

## Gurdial Singh: A Storyteller Extraordinaire

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This article explores the life, times, and writings of Gurdial Singh, who describes himself as a 'critical realist.' Beginning his publications in 1957, he has written nine novels, eight collections of short stories, three plays, two prose works, and nine books for children. This article examines themes such as synthesis of tradition and modernity, concern for the underprivileged, and faith in humankind's revolutionary spirit that run throughout his writings.

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### Introduction

As I sit down to reflect on the range and quality of Gurdial Singh's fiction, Plato's famous dictum inevitably comes to mind. In his *Republic*, Plato is believed to have stated that he looked upon a carpenter as a far better, a far more superior artist than the poet or the painter.<sup>1</sup> For Plato, the carpenter had come to embody the image of a complete artist or rather that of a total man. After all, wasn't he the one who imbued the formless with a sense of structure and form and infused the rugged material reality with untold creative possibilities?

By all counts, Gurdial Singh answers the Platonic description of a complete artist rather well. Born to a carpenter father, who insisted that his young son, too, should step into his shoes, Gurdial Singh chose to become instead a carpenter of words, a sculptor of human forms, and a painter of life in all its hues. On being refused funding by his parents for education beyond high school, he decided to be his own mentor, slowly toiling his way up from an elementary to a high school teacher, from there to a college lecturer, and finally a professor at a Regional Centre of Punjabi University. His is a saga of courage, a profile in patience and gritty determination, which reads more like a work of fiction in progress. As one of the most illustrious exponents of Punjabi language and culture, he has served its cause for well over four decades now.

### A Brief Profile

Gurdial Singh was born on January 10, 1933 at Bhaini Fateh, a village near Jaito in District Faridkot, Punjab.<sup>2</sup> His father Jagat Singh was a carpenter and blacksmith, who crafted wheels for the bullock carts in winters and moulded trunks and water tanks out of iron sheets in summers. His early childhood memories are of people ferrying water in leather bags (*mashaks*) over long distances, as Jaito was then plagued by acute water scarcity. Despite this,

Gurdial Singh never thought of straying too far from his place of birth, either then or now. All through his growing years, he stayed rather close to his roots, and later in his youth and middle age, he returned to them as often as he could. No longer water-starved, Jaito is now a bustling small town, but undaunted by its changing character, Gurdial Singh has, after his retirement, made it his permanent home.

Unable to meet the growing demands of a large family, his father made him give up his studies while Gurdial was still in the eighth grade, and drafted him as an apprentice into his own vocation. The very thought of spending grueling, long hours at harsh physical labor was both harrowing and revolting for the young Gurdial, who congenitally had a delicate constitution. Often he would slip away either to a nearby gurdwara or immerse himself in painting canvases, just to be able to escape the drudgery of physical labor. If anyone did relieve the tedium and dreariness of those years, it was another enthusiastic young lad, S.S. Padam, who motivated him to teach small children in the neighborhood. That's how Gurdial kept his interest in education and culture alive through those dark days of deprivation and poverty.

But for Madan Mohan Sharma, the Headmaster of a Middle School in Jaito, who became his guiding light, he probably wouldn't have ever been able to study further or improve his qualifications. Often 'Masterji' would drop by and extend whatever help Gurdial needed to get on with his studies. He was the one who first persuaded Gurdial's father to spare the young lad the rigors of physical labor and then goaded him into completing his Matric as well as his Gyani. It was master Madan Mohan who took him to a colleague, an inspector of schools, for a job. It was in Nandpur Kotra that he got his first job as a school teacher at a salary of sixty rupees. To be able to get a running grade, it was imperative for him to go through formal training, which meant taking leave without pay. In 1962, he became a teacher of Punjabi in a village. 'Masterji' continued to goad him to study further, and Gurdial finished his B.A. by parts, first English, then history. Finally, against all odds, he completed his M.A. in Punjabi in 1967.

All along, his father had continued to resent the fact that his elder son opted out of work to study further, which often led to bitter skirmishes between them. Once the differences had become irreconcilable, Gurdial opted out of a joint family set-up and started living separately. As he had already been married at 14 to Balwant Kaur, who was his age then, he was compelled to become a provider while still striving hard to educate himself. His wife was decidedly more supportive of his efforts than his father ever had been. An introvert, who refused to share his innermost thoughts and tensions with anyone, Gurdial Singh was compelled to write because he wanted to come to terms with the complications and hardships of life. He has always looked upon writing as a form of therapy, something that has enabled him to experience both solace and inner satisfaction, all at once.

It was only when he had started reading up on the classics that a strong, irrepressible desire was born in him to emulate the masters. Having realised rather early on in life that social milieu, locale, and specific problems varied

according to the cultural context, he worked hard to first discover and then hone his own distinctive literary voice. Personal convictions born of his experiences motivated him to identify with the poor and the marginalized. It was this slice of life and its authenticity that got him early success. In 1957, he published his first ever story called *Bhaganvale* (The Lucky Ones) in *Panj Darya*, a magazine edited then by the famous poet, Mohan Singh. Most of his stories were published in *Preetlarhi* edited by Gurbaksh Singh.

Though he kick-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 Diva* (Lamp at the Grave) in 1964 and was hailed as a modern classic. However, his early success didn't stand in the way of his later, equally powerful and significant works of long fiction such as *Unhoye* (The Survivors, 1966), *Kuvela* (It is Late, 1968), *Adhdh Chananhi Rat* (Night of the Half-Moon, 1972), *Anhe Ghorhe da Dan* (Offering of the Blind Horse, 1976) and *Parsa* (1991).

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 has managed to produce as many as eight collections of short stories so far, the more notable among them being *Saggi Phul* (Same Flowers, 1962), *Kutta Te Aadmi* (The Dog and the Man, 1971), *Begana Pind* (Strange Village, 1985), and *Karir di Dhingri* (The Karir Branch, 1991). Apart from nine novels, all of which have been widely read and acclaimed, he has authored some three plays, two prose works, and no less than nine books for children. He has also translated several of his own works into Hindi and those of the other reputed Indian and non-Indian writers into Punjabi. In addition to *Marhi da Diva* (*The Last Flicker*, Sahitya Akademi, 1991) three other novels, *Adhdh Chananhi Rat* (*Night of the Half-Moon*, Macmillan, 1996), *Parsa* (NBT, 2000), and *Unhoye* (*The Survivors*, Katha, 2005) are available in English translations.

Tall and gangly, Gurdial Singh is modest to a fault, and has consistently shunned and resisted media strobes and unnecessary publicity. In fact, he is quite contemptuous of those who write only for money and public recognition. Though he doesn't quite attach much significance to it, recognition has certainly come his way in the form of countless awards and honours, both national as well as international. Among others, special mention may be made here 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 (2000), the highest literary honour in India, all of which settle lightly on his mildly hunched shoulders. Having retired from active teaching and research, he now lives in Jaito, his hometown.

### **Novelist in Perspective**

Before making an assessment of Gurdial Singh's fiction, his work needs to be placed 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 tenth century. Its emergence in the Indo-Gangetic plain, strangely enough, coincided 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, while Punjabi has had to stay confined rather diffidently to the plains of Punjab, the place of its birth. (It's only in the past fifty years or so that the Punjabi people and their language have started making their presence felt across the globe). Despite their vast geographical and 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 twelfth century saint, often seen as one of the early Punjabi poet. For almost three hundred years thereon, until the advent of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) on the scene, Punjab went through an extended phase of foreign invasions, bringing its literary march to a temporary halt. However, once the Guru's writings 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, this *banhi* found its place in the Sikh scripture, the *Guru Granth*, a repository of the collective wisdom of the Sikh Gurus and other proponents of the *Bhakti* movement. In the context of Punjabi literature, the *Guru Granth* occupies the same pre-eminent, canonical position that is often conceded to the *Bible* in English literature.

Making a rather slow start, the novel, however, did not emerge in the Punjabi language until the later half of the nineteenth century, initially developing largely in the shadows of its European counterpart. Bhai 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.<sup>3</sup> Under the reformist influence of the Singh Sabha Movement, 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 story telling 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 delicate texture. In his novels, sentimentalism goes hand in hand with the ideology of a social reformer, something that Sohan Singh Seetal and Jaswant Singh Kanwal, who came later, also tried to emulate, fairly successfully.

Kartar Singh Duggal's *Andran* (The Entrails), a novel written in the Pothohari dialect and steeped in the localism of the 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 social realism in the Punjabi novel, which was to acquire its ideological underpinnings from a 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 sentimentality, these luminaries slowly but surely paved the way for the advent of a truly modernist novel in Punjabi, with a psychological and sociological thrust all its own.

Until the times of Gurdial Singh, two opposed ideologies, a brand of romanticism and an indigenous form of realism, influenced the content and form of the Punjabi novel. Apart from these ideological tensions, 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, tried to attain a synthesis of the two, something that had eluded Punjabi fiction until then. By pulling it out of the bourgeois morality into which the Punjabi novel had largely sunk in its post-Independence phase, he opened up possibilities that would have otherwise remained unrealized.

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 created a fictional replica of the insulated, self-enclosed, and provincial world of the Malwa region where he has lived all his life, and whose dreams and desires, folklore and culture, he best understands and empathizes with. Most of his novels seek to capture the distinctive flavor 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 unyielding land, prickly air, low-roofed mud houses, and vast open fields mingle and overlap with stifling caste prejudices and intriguing questions of land ownership to create a befitting backdrop to this incomparable saga of human courage, resilience, and sacrifice. However, the self-limiting nature of the Malwa region doesn't prevent Gurdial Singh from giving an artistic expression to the complexities of life he has set out to explore.

Gurdial Singh radicalised the Punjabi novel by infusing it with a new consciousness about the underprivileged and the oppressed. Commenting upon his first ever novel *Marhi da Diva*, Namwar Singh, an eminent Hindi critic, 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 the 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 Diva* revitalized this form as only he could.'<sup>4</sup>

The significance of *Marhi da Diva* lies in the fact that for the first time ever in the history of Punjabi fiction, a social and economic outcast, made it to the centre stage of fiction. While seeking to project the sufferings of the hopelessly marginalized individuals as well as social classes and castes in a rather involved manner, Gurdial Singh has never lost sight of the imaginative and creative demands of his own vocation as a novelist. Often seen as a proponent of social realism, he is equally at ease with the poetic, symbolic mode of expression.

His sternest critics also concede that he broke new ground by turning the novel into a critique of social discourse, without compromising its poetics. Steeped in history without being explicitly historical, his fiction mediates its way through crosscurrents of mainstream and folk traditions of storytelling. Though he did radicalize the novel by infusing greater ideological strength into its content, at the formal level, he is not an experimentalist.

Convinced that form must ultimately follow the dictates of content, Gurdial Singh's favourite self-description, after Georg Lukacs' well-known phrase, is that of a 'critical realist.' Though there is an organic quality to all of his fiction, he doesn't return to the treatment of the same subject or style more than once.

### **Gurdial Singh's Fiction**

In one of his novels, *Parsa*, a low-caste servant, Tindi, requests his master to tell him an 'interesting story.'<sup>5</sup> On being asked as to what 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, who has consistently and tirelessly tried to put the dispossessed and the dislocated on the centre map of his fiction. From a poor, illiterate farmhand to an overburdened rickshaw-puller or a low-caste carpenter, it's always the rawness of human life that strikes a sympathetic chord in him.

Conceived as victims of social and historical tyranny, most of his characters fight back even in face of an imminent defeat. He strongly believes that man's ultimate duty is to fight the tyranny and oppression built into his own situation. This is what often imbues his characters and his novels with a sense of tragic inevitability. And this tragic sense is certainly much more pronounced in his early novels such as *Marhi da Diva* and *Kuvela* than it is in his later works. While Jagsir in *Marhi da Diva* falls prey to the machinations of a beguiling feudal power play, Hira Dei in *Kuvela* 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* and Moddan in *Adhdh Chananhi Rat*. Unlike Jagsir, both Bishna and Moddan not only refuse to become accomplices in the process of their own marginalization but also make efforts to rise in revolt against this process. They even go so far as to interrogate the dehumanising social and 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's in recognition of this fact that *Parsa* 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 to make an attempt to reclaim the diverse and complex strands of his cultural memory within the scope of a single work of fiction, with some measure of success, is indeed, extremely rare. And if such an example does exist in contemporary Punjabi literature, it's Gurdial Singh's much-celebrated novel *Parsa*.

There's both a touch of authenticity and self-absorption about Gurdial Singh's ability to fashion a wide range of human characters. But he doesn't ever allow his interest in or sympathy for his character(s) to either overwhelm or undermine his primary commitment to the social concerns. For him, man is essentially a social and historical being. As a natural corollary, his characters remain intermediate agents, individualised yet typical concretisations of the context in which they live and operate.

Almost all his novels are set amidst the shifting contours of the Malwa region whose economic backwardness sometimes obscures its cultural richness. What is significant is that despite Gurdial Singh's emphasis upon local colours, sounds, and smells, Malwa manages to become in his fiction a microcosm of the world within which a larger drama of human existence plays itself out. Working within this framework, he has managed to create richly evocative vignettes of rural life, complete with its distinctive codes, customs, and conventions. Always alive to its throbbing pulse and rhythm, he sees a village not as static but an ever-changing, dynamic unit. It's the dialectics of tradition and modernity that tends to give an overarching expression to his insistent social concern.

*Marhi da Diva* relocates the twin questions of ownership and dispossession within the ambit of the Green Revolution and redefines them. *Kuvla* probes into the problem of widow remarriage in an orthodox Hindu society. *Rete di Ikk Muththi* is a portrayal of how the blind pursuit of materialism leads to a slow erosion of human values. *Anhe Ghorhe da Dan* bemoans the loss of kinship culture, casting a look at the issue of shrinking land holding and the attendant problems of forced migration, unemployment, and destitution.

Set in pre-Independence India, *Unhoye* records the impact of early forays into industrialization with a rare precision, and how dehumanisation creeps in. Unlike his other works, *Parsa* is not so tangibly located in a time-space continuum. As the main focus of the novel is on reclaiming the rich literary and cultural sources and history of Punjab, social reality impinges on it very marginally. After having created the narratives of oppression in his earlier novels, Gurdial Singh finally breaks free in *Parsa*, moving rather self-assuredly towards a narrative of emancipation. For those readers who have walked with him through the fire and brimstone of inferno that Jagsir, Moddan, and Bishna live through, *Parsa* brings the ultimate, much-awaited Dantesque vision of Paradisio.

Even when he does portray social reality in all its passion, as he does in his earlier novels, he takes care not to allow the portrayal to become morbid. A certain degree of poeticity 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 Diva*, *Rete di Ikk Muththi*, and *Adhdh Chananhi Rat* sometimes acquire a suggestive power far beyond their immediate context. It's his poetic vision that ultimately liberates and offers a transcendent edge to everything he portrays.

Nowhere does it become more conspicuous than in his all-enveloping view of life. On being asked about it once, Gurdial Singh is reported to have quipped, 'Had I not taken to writing, I would have probably exploded. So, my life-view is nothing if not tragic.'<sup>6</sup> For him, tragedy is not a by-product of a fortuitous set of circumstances or an ingrained personal failing. It is an expression, even a triumphant assertion of man's unending search for the classical values of honour, dignity, and self-respect. Such a view of life confers no heroism; it can't even induce despair or defeatism.

In novel after novel, Gurdial Singh succeeds in renewing our faith in the irrepressible spirit of human nature and the power of human endurance. On being asked how he felt on receiving Jnanpith, the most coveted literary award, he is believed to have said, 'It's a recognition of those who live in my pages.'<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, only Gurdial Singh could have justifiably made such a claim. In his case, Jnanpith is not just a personal triumph of an individual, but of all those who are still fighting for the retrieval of honor and dignity that history has denied them through the ages.

### **An Overview of Short Fiction**

Before I had read Gurdial Singh's stories, I had known him only as a novelist. My introduction to him as a novelist was also a fortuitous one. I had translated a few stories from Punjabi and was scouting around for a publisher. My colleague and friend, Pushpinder Syal, happened to mention this fact to the editor of Macmillan India, whom she had met during one of the conferences. Around that time, Macmillan India was working out the finer details of a series called *Modern Indian Novels in Translation*, a massive, five-year long project whereby fifty-five novels were to be translated and published from as many as eleven Indian languages. Expressing her inability to publish the stories, the editor had, by way of a counter-proposal, suggested that they would certainly be interested if someone were to translate a well-known Punjabi novel into English. That is how Pushpinder and I had ended up collaborating on *Adhdh Chananhi Rat* (called *Night of The Half-Moon* in its English rendering), a Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel of Gurdial Singh. Of all the major living writers in Punjabi, how and why the choice had ultimately narrowed down to Gurdial Singh is, of course, part of another much longer story.

While working my way through his novels, (apart from *Night of the Half-Moon*, *Parsa* and *The Survivors* are the other novels that I've translated) what really struck me about Gurdial Singh's fiction was its finely crafted minimalism, which undoubtedly has a rare sculptor's touch. This minimalism is evident not only in the way in which he designs the mise-en-scene of his novels but also in the selection of his subject matter, his skilful use of the language, and his



microscopic vision of life. The real strength of his fiction, it appears to me, doesn't lie so much in creating larger than life images, but in crafting living monuments out of the ordinariness of our lives and the inanities we often find appalling.

A true miniaturist, he often applies small, finely tuned strokes, making capital out of the moments we are rather dismissive about. The 'arching of an eyebrow,' 'twitching of a lip,' or 'rippling of the calf-muscles'—these are not simply physical gestures in Gurdial Singh's fictional repertoire. These are, in fact, the very soul and substance of a man's inner world, signs that reveal the seething ruptures in his soul, authorial interventions into the little known realm of his character's unconscious. He believes in paring his language down to its bare essentials, pruning away the excesses with the ease of a meticulous craftsman. A hallmark of his classicism and often a critical reader's delight, this pared language could also turn into a translator's nightmare.

Nowhere does this aspect of Gurdial Singh's writing become so transparent as in his short fiction. For someone whose self-chosen calling is that of a minimalist, short fiction certainly does provide unlimited possibilities. And without a doubt, one could say that he has, over the decades, explored all these possibilities to their utmost, as my discussion of some of his stories a little later would easily bear out. One irony of literary history is that Gurdial Singh has earned almost all of his plaudits as a novelist, while he is known to have written some of the most memorable stories in Punjabi.

With the exception of a few of his stories, which have been translated and published in newspapers and literary journals, the major gamut of his work is still not available in English. This is what prompted me to put together a collection of Gurdial Singh's stories in English translation significantly titled *Earthy Tones*<sup>8</sup>. Among other things, I did it specifically with the idea of debunking some of the popular notions about Punjabi literature in general and Gurdial Singh's fiction in particular. For instance, it is often believed, for whatever reason, that Gurdial Singh's range is severely limited, and that he chooses to restrict himself to the portrayal of village life and rural-based characters. There is no doubt that his fiction is, by and large, village-centred but it would be wrong to assume that it fails to cross its self-imposed boundaries.

A typical Indian or a Punjabi village is no longer an insulated place or a haven that can't be intruded upon or penetrated. Its boundaries have already been breached and violated. Assailed by an invisible threat of urbanism, the village is redefining its relationship with its cultural other as well as its own exclusionist identity. And this is something that Gurdial Singh knows with an insight only an insider can possibly claim to possess. Set in an undefined urban location, *A Season of No Return* is an exploration of the psychological changes that often result from this unequal interaction between the village and the town. Kauri comes to live with her son to help her daughter-in-law through her period of confinement.

In total defiance of stereotypical characterisation, Santokh, her son, is shown to be a perfect picture of obedience and so is her daughter-in-law. Both are more

than willing to do their duty by her and yet somewhere deep inside, Kauri is not comfortable with herself. Santokh and his wife attend to all her physical needs, including the most minor ones, yet are completely oblivious to her deeper, emotional needs as much as they are of their own. Caught in a circular motion, they seem to have made a habit of leading a clockwork life, which Kauri finds so intolerable that she constantly yearns to join her husband back in the village. What ultimately snaps the thread for her is the crass, commercial attitude of her son, who decides to send her back only when her physical condition worsens. It is within such a frame of interpersonal relationships that Gurdial Singh seeks to put much larger questions in focus for us.

*The Watch Isn't Working Anymore* is another story in this collection which deals with how the winds of change sweep through the village, rather surreptitiously, ripping apart its secure and stable network of relationships. Kundu is a retired, army personnel who has raised his only son, Kelu, by mortgaging the only piece of land he had. When people point out that it was a mistake on his part to do so, he retorts, 'Property has meaning only so long as people are around.' It is around this simple belief that he has built his entire life, and what is much worse, he treats his personal belief as the only barometer of all human relationships. Unknown to him, his son has already discarded this value system and moved on ahead. Educated and employed in a town, he now lives by an entirely new code in which visiting home is more of a ritual, not an expression of love; and the only way to express feelings is to bring his father expensive gifts. The manner in which Gurdial Singh has tried to capture the child-like excitement and enthusiasm of an old father is certainly a comment on his characterisation, stamped as it is with rare sensitivity and psychological depth. The same 'watch,' which had made Kundu feel that he was ahead of others in the village ultimately leaves him in a time warp. On being denied the simple joy of participating in his son's wedding, Kundu feels that the watch has stopped working for him, and that he has been left way behind in the march of time.

In *A House with Two Rooms*, however, the focus is entirely urban, both in terms of location and characterisation. A grim and sordid drama of urban nightmare that often runs so close to our lives, regardless of whether we live in a mofussil town or a metropolis, is what unfolds before our eyes as the story progresses. Nameless characters belonging to a lower middle class family live out their cramped, pigeon holed existence in two drab, cheerless rooms. Seen through the eyes of a retiringly passive husband, it's an extremely graphic account of how, despite all the good intentions on his part, his repeated attempts at spending a holiday quietly by himself, reading, are doomed to failure.

On the face of it, it might seem to be either the work of his overbearing wife, the financial demands of his adolescent, though loving, daughters, or the quiet but disturbing presence of his old, ailing father. But the real culprit, it turns out, is the oppressively limited space, which constantly throws them across each other's path and yet fails to bring them together in any real sense. Somewhat like the inhabitants of Dante's *Inferno*, each one of them remains locked up in a

painful awareness of his own condition. And the extent to which their loneliness has left them dehumanised is not revealed until the old father ultimately dies.

Among others, it's in *The Dam*, *Silent Rage*, *A Black Bull*, *The Cattle Fair* and *A Haunted House* that Gurdial Singh returns to his familiar locale, the village, in a more explicit way. So evocative is his picture of a typical Punjabi village that even those amongst us who have never been inside a village somehow begin to feel that we have lived at least part of our lives there. The sights, sounds, and smells are all there, but more significantly, so are the warning signals of the dangers a village is often exposed to, both from within and without. It's the imminent threat of flood looming large over a small, unprotected village that becomes thunderously real in *The Dam*. The story seems to suggest that this kind of threat can still be guarded, if not managed or fought against. From this perspective, the lone image of Pakhar keeping a vigil in the fields through the dark, ominous night becomes unforgettably heroic. What Gurdial Singh is actually at pains to point out is there is another kind of a threat as well, equally real and perhaps more dangerous, that is slowly corroding the very edges of our social life. And this threat either comes from the local politicians out to exploit the situation or from the administrators, revelling in their own apathy. It has become such an integral part of our lives that we don't even see it as a threat any longer.

Not the one to simply bemoan this fact, Gurdial Singh prefers to use short story as a medium for sensitising his readers about the issues that already are affecting or are likely to affect their lives, directly or indirectly. There is a definite revolutionary potential in his stories that no discerning reader can afford to miss. At one level, *The Cattle Fair* may appear to be a purely descriptive story, giving a first hand account of an insider's view of an annual, village fair. At another subtler level, however, it is about the imperceptible, though not entirely implausible, process of psychological transformation. Two illiterate brothers, Santu and Pala, who have never perceived themselves as distinct from the cattle, set out to see the fair. At least one of them returns home, changed. After having borne the tyranny and oppression of his own father for several years, he now decides to raise a banner of revolt against him. The message that comes through loud and clear is that regardless of the where and in what form it is found, whether in the home or outside, by father or politician, oppression must always be fought and resisted.

Nothing appears to disturb Gurdial Singh so much as the abject surrender that human beings often make to their circumstances. Resistance appears to be a key word in his vocabulary and it is this mantra of resistance that he recites in one story after another. Sometimes, it takes on the visibly disturbing image of Bhunda, the dumb one, rushing headlong into revenge with little or no thought as to the consequences as in *Silent Rage*. And sometimes, it becomes a pathetic image of an able-bodied Attra moping over his fate, crying out in despair and helplessness, 'Why did you send me on this earth as a man? It would have been much better to be born a bull,' as in *A Black Bull*.

However, if neither the sociology of resistance is grasped fully nor the enemy identified clearly, as happens to be the case with Melu in *A Haunted House*, then sanity is the price that one may have to pay for it. It is no coincidence that most of those who are perceived to be the agents of resistance in Gurdial Singh's short stories also happen to be sharing an inalienable relationship with their soil. It is almost as if the village, shorn of its over-romanticised image, stands transformed into the ultimate battleground for resistance in all its forms.

Equally, it is seen as a fertile soil for some of the worst human evils imaginable. Almost all the stories scream out that the acts of human deception and treachery are as common here as elsewhere. Gurdial Singh's interest in village, its life, and people does not merely perform a sociological function, but has a definite transcendent function too. He tends to view it as a microcosm of the world where all kinds of human conflicts and predicaments play themselves out. Such an element of universalism accounts for the timeless appeal of his short fiction.

Among other things, Gurdial Singh has often been criticised for not giving enough space in his fiction to the representation of women. Both his Punjabi readers and his long-time critics believe that women simply hover on the margins of his fiction. Women do not enter the centre-stage of action nor do they ever come vibrantly alive in his work. While finalising *Earthy Tones*, I took special care to give as much space to the women-oriented stories as I did to others.

While translating *The Karir Branch*, I was particularly struck by the sensitivity and psychological insight with which Gurdial Singh has created Balwanto's character. Naturally rebellious and fiercely independent, Balwanto finds herself in some kind of a psychological trap when her husband manages to get her to promise that, whatever the provocation, she would never ever raise her voice in the presence of his parents. Stuck in her throat like a thorny bush of *karir*, this promise keeps lacerating her inner being for eleven long years. Once famous in the entire village for her incomparable beauty, she slowly begins to wilt and wither. And one day, when the thread of her supreme patience finally snaps, out leaps *Kalka Mai*, thirsting for revenge.

In the hands of a lesser writer, the story would have become another variation on a stereotypical torture and revenge theme, but not so with Gurdial Singh. It is his fine understanding of human mind and motivations, which ultimately enables him to go beyond the expectations of an ordinary reader. Though one may have reservations about the final resolution of the story, it is hard not to agree with the contention that Balwanto is caught in a classic, ageless conflict which neither permits her to live with the promise nor without it. The complexity of her predicament lies in the fact that she neither wants to be untrue to herself nor her husband. Her suffering has something almost Grecian about it, and so has her tragedy.

If it is a subversive patriarchy that seems to work against Balwanto, Maghar's wife in *Price of a Bride* is shown to be a victim, not of a system, but

of another woman's jealousy. Led into believing that Maghar's wife is the one responsible for ensnaring her own husband, Santi undergoes a rapid transformation from a loving, affectionate wife into a cranky, hard-boiled nag. Interestingly enough, she doesn't quite understand the reasons for this dramatic change in her own temperament. Initially, she directs all her venom against her husband, but when that doesn't help matters much, she throws Maghi's wife out of the house, only to regret her decision later. Driven by her blind, unidentifiable impulses, Santi becomes both a helpless victim and a repentant victimiser.

In *Ambo*, however, we find Gurdial Singh talking about a strange kind of sorority between two women, one old and authoritarian, and the other young and fragile, both of whom have a purely chance encounter in the compartment of a train. Thrown together into proximity, which both find rather hateful and revolting in the beginning, slowly they grow into a warm understanding of each other, even of their own selves. Not only this, the younger one who had always been something of a coward, finds sudden tidal waves of confidence surging up inside her. What is, indeed, remarkable is that so much happens without too many words passing between them.

The success of this story lies as much in the subtle manner in which Gurdial Singh makes both women catalysts' of each other's inner change as it is in his ability to twist this ordinary human situation into an extraordinary one of philosophical interest. Going beyond its immediate appeal, it turns into an extended reflection upon the age-old, philosophical question of how and in what possible ways could mind and body interact and influence each other.

To bring philosophy into our lives is something that does call for very special narrative skills on the part of any writer. And no less skilful or formidable is the task of portraying not the sentimental love of youth, but a calm, mature feeling that grows between two people, equally helpless and vulnerable. *Bonding* is about how, sometimes, sharing a few moments with a person one has loved and lost could be much more meaningful than an entire loveless life spent together. Though Bantu and Jai Kaur meet at the station unexpectedly and part soon after, their silhouettes framed against the setting sun or making their way slowly to the village remain etched on our minds forever.

What is praiseworthy is that their meeting is free of hysterics of emotion and the painful reminders of broken promises. Surprisingly, there is a lingering suspicion, a strange inability to trust someone who had made 'trust' possible in the first place. A bond buried in time is resurrected temporarily and it leaves behind, not a trail of nostalgia, but a strange fulfilment that only a deep bonding could possibly yield. Behind this ability to handle a potentially volatile situation with utmost restraint and control, one detects the hand of a master craftsman.

### **On Translating Gurdial Singh**

My association with Gurdial Singh's fiction goes back to 1991, when Pushpinder and I were commissioned by Macmillan (India) to translate his

Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *Adhdh Chananhi Rat*. Since then, I have translated three of his novels and a collection of short stories, too. Before I start theorizing about my experience of translating Gurdial Singh's fiction, we need to understand the specificities of Punjabi literature in general and Gurdial Singh's oeuvre in particular.

The tradition of Punjabi writing has maintained a vital, living contact with a much older oral tradition. However, it is not at all easy to map out this relationship as it has presumably run its own distinctive course in different genres available in Punjabi. Even without going into its intricacies, which would undoubtedly call for a much larger discussion, one may safely suggest that almost all Punjabi writers through the ages have tried to negotiate this oral and literary space in their own distinctive manner.

However, in the case of Gurdial Singh, this particular relationship takes on a very specific form; it surfaces as an unfailing insistence upon the spoken word. Being firmly rooted in the soil, he never fails to bring alive the natural rhythm and resonance of the spoken word. While this lends to his portrayal of situations and characters a rare authenticity and dramatic urgency, it also imparts to his fiction a certain quality of earthiness, even classical charm and simplicity. Largely recognised as one of the strengths of Gurdial Singh's art of fiction-making, it is this quality which often turns out to be a major source of anxiety for his translator(s).

In my early encounters with Gurdial Singh's fiction, it was this challenge of having to render into English the speech of his rustic characters, with all its inflections and tonal qualities, that both enthralled and teased me at the same time. Had it simply been a question of finding English equivalencies for the local idiom used by his characters, it wouldn't have really mattered so much. Translation, as any translator worth his salt would easily concede, is not merely a game of finding linguistic equivalencies at the semantic or the syntactic levels. Often the local idiom is so deeply embedded in the cultural layers that any attempt at a simple rendering could, at best, turn into a contraction or a reduction and at worst, a deflection, if not a total loss of meaning. Besides the syntactic structures in the two languages, Punjabi and English operate so differently that often the process of transmission from one to the other may threaten to become entirely obfuscating.

Whichever way we choose to think about it, the loss is invariably of those cultural specificities that are intrinsically and inherently resistant to any act of translation, however shrewd or strategic. While self-reflexivity is an inescapable fact of any translator's job, it doesn't always become a route to self-awareness. Even in those cases where it does become so, the practise of translation may often throw up challenges, which no amount of anticipation or awareness might actually be able to help tide over. Faced with some of these limitations, the task of a translator, especially if he is seeking to capture the 'spirit of the original,' may actually become not easy but all the more difficult, even formidable.

Often 'purists' among readers tend to question my translations on the grounds that they are heavily interlarded with the original Punjabi words and

expressions. While some view this tendency as an expression of total lack of imagination or taste, the others choose to interpret it as an expression of aesthetic failure on my part, a desperate attempt to save the face by biting off the nose. All that can be said here is that in all translations of Gurdial Singh's fiction, long and short, I have consistently taken recourse to the original Punjabi words as a matter of conscious policy and strategy; not as the last manoeuvre to find a way out of the impasse. Kinship markers, forms of salutation, exclamatory words, and sometimes names of plants, trees, seasons, rituals and ceremonies are so deeply embedded in the specificities of the source culture that all efforts at rendering them into the target language prove self-defeating.

At this juncture, we ought to remind ourselves of Walter Benjamin's famous words that not just translation, but rather all forms of writing are necessarily a deflection away from 'the purity of the original.'<sup>9</sup> Seen from this perspective, translation is never completely done in the target language, as is often assumed, but in what George Steiner describes as the 'third language' and often in what Homi K. Bhabha calls the 'third space.' If it's the search for the 'universal' in specific human experiences that makes translation possible, it's the cultural specificity, often eminently untranslatable, that adds to the innumerable woes of a translator.

Hamstrung by such situations, a translator may find himself up against an impenetrable wall or an insurmountable cul-de-sac. Gayatri Spivak, an eminent critic and a distinguished translator herself, has pointed out the need to recognise the whole area of 'untranslatability,' embedded in the archeology of each seemingly translatable text. This is particularly true of Gurdial Singh as he often writes in a dialect, popularly known as the Malwai dialect, which is heavily interlarded with local and regional specificities and therefore is extremely difficult to render into standard English. What makes it all the more challenging is the fact that often Gurdial Singh creates (as he does in *The Survivors*) a 'polyphonic novel' with a variety of registers, styles, and voices. While translating different dialects into homogenized English, I have tried, as far as possible, to alert the reader about the distinctness of dialects by taking recourse to para-textual strategies. This is how I have tried to negotiate the problematic areas of 'untranslatability' while working my way through Gurdial Singh's fiction.

All along I have been conscious of the fact that far less than a mechanical activity (or simply a matter of finding lexical and/or semantic equivalences in two different language-systems), translation is a highly self-reflexive, political act. The politics of translation is inevitable in a situation where the source and target languages are as highly differentiated as Punjabi and English, even inequitably placed and distributed against each other in terms of their reach, spread, power and dominance. Being a dominant, global language, English is inherently privileged and if a translator, too, by accident or design, begins to collude in this process of domination by adopting 'domesticating' and not 'foreignizing' method,<sup>10</sup> the resultant de-culturation of the source language/culture is almost inevitable. And this, in turn, is bound to defeat the

very purpose for which translations are often undertaken. By scrupulously adhering to the 'foreignizing' method and stubbornly refusing to make egregious concessions to English, not only have I tried to be partial to my own language Punjabi (for which I'm not in the least defensive), but also demonstrated the way in which my 'politics' essentially functions.

Though theorists like Lawrence Venuti have done their utmost to interrogate and problematize the much-abused notion of 'translator's invisibility' (there is an attempt to re-assert and establish the rights and prestige of the translators, something that history has stoutly denied them), I do believe that 'translator' is quintessentially a 'medium' and not a 'source.' If he has to find a new garment for the body of an old text, it's not only important for him to hide behind the skin and mask of the author, but equally important to share in the world-view, perspective, and ideology of the author. After all, a translator has to walk in step with another, tune into another's rhythm and grace and, if possible, even create a world that is neither entirely his nor anyone else's.

Had it not been so, I probably wouldn't have returned to Gurdial Singh's fiction with the kind of unflinching religiosity I have. Translating Gurdial Singh's fiction has been an eminently gratifying, though not a less challenging experience, for that reason. Perhaps, it was so gratifying only because at every juncture it threw up new and entirely unexpected challenges. His fiction has this unerring tendency to knock a translator, a professional more than an amateur, completely out of his complacency. 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. In a way, the challenge is inherent in the fact that Punjabi and English do not merely represent two distinct, not necessarily antithetical, languages or linguistic systems, but two different cultural worlds as well. All odds notwithstanding, if I continue to translate Gurdial Singh's fiction, (presently, I'm working on the translation of his autobiography, which is in two parts), it's only because across the barriers of age, time, and space, I somehow feel a deep sense of kinship and affiliation with him and his work, which is as hard to explain, as it is difficult to decipher. Perhaps, it has something to do with the *Punjabiyaat* we have inherited or a common dream we both share, albeit tacitly, that we must ultimately leave this world a much better place than we found it; he, through his stupendous creations, and I, through my attempts at translating them.

### **Conclusion**

Though Gurdial Singh may have started off as a local or regional novelist of a small state of India called the Punjab, but today his stature has definitely grown far beyond the regional, even national boundaries. His fiction has been so extensively translated into the English language that now it has actually become possible for us to assess his work within the larger framework of world literature, something we couldn't have possibly done earlier when he was anchored only within the limited domain of his own indigenous literary



traditions. Having spent more than twenty-five years of my life reading, researching, teaching, interpreting and evaluating a large body of world literature, I dare say that Gurdial Singh can easily be placed among the best we have had in any of the world languages in the twentieth century.

Not only has he exposed himself to the best that was available to him, he very studiously imbibed and internalised the best that he could from whatever he read in world fiction. If he learnt his craft of fiction-making (as he has often conceded in his personal interviews) from such great masters as Gorky, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Steinback, Maugham, Hemingway and Irving Stone, he has emerged as a story-teller extraordinaire by virtue of the rich literary and cultural legacy he is likely to leave behind.

If the history of world literature is ever attempted, I'm confident that Gurdial Singh's name would appear alongside that of Mahfouz, Marquez, Kundera and Simin Daneshvar. In comparing Gurdial Singh's fictional oeuvre to that of the Nobel Prize Winners, I'm not just being churlish as it is both my conviction and belief that once Gurdial Singh's fiction is disseminated, circulated, and evaluated within the international academia, it wouldn't be possible for us to deny him either the international critical acclaim or the much-wider readership and recognition, something he pre-eminently deserves.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. A. D. Lindsay (London: The David Campbell Publishers, 1992), 282-286. Though Plato introduces this comparison between the painter/poet and carpenter in these specific pages of Book X, it constitutes part of his much larger discussion on the Theory of Forms, which he develops through *The Republic*.

<sup>2</sup> This biographical information has been accessed directly from the author and is based upon whatever he has often shared about his life in several of the interviews recorded with him. Most of this material is in my personal collection/archives.

<sup>3</sup> This entire discussion derives itself from my reading of several histories of the Punjabi literature. However, the section on Gurdial Singh is based upon my reading of his work. For more comprehensive analysis, see Kartar Singh Duggal and Sant Singh Sekhon, *A History of Punjabi Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in the postscript to Gurdial Singh's *Marhi da Diva* (Chandigarh: Lokgeet Prakashan), 167. Though the original quotation is in Hindi, it has been

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reproduced in the text in Punjabi and the English translation in this case, as in several other similar cases, is mine.

<sup>5</sup> Gurdial Singh, *Parsa*, trans., Rana Nayar, (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2000), 242.

<sup>6</sup> As quoted to the author in an interview published in *The Tribune*, Sunday Reading, June 16, 1996, 5.

<sup>7</sup> As quoted to the author in an unpublished interview.

<sup>8</sup> Gurdial Singh, *Earthy Tones: A Collection of Best Short Stories*, trans., Rana Nayar (New Delhi: Fiction House, 2003). Major part of the discussion in this section on short fiction derives itself from an extended, critical introduction I wrote for this collection. All the stories referred to in this section were originally included in this anthology and discussed threadbare in the introduction.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator,' in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1979), 69-82.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995). In this book and several other writings of his, Venuti has discussed these two methods/strategies of translation at great length.