallowing them up imperceptibly, reducing all human equations into marketable commodities.

Though he lived all his life in a market town, yet 'commodification of literature' is what he resisted with all his might. Market was the last place he would have liked to either position himself or his works in. Expectedly, Jaito Mandi paid a tearful farewell to its most illustrious son ever (the street in which he lived is now known as *Jnanpeeth Marg*), with the workers, peasants and other common people turning up for his last journey in large numbers, as if in a purely spontaneous gesture of love and goodwill.

For he was the man who fought for the cause of such people, creating in the process monumental works which already enjoy pre-eminence as the "modern classics". Some of the qualities that set him apart as a writer were his sincere, passionate engagement with issues close to his heart, his remarkable, often rare control, even restraint over the artistic material, authenticity of his beliefs and convictions, and an unsparing, no-holds-barred articulation of it all in several of his works, fiction, non-fiction or otherwise.

Gurdial Singh has, indeed, left a rich literary/cultural legacy behind. It will take us years, if not decades, to understand the exact measure of influence his writings may have had on Punjabi mind, society and culture. In some ways, his contribution has been mapped out already, but there is so much more that remains to be discovered. Most of his critics do concede that Gurdial Singh deserves his pride of place among the greatest of Indian writers such as Prem Chand, Phaneshwar Nath Renu, Mahasweta Devi, U. R. Anantamurthy and Nirmal Verma et al.

But I would go a step further and say that the real assessment of Gurdial Singh's work is possible only if he were to be placed among the best that the World Literature has produced in the recent times. As far as I go, he could confidently rub shoulders with the likes of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Naguib Mahfouz and Simin Daneshwar, and so certainly deserves his place

among them, as well.

To my mind, the only real tribute to Gurdial Singh would be to initiate such an assessment of his work, which, I am confident, would happen soon enough. Until then, we let him rest among the stars, with evening dew shedding silent tears over the departure of nature's very own, gem of a child.

Gurdial Singh: A Timeline

- 1933 (January 10). Born in a poor family of carpenters and blacksmiths.
- 1933-1940. Early childhood spent in the small township of Jaito Mandi (whose population was around eight thousand then, and even now is no more than thirty-five thousand), playing in the streets, around the ponds and trees, barely a few hundred yards away from his house.
- 1945. Early education at the local middle school, mainly through the intervention of the headmaster, but much against the will of his parents. He hadn't even passed middle school when straitened circumstances coerced him into leaving school and joining his father.
- 1945-52. For six or seven years, he did stressful physical labor as a carpenter-cum-blacksmith, first with his father and later, even on his own. Hammering out iron sheets proved to be so strenuous for a frail young boy of fifty kilograms that it led his right arm to become an inch longer than the left, which it still is.
- 1946. He was married to Balwant Kaur, a girl from Bathinda.
- 1951. Manjit, his first daughter was born.
- 1953. Rabindra, a son was born.
- 1955. His younger daughter Sumeet was born.
- 1951-53. Due to the persistent efforts and guidance of the headmaster, Madan Mohan Sharma, he resumed his studies. Despite the pressure of physical labor he continued to study for up to 14 hours a day, and first

passed his matriculate examination, and then Gyani (with honors in Punjabi).

- 1954. Started his career as a Primary School Teacher in a neighboring village at a salary of sixty rupees a month. As this wasn't enough to take care of the growing needs of a large family, he started doing translations to augment his income.
- 1951-57. Prepared himself consciously for the vocation of a writer. He thought of this vocation mainly because of his introverted, sensitive nature and personal sufferings.
- 1957. His first story was published in *Panj Darya*, edited by Mohan Singh; and thereafter he published in *Preetlari* and several other literary magazines on a regular basis.
- 1961. *Saggi Phul*, his first collection of stories published. In the same year, he completed his F.A. from Panjab University, Chandigarh.
- 1963. *Chan Da Boota*, his second collection, published. Alongside, he completed his B.A. from Punjab University.
- 1964. *Marhi Da Deeva* was published. It was hailed as a modern classic by the critics.
- 1966. *Unhoye* was published and it put him among the front-runners of Punjabi fiction. .
- 1967. His third novel *Rete Di Ikk Muthi* was published. In the same year, he did his M.A. (Punjabi) from Punjab University.
- 1968. Published *Kuwela*, a novel.
- 1970. Joined as a Lecturer of Punjabi at Barjindra College, Faridkot.
- 1972. Published *Addh Chanini Raat*, a novel that won him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi in 1975.
- 1976. *Anhe Ghore Da Daan*, another novel, published.
- 1985. Published *Begana Pindh,* a collection of short stories.
- 1986. Soviet Land Nehru Award. Also joined as Reader, Regional Centre of Punjabi University, Bathinda.
- 1990. He was elevated to the position of a full Professor.

- 1991. Published his magnum opus *Parsa,* and *Kareer Di Dhingri,* a collection of short stories.
- 1995. Retired as Professor from the Regional Centre, Bathinda.
- 1998. In recognition of his service to Punjabi literature and culture, he was awarded the Padam Sri by the Government of India.
- 2000. Honoured with Jnanpith, the highest literary award in India.
- 2001-02. Nominated as a Visiting Professor by Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar.
- 2002-04. Punjabi University, Patiala nominated him as Professor of Eminence. Currently, he is a life Fellow of the same university.

Literary Odyssey: At a Glance

Novels:

1. *Marhi Da Deeva,* 1964 (*The Last Flicker*, Sahitya Akademi: 1991)
2. *Unhoye,* 1966 (*The Survivors,* Katha, 2005)
3. *Rete Di Ik Mutthi,* 1967 (*A Handful of Sand*, NBT, 2012)
4. *Kuwela,* 1968 (The Inauspicious Hour)
5. *Adh Chanini Raat,* 1972 (*Night of the Half-Moon*, Macmillan, 1996)
6. *Aathan Uggan,* 1974 (Sunrise, Sunset)
7. *Anhe Ghore Da Daan,* 1976 (*Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse,* Rupa, 2016)
8. *Pauh Phutale Ton Pehlan,* 1982 (Before Dawn Breaks)
9. *Parsa* (English translation under the same title, NBT, 2000)
10. *Aahan*, 2008

Short Story Collections:

1. *Saggi Phul* (A Headpiece of Jewelry, 1961)

2. *Chan Da Boota* (A Moonlit Sapling, 1963)
3. *Upra Ghar* (A Strange Home, 1966)
4. *Kutta Te Aadmi* (The Dog and the Man, 1971)
5. *Masti Bota* (Mischief Monger, 1982)
6. *Rukhe Misse Bande* (People, Warm and Dry, 1984)
7. *Begana Pindh* (An Alien Village, 1985)
8. *Chonvian Kahanian* (Selected Stories, 1988)
9. *Pakka Tikana* (The Permanent Abode, 1990)
10. *Kareer Di Dhingri* (A Branch of Kareer, 1991)
11. *Meri Pratinidhi Rachna* (My Representative Stories, 1992)

Plays:

1. *Farida, Ratin Vadian* (Long Nights, O Farid, 1982)
2. *Vidayagi De Pichhon* (After the Farewell, 1982)
3. *Nikki Moti Gal* (Tid-Bits, 1982)

Prose:

1. *Punjab De Mele Te Teohaar* (Fairs and Festivals of Punjab, 1988)
2. *Lekhak Da Anubhav Te Sirjan Parkiriya (*An Author's Experience and Creative Process, 2002)
3. *Neean Mattiyan* (Autobiography, Part I: Small Talk, 1999)
4. *Doojee Dehi* (Autobiography, Part II: The Other Body, 2000)

Books For Children:

1. *Bakalam Khud* (In One's Own Hand, 1960)
2. *Tuk Kho Laye Kawan* (Crows Snatched Away the Morsels, 1963)
3. *Likhtam Baba Khema* (Baba Khema Writes, 1971)
4. *Baba Khema* (1988)

5. *Gappian Da Pio* (The Father of Gossipmongers, 1989)
6. *Mahabharat* (1990)
7. *Dharat Suhavi* (The Beautiful Earth, 1993)
8. *Tin Kadam Dharti* (Three Steps Across Earth, 1993)
9. *Khate Mithe Lok* (People, Sweet & Sour, 1993)

Awards & Honors:

1. Best Fiction Book Award 1966, 1967, 1968, and 1972
2. Nanak Singh Novelist Award 1975
3. Sahitya Akademi Award 1975
4. Punjab Sahitya Akademy Award 1979
5. Soviet Land Nehru Award 1986
6. Punjabi Sahitya Akademy Award 1989
7. Shiromani Sahitkar Award 1992
8. Bhai Veer Singh Galap Puraskar 1992
9. Pash Award 1995
10. Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sahitya Samellan Samman 1997
11. Padam Sri 1998
12. Jnanpith Literary Award 2000.

His Critics

"If we were to accept the fact, which must somehow be faced, that the basic function of all human arts is to enable us to expand our consciousness of human pain, suffering and compassion, then by bringing the misery of the lowliest and the humblest within its ambit and by touching a rare chord in us, *Unhoye* could be said to have fulfilled this sublime function in the best manner possible."

—Gurbachan Singh Talib, writer, scholar and critic (1965)

"Three or four characters have been delineated in Gurdial Singh's novel *Unhoye* just the way characters often deserve to be; in eminently unforgettable manner. Undoubtedly, these characters shall live in the collective memory of our people, generation after generation, with the same intensity and fervour with which Hamlet still lives on or Don Quixote has managed to live in the popular imagination of the West. I'm not in the least hesitant, setting up this analogy between *Unhoye* and these sublime creations. In my estimation, Gurdial Singh's novel is certainly worthy of such a comparison."

—Prof. Sant Singh Sekhon, writer, critic and academician (1976)

"*Unhoye* epitomizes the next logical step in that new direction in Punjabi literature that Gurdial Singh blazed through his first ever novel, *Marhi Da Deeva.* What is common to both these novels is their relentless commitment to a searchingly honest portrayal of village population, especially its deprived and disadvantaged sections. In the first novel, Jagseer is a victim of the circumstances he has inherited, whereas in *Unhoye*, Bishna's tragedy is largely the handiwork of his own character, his dogged refusal to surrender himself to his situation and circumstances. Unlike Jagseer, Bishna and Daya Kaur don't make insistent claims upon our sympathies, rather stand tall in our estimation by virtue of their persistent refusal to be cowed down…Though most of us often lead servile and obsequious lives the way Bhagta does in the novel, Gurdial Singh constantly makes us yearn for the life of dignity and self-respect that only Bishna stands for."

—Prof. Attar Singh, critic and scholar (1983)

"While fashioning his creations, Gurdial Singh often betrays a rare artistic control and economy of expression, which is simply beyond the pale of comparison, at least, within the realm of Punjabi literature. The fictional works, he has produced so far, bear ample testimony to the indubitable merit and the great quality of his art. If *Marhi Da Deeva* only offered a bare reflection of what heights he could attain, *Unhoye* is its apotheosis, its supreme material expression. So great are his powers of narration that he truly deserves to be assessed within the larger frame of world literature."

—Prof. Amrik Singh, eminent educator and thinker (1993)

"In *Parsa*, Gurdial Singh has created a self-reflexive, seamless narrative without a definite sense of ending or closure… The most astonishing aspect of this impressive work of fiction is its Jat-Brahmin hero with along lineage, for he holds the theme and thought together by the hooks of his spirit, as it were… It is here that the dialectics of Marxian thought and Sikh mysticism, operating inexorably through Gurdial Singh's other novels, finally attains a rare creative energy and synthesis."

—Prof. Darshan Singh Maini, Introduction to Rana Nayar's trans. of *Parsa* (2000)

"Gurdial Singh's creative imagination is imbued with a rare sense of synthesising power. Like a true artist, he understands the dilemmas and conflict of both art and life exceedingly well. No wonder, his poetic effusions go so very well with a restrained expression and an economy of detail. He is a minimalist in the true sense of the word, as he manages to make it not just an expression of his style but also the very texture of his vision and thought. No wonder, he is able to strike a precarious, though fine balance between the narrative and the dramatic, the personal and the historical, the political and the artistic."

—Prof. Rana Nayar in an essay published in *The Tribune* and *Nishaan* on the occasion of the author being awarded the prestigious Jnanpeeth (2000)

"*Earthy Tones* creates a mosaic of images of both rural and urban Punjab that seethe, simmer and linger in our memory. These stories chronicle the cultural history of the Malwa region with an unerring sense of verisimilitude and incomparable poetic sensitivity. With its stubborn, unyielding land, sandy soil, prickly air, low-roofed mud houses and vast, open fields that mingle and overlap

with stifling caste prejudices and land related hostilities, Malwa comes alive here as a microcosm of pulsating human reality. A minimalist to the core, Gurdial Singh explores all shades of earthy tones with utmost restraint and almost classical simplicity. In their incessant struggle against the social and historical forces, his characters often display a rare sense of resistance and resilience. Holding their ground, they prefer to go down fighting rather than capitulate or cower under. And it's invariably the dialectics of tradition and modernity that gives an overarching expression to Gurdial's irrepressible social concerns."

—Prof. Rana Nayar on translating *Earthy Tones* (2002)