

## Women as Victims of Poverty and Patriarchy: A Feminist Study of Gurdial Singh's Selected novels

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**Abstract:** Gurdial Singh is a renowned and celebrated Punjabi novelist known for his contribution to Punjabi literature. He has to his credit many awards and accolades. He can be called a regional novelist like James Joyce, Thomas Hardy and R. K. Narayan who have presented realistic scenario of their fictional or realistic regions. Gurdial Singh has been the spokesperson of rural agrarian society of Punjab. This research paper deals with his female characters from his works- *The Last Flicker*, *Parsa* and *The Survivors*. He presents a nuanced portrayal of women in patriarchal society. His female characters are traditional yet resilient. They are grounded in rural socio-cultural fabric of agrarian Punjabi society. They are victims of harsh realities, poverty, oppressive social setup, and societal expectations. At the same time, they are epitomes of tolerance and quiet rebellion. The objective of the present research paper is to highlight how the women characters are underrated and their plight has been highlighted with the help of Feminist Theory. Close reading of the texts and evaluation of critical discourses had been the integral part of research methodology. Through his female characters, Singh has emphasized the inner strength of women in comparison to the flawed personalities of male characters. His works also highlight the patriarchal structure of society and how the women are agents of change and societal dynamics. However, Singh's female characters have been critiqued for limiting women's aspirations within limits of society. Despite this, his portrayal of women is empathetic. Some of his characters are flat but some evolve with story and grow stronger during the course of the plot.

**Keywords:** tapestry, agrarian rural society, resilience, societal dynamics.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is the record of peoples' expressions in black and white from time to time. Through the texts, we come across millions of individuals who live their lives silently, submitting to the circumstances. But those dead voices come to life when the revolutionary writers act as their spokespersons and pen down their sadistic sagas. It is only through the words on the pages that those suppressed, repressed and oppressed voices find an expression and a voice. Therefore, literature becomes the voice of the voiceless, a vision for the blind, a sound for the deaf, an expression for the dumb, and above all, an invigorating binding force of life for the society and societal kinships. It has been rightly remarked that "Literature acts as a spokesperson of those whose voice has been muted by the shackles of society" (Bhullar 29). The gap between the visible and the invisible, the real and the unreal, truth and false, dream and reality is bridged by the writers who write about the real and realistic realms of humanity. This research paper focuses on those female characters of Gurdial Singh's selected novels- *The Last Flicker*, *The Survivors* and *Parsa* who are victims of poverty and patriarchy.

Gurdial Singh is one of the most celebrated writers of Punjab whose novels have been translated into English and adapted into movies also. His novels are deeply rooted in rural Punjab. Through his novels, he presents agrarian life of agriculturalist community. His narrative style is simple and straight forward. His female characters are stronger than his male characters though ultimately, they are caught within the vicious cycle of poverty and patriarchy. The female characters in Gurdial Singh's selected works represent thousands of those individuals like Adam, Eve and Satan of *Paradise Lost* written by John Milton who "are not allowed to exercise free will" (Bhullar 32).

The female characters in Gurdial Singh's novels seem to be occupying a crucial space that means they are an indispensable part of the social structure, which is true too because no society can flourish without the women folks. Yet they are marginalised to an extent that they portray "the other". In fact, the female characters are the centre as well as the periphery in the narratives of Gurdial Singh. Their lives are woven into the social and cultural fabric of the society. On the surface level, they appear to be reticent, restricted and full of resentment but on the deeper level, they stand out because of their inner strength, form of resistance and silent resilience. The present paper examines the presentation of women in Gurdial Singh's novels, depicting their strong disposition in contrast to the meek male counterparts. His female characters can be seen challenging the circumstances and societal norms of their times. These ordinary women are symbolic of extraordinary courage, strength and revolutionary rebellion. It also seeks to analyse in detail the representation of women in Gurdial Singh's novels within the restricted space of male dominated society.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gurdial Singh has given a new direction to Punjabi novel but he is not free from narrative flaws. As a writer, he offers a profound and deep exploration of Punjab in its rural setting with his powerful and deeply moving narratives. All his works are deeply rooted in Punjabi traditions but sometimes too realistic to be true. His novels are not just the stories of human beings and their relationships with land but his narrative goes beyond the socio-economic conditions of his characters. Different scholars have reviewed his novels with different perspectives.

Amar Tarsem And Sushil Kumar (2006) have pointed out in the Preface to the book *Re-Readings of Gurdial Singh's Fiction* by Paramjit Singh Ramana that Gurdial Singh often gives voice to the oppressed classes and marginalized communities and in this way his contribution never goes unnoticed. They have called him the author who focuses on the lives of the subalterns and those downtrodden individuals whom society pays negligible attention but as a committed writer Gurdial Singh makes it his duty to demonstrate the "struggles faced by the peasants" (Tarsem and Kumar vii).

Desraj Kali (2016) in an online article titled as *Remembering Gurdial Singh* asserts that Gurdial Singh is undoubtedly the "writer of realism" who shall always be reminded of for the three things he is committed to firstly, the past of Punjab; secondly for the language and the form of his novels; and thirdly for the "Cultural Consciousness" of Punjab (Kali 2)".

Rana Nayar (2017) has remarked in his article with the title- Gurdial Singh, Voice of the Voiceless that was published in Economic and Political Weekly that Gurdial Singh as the writer has been the passionate voice of the poor and marginalized communities and poor peasants, landless labourers and downtrodden females come directly under this category. Prof. Rana Nayar has translated

three novels and 14 short stories of Gurdial Singh in addition to some books and articles dedicated to him and has called Gurdial Singh, a “voice of the voiceless” and “*messiah* of the marginalised” (Nayar 25).

Sarika Goyal (2019) has written a research paper on the title- The Fictitious World of Gurdial Singh and the Theme of Celibacy in which she has pointed out that females are required in every male’s life and Jagseer is devoid of a life partner because of his caste and poor economic condition and most importantly because his mother carries the stigma of elopement. The son bears the brunt and does not get a suitable wife and it is also important to note down how the single males are disrespected in society stating “the free willed celibates are rejected and often mocked at” (Goyal 113).

Narender Kumar (2019) in his research article “Indian State, Land Politics and the Dalit Political Imagination of Gurdial Singh” pinpoints that his characters in the novel *Unhoye* (The Survivors) tend to move to the newly made market places in urban areas to enjoy economic independence away from the fetters of society but no such freedom is available to the female characters. The scholar states that “the state is the central agency” that discriminates against the marginalized communities (Kumar 4).

Another important scholar Madhav Nayar in his famous article written in the context of *Unhoye* (The Survivors) and recent farmers’ protest against the Farm Bills issued by the Central Government states that the novel is about the encounter between the rich and the poor, land owners and farm-hands and about a vicious circle of poverty and politics in which “powerless women are bought and sold in marriages, and workers wrecked into anomie” (Nayar 8).

The marginalization of women in literature is not a new concept, rather it comes under the radar of feminist theory. The review of literature cannot be complete without referring to the concept of marginalization under the light of Feminist Literary Theory, representation of the females in Punjabi Literature and gender concerns in the selected novels of Gurdial Singh.

### **3. RESEARCH GAP**

As far as research gap is concerned, most of the novels written by Gurdial Singh display major concerns as caste subjugation, realistic portrayal of poverty, rural social set-up, relationships and dependency on land, struggle between the owners and worker who toil the land and so on. But while going through the scholarly articles it was felt that there has been limited analysis of novels of Gurdial Singh. The neglect of gender concerns has provided a big research gap and I zeroed at the concept of marginalization of women. The feminist reading of the selected works of the author has given me an insight into the layered oppression. Lack of critical discourses on gender issues in his novels has been an important part of research gap. There is ample material on how the males are suffering but a little and limited is known about the internal and societal struggles of the female characters. This negligence of female characters in the novels prompted me to study and explore this topic highlighting the side-lined women characters in the male dominated world of rural life.

### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Gurdial Singh has tried his best to define the Punjabi rural life in its true sense but he failed to produce larger than life characters like William Shakespearean tragedies. His male characters are ruling the narratives but they do not display the qualities of Aristotelian Hero. On the other hand, his female

characters stand out as the most remarkable creations of their own kind. But it is very important to understand his female characters from the point of view of gender, equality, status, opportunities and identity in a male dominated society. His women characters can be seen navigating between the opposite forces of society and personal aspirations. Therefore, to carry out the research process, Theory of Feminism has been applied. Feminist literary criticism gained ground in 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir introduced the concept of “otherness” in the context of females with the book *The Second Sex*. Elaine Showalter (1977) is known for her three phase categories-the Feminine phase, the feminist phase and the female phase. Feminist philosopher, Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity as conveyed through her book *Gender Trouble*, 1990 discusses gender being different from biological sex and being based on social performance fixed by the society. These concepts and theory have provided a clear lens to analyse the marginalized condition of female characters in Gurdial Singh’s selected novels. Textual analysis with the close reading of the texts has been the primary method of discussion. Comparison with other characters has also been taken into consideration. Critical analysis and interpretative methods have also been used to conduct the research.

## 5. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

- To discuss and analyse the marginalised representation of women in Gurdial Singh’s selected novels such as *The Last Flicker*, *The Survivors* and *Parsa* examining the role of female characters and their significance in the narrative.
- To explore the feminist concerns and discuss the impact of patriarchy and their poor economic conditions on the lives of women characters.
- To compare the depiction of women in the novels with the perspectives of Feminist Literary Theory focussing on the famous feminist theorists and their viewpoints, highlighting the need for gender-conscious, interpretations of texts written by male-authors

## 6. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Gurdial Singh’ novel, *The Last Flicker* is a remarkable narration that presents the harsh conditions of rural Punjab in particular the struggle of the marginalised communities and sections of society. In fact, the novel revolves around its protagonist named Jagseer, who is a victim of social injustice and oppression. Even though Jagseer is called the protagonist of the novel yet he appears to be an anti-hero devoid of heroic qualities which Jeona Maud, Dulla Bhatti, Punnu, Mirjha, Ranjha possess proudly. In contrast, it is the female character Bhani who is stronger than him. Bhani is more expressive and assertive than the so-called Dalit Hero-Jagseer. he is often seen powerless in the face of harsh rigid circumstances whereas Bhani is bold enough to address his silent advances and dormant expressions of love. Gurdial Singh has created a melodramatic hero in the novel who is not ready to fight against the system like Bhani. Bhani represents the resistance in real sense. But she could not realise her dreams of entertaining a lover of her choice because of constraints of her married life. She is beaten up her Nikka, her husband out of suspicion of an illicit relation with Jagseer.

Another remarkable female character in *The Last Flicker* is Nandi, mother of Jagseer, who had eloped when she was young to get married to her lover, Thola and bore the brunt of her family when she was excommunicated who declared, “Okay Nandi...you are dead for us and we are dead for you;”

(Singh 14). Nandi too appears to be bolder than the male counterparts who took the decision of spending her life with the man of her choice without considering the societal norms. But later on, Nandi had to suffer a lot because of her decision, her caste and her class. Jagseer could not get a wife in life only because his parents specially his mother eloped.

The women in **The Survivors** highlight the exploitation of women's labour in physical and emotional terms and how their contributions often go unnoticed. Even in a book review by some anonymous writer, this novel has been called the story of two brothers and here the question arises why has the contribution of Daya Kaur undermined. Even when she along with her husband and his brother comes out of her house as the proclaimed offender, she walks with dignity and courage which is not digested by the villagers. She has stood by her husband as a protective shield, he too respects and regards her like a true companion but if we consider her role in larger society, she as a female is ignored and neglected. The novelist states about their relationship that has stood steady over the past 30 years during which "she stood by him like a man, shoulder to shoulder, through every crisis of life" (Singh 78).

The sidelined females in the novel **Parsa** – like Beero, Parsa's wife who died because of ill health and how when the women of the neighbourhood came for mourning were silenced by Parsa demonstrates the restricted set up for females. On the other hand characters like Mukhtiar Kaur and Savitri portray a different disposition yet they all exist on the periphery of male dominated world. Parsa's words on accepting the death of his wife as reality seem to be the slogan of female characters who have submitted themselves to the system. The so-called sympathizers are pretenders for Parsa. He knows nobody's authority and openly shares his feelings about Pala saying, "If He lives inside me, then I am his personification. Why should I look for him? In that case, I'm God!" (Singh 80). But portrayal of female characters in such a dim light is not appreciable on the part of the author himself.

## CONCLUSION

Women characters suffer **multiple marginalization** yet to an extent they display resistance. They are not falling a prey to intoxicants as **escapists**. They have not been given proper representation. The author has highlighted his male characters and it seems as if he, himself is taking the side of patriarchy by not giving due importance to the likes and choices of the females. Gurdial Singh's women characters are shy but they are ready to refuse silently to accept a fate dictated to them by the society. Almost all of his characters highlight the hidden strength of soul that is invincible. His characters represent those individuals who had found out ways to assert themselves in the novel but many of such persons can never realize their true self because of social boundaries of caste, colour, creed and gender and go unnoticed. Though on the surface level they are victims of the system yet at the same time, they are pillars of strength, responsibility and endurance. They are not vocal but their silent voice is woven in the fabric of life like the humming of birds. They are seen shouldering the burden of survival in real sense.

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