

## **Between Hammer and Pen: Variegated Hues of Gurdial Singh in his Autobiography *Kya Janu Mai Kaun***

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Ever since the Socratic dictum of “Know thyself”, St. Augustine’s supplication in *Confessions* “I beseech you, God, to show my full self to myself”, W. B. Yeats’s claim “I begin to study the only self that I can know, myself, and to wind the thread upon the pern again” (*Mythologies* 364), Mahatma Gandhi’s appeal in the introduction of *Story of my Experiments with Truth*, “What I want to achieve, what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years — is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha”, and the emergence of subaltern autobiographies that attempt to assert one’s marginal self, the genre of autobiography has traversed a long way to self-explore, self-understand and self-construct.

The notion of self-knowledge or *atma jnana* which has been one of the core elements of Indian Metaphysics is usually what the genre of autobiography intends to capture. Within the western literary tradition, the traces of modern life writing or autobiography that emerged during the sixteenth and seventeenth-century emphasised on the notion of self as a “unique historical identity” (Smith 21) with a “conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life” (Gusdorf 29). However, while the high modernist and New Critics gave privilege to a knowable self that is a unified entity, the post structuralists and postmodernists emphasized creating versions of self as fragmented, de-centred and unknowable. Psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan described self in terms of a continual flux that is both transformational and discontinuous, C. J. Jung extended his arguments to explicate human entity as a process instead of a settled state of being. Interestingly, within the genre of autobiography, the possibility of human identity construction is contingent upon the notion of the narrative discourse of the person-protagonist. If a narrative discourse according to theorists like Mikhail Bakhtin views human beings as always in the process of making themselves, as rejecting any definitive or fixed version of identity, then life narratives too, become open, unending and available for multiple interpretations. It becomes pertinent to recall the famous lines of Bulleh Shah at this point:

*Na Mei Mullah hu Masjid Ka  
Maslak Kufr Nahihai Mera  
Saathi Mai Nahi Ache Buro Ka  
Mai firoon na mai musa  
Bulla Kya Janu Mai Kaun* (Epigraph, Singh)

These lines appear as an epigraph of Gurdial Singh's autobiography and the phrase "Kya Janu Mei Kaun" indicates that the author identifies himself with the philosophy of Bulleh Shah that is premised on the rejection of any fixed, compartmentalised and rigid labelling of his identity within a prescribed framework. This refrain from limiting his identity allows his readers to witness multiple facets of the author during the journey of his life narrative. Gurdial Singh clearly underlines the objective behind writing an autobiography: he separates the artists or authors from the common populace to underline how the former are born with a "streak of madness" because of which every incident leaves an indelible impact on them. By employing a couplet from Sant Kabir, "*Sukhiya sab sansar hai, khaveaursove; Dukhiya bas Kabir hai, jage aur rove*" (Singh 358) he underlines how a "thin-skinned" artist will continue to "stay awake and weep" till the time suffering continues in the world. Other than the major and minor incidents of his life, he has been born into a particular family, a particular cultural landscape and a particular society—all these factors that constitute his location has been the source of inspiration for his writing. It is perhaps pertinent to remind ourselves that by the time he finished writing the second part of his autobiography, he was conferred with the prestigious Padma Shri award in 1998 and the highest literary honour, the Jnanpith award in 1999. It is remarkable that throughout his autobiography, he doesn't mention a single award or honour as if they do not hold much relevance to his journey. However, he realises that an autobiography is written when a certain section of readers is so invested in a personality that they have an urge to know the individual responsible for creating these literary works. As a skilled author who is highly aware of the writing style employed in this genre, he almost theorises the interplay of fact and fiction in the following words:

In this sense, autobiography is an amalgam of half-truths and fiction. First of all, the author of the autobiography selects those incidents that influenced him the most. Then he evaluates the literary significance of those incidents. These two steps are easy. But the next step is rather difficult. At this step, in addition to evaluating the importance of past incidents, he has to recreate them from the perspective of his present views, feelings and attitudes. It has to be done in such a way that, while retaining the factual status of those incidents from the past, the added fictional elements may give an artistic form to the particular event—a form which augments the perception of deeper meanings of life and leaves a special impression on the mind of the reader. (Singh 5)

His autobiography has been divided into two sections, *Pehli Dehi* and *Dusri Dehi*, indicative of the two phases of his life. The first phase resembles a

memoir of past incidents, anecdotes, places and people that came in contact with the author during his formative years. Interestingly, though the author is the narrator here, he is not the protagonist. Instead of him, the people associated with him are highlighted while he maintains the position of an acute observer. He reminisces about these episodes as several “micro-narratives”, a technique he followed throughout his literary works. The transition from childhood to adolescent years also alters the narrative strategy as the focus gradually comes closer to the person who tries to live away from his parents, who is attracted by the opposite sex, who relishes the little moments in the company of his friends and bear the pangs of separation from them in the wake of communal disharmony. During the second phase of his life journey, he first becomes a skilled blacksmith and carpenter and then makes a departure from his family occupation. Documenting the personal account of his struggles, scarcity and growth through the disposition of his skills and knowledge, he becomes both the narrator as well as the protagonist in this phase, underlining in other words, the completion of his transition from one phase to another. Between these two phases of his life, he mentions a well-renowned Punjabi proverb:

*Bandia teria dus dehia,  
Iko gayee viha, nau kidher gayia*  
[Man, life has ten phases fine,  
The first one blew you away  
Where have gone the other nine?]  
[As quoted in the English translation] (Singh 185)

Out of the ten phases of a person’s life that the Punjabi folk mentions, he suggests that he has been able to lead only two phases in his life where although he has changed his situation by becoming a writer and teacher in the second phase, even at the age of sixty-seven (when he writes this autobiography), he has not been able to achieve the physical comforts and a certain level of contentment. Despite his struggles, he explains his autobiography in an interview to the famous Hindi critic Dr. Vinod Shahi by saying, “The way life is vast and multi-layered; it is also variegated and differentiated. I have tried to portray it in all its variety and multiplicity, as best as I could” (Singh 53). One of the ways in which this ‘variety’ and ‘multiplicity’ is depicted by Gurdial Singh involves different facets of his personality that unravel in front of his readers throughout the story of his life. Furthermore, an individual’s life narrative is never completely her/his ‘own’ in the sense that it is always conditioned by the cultural context that has shaped a person. The effect of the cultural landscape of Punjab can be easily witnessed in his autobiography.

Gurdial Singh was born on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1933 in a village called Bhaini Fateh near Jaito into a family of Ramgarhia Sikhs. At the onset of the

autobiography, readers come across the naïve carefree world of a child who has been deeply attached to the culture and soil. Going back in time, the author recalls how merely at the age of three, he used to sing Punjabi couplets in front of his friends and a few years later, revel in inventing new games in the lap of nature. The young Gurdial also grew up listening to the stories of his *taya*, which impacted him so much so that they would lose their form, become fluid and intermingle with each other in his dreams. As a child, he had the ability to convert real incidents into convincing stories in front of his friends as in the case of his *tayi's* fits where she cursed the *chowdharies* (which has caste, class and gender implications). This preoccupation of employing real life instances as a catalyst to ignite one's active imagination has been employed by him throughout in his literary oeuvre. His genius as a storyteller can be traced not only from the manner in which he suffuses his life narrative with myths, customs and anecdotes but also with characters telling stories to each other. Furthermore, the cultural stories rooted in the traditional narratives of Punjab like that of Jani-chor, Roop-Basant, Nal-Damyanti and Sohni-Mahiwal are scattered over his autobiography. In the article, "Narratives of National Identity as Group Narratives: Patterns of Interpretive Cognition" (2001), Carol Fleisher Feldman explicates profound connection between our personal stories, cultural stories and the governing thoughts behind the larger fabric of the narrative itself. The vital role that culture has played in shaping Gurdial Singh as an individual can be witnessed from passing references to the River Jhelum or the Malwai dialect spoken by several characters throughout the Hindi translation of the autobiography. By extensively employing quotes from Gurbani, Quissas, local songs, folk stories, couplets, idioms, local phrases and anecdotes, Gurdial Singh underlines what Brockmeier and Freeman calls, "the folk psychological canon" (Freeman 288). His narrative is replete with ideas from Baba Sheikh Farid Shakrganj, Guru Nanak Dev, Bulleh Shah and Amrita Pritam, and highlights how the vastness of Punjabi literary tradition has influenced his literary genius.

By the virtue (vice?) of being born in a family Ramgarhia Sikhs, who were considered 'backward' artisan clans due to their traditional occupation as carpenters, he occupied a marginal status in the social hierarchy, an impediment he endeavoured to transcend throughout his life. It is because of his traditional family occupation that his name was struck off from the school when he was merely in the sixth standard, he was made to work for more than fourteen hours in a day as an apprentice to his father and hold thrice the amount of weight of his body on his shoulders. Going down the memory lane, he recalls how ashamed he felt while trying to sell menial wooden items on the road and sits in absolute passivity as tears roll down his eyes when he is caught by one of his school friends. When at a tender age of thirteen, he was burdened with the family responsibilities as a husband and son; as a father, it became even more

difficult for him to work laboriously as a carpenter or to make iron trunks. In a documentary produced by Sahitya Akademi, K. Satchidanandan underlines the relevance of hard physical labour in the literary corpus of the author which empowers his characters to revolt against the injustices enmeshed in the social system and this emphasis on hard physical labour is a direct consequence of the location of the author. Readers witness how his frail shoulders were not only burdened because of the family responsibilities and economic deprivation resulting from extreme physical labour, but more importantly, the work also lacked any sense of honour or dignity. To add to his dismal world the physical and emotional pain suffered by him were considered mere excuses of a slacker by his father. The constant tantrums and societal pressure created by his father at one point even made him feel suicidal. His decision of discontinuing the work of his father on the one hand and rekindling his lost love for education under the guidance of his school Headmaster Madan Mohan Sharma on the other, allowed him to take a departure from his family occupation as well as 'carve' a different course of life for himself. It is pertinent to note that the rejection of his traditional family occupation also has implication in terms of caste as occupation plays a major role to keep the caste hierarchies intact. In his article, "Gurdial Singh: A Storyteller Extraordinaire" (2012), Dr. Rana Nayar opines: "An inveterate progressive, he subscribes 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..." (Nayar 13.)

This observation becomes relevant to understand Gurdial Singh's entire life story too as this 'continuous' and 'uninterrupted' struggle continues even when he rejects his traditional family occupation as a carpenter. It is noteworthy to recall that he left the work of a labourer after single-handedly finishing the task of three months in one month and generating five hundred rupees for the family. However, even after struggling to clear the matric exam after a gap of many years and getting appointed as a primary school teacher, he managed to procure only sixty rupees for the family, a paltry sum that led him to indulge in translation projects, churning out a translator in him which reminds the readers of his commitment towards evolving irrespective of the circumstances. In an interview to the Malayalam writer, Dr. Arzoo, he reveals that he did not translate his works due to some external inspiration but because he earned sixty rupees as a teacher and "...it was difficult for me to run the house" with it (Singh 71). Even when he was appointed as a lecturer, he earned three hundred rupees which were inadequate to meet the higher educational needs of three children along with their marriages, an impetus that shaped him to view the 'microscopic visions' of life and fostered him to become a short story writer in 1955 and a well-known novelist by 1968. His teaching, writing and translation projects kept proceeding simultaneously. He retired from Punjabi University, Patiala as a

reader in 1995. In an interview to Dr. Vinod Shahi he asserts, “If I had not wielded a hammer, chisel and axe, I wouldn’t have had so much of physical strength as I have now. And probably, in that case, I wouldn’t have wielded my pen with the same sort of force” (Singh 50). It is because of this arduousness that he has been able to garner such scholarly acclaim.

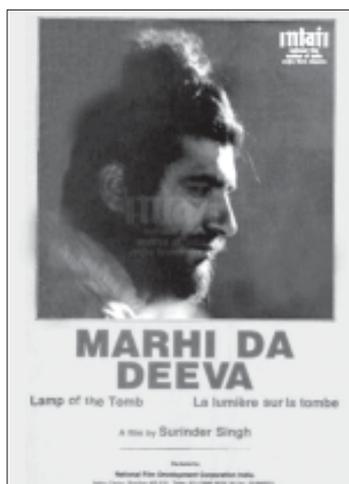
In the essay, “Metaphysics and Narrative: Singularities and Multiplicities of Self” (2001), Rom Harré explicates multiplicity of self in the second category which is continuously changing, not merely through “skills and powers” that might become stable but because, he argues, “knowledge is always being augmented” (Harré 62) and reveals how acquiring a new manual skill requires learning which leads to changes in the nervous system of the learner which constantly moulds the self. Gurdial Singh not merely acquired the skill of holding a hammer and a pen but his childhood artistic impulses later manifested itself through the immense mental satisfaction received after holding the paintbrush tool as he craved to spill myriad hues on the canvas—a metaphor that can be employed to understand the canvas of his life as well. Unfortunately, due to the economic constraints, he could not incur the cost which painting as a hobby demanded but nevertheless, managed to somehow give private classes of painting to students and make portraits of Gurudwaras for the school inspector, therefore fulfilling his desire to paint while simultaneously evolving himself. Another dimension of his personality is revealed in front of the readers as he unfolds how he learnt another art form by Dr. Bhatti who used to make idols from plaster of Paris which fascinated him to the extent that he himself sculpted Tolstoy’s bust and a beautiful naked woman. Readers are gradually acquainted with different shades of an artist in his personality from his formative to the mature years.

Interestingly, within his autobiographical journey, the motif of journey itself recurs throughout his narrative. He can be witnessed as somebody who constantly travels—to physical places in search of work against which he gets insufficiently paid, to teach, to training programmes, to find the burnt houses of lost friends in the wake of partition of Punjab and ultimately, in his memories that keep revisiting him from time to time throughout the journey of his life. While reading his autobiography, one observes that he not only revisits his memory lane, but often juggles between incidents of the past that renders him sentimental, anxious or sometimes even gloomy, but he doesn’t shy away from accepting his feelings in the present and therefore, consistently forges the journey.

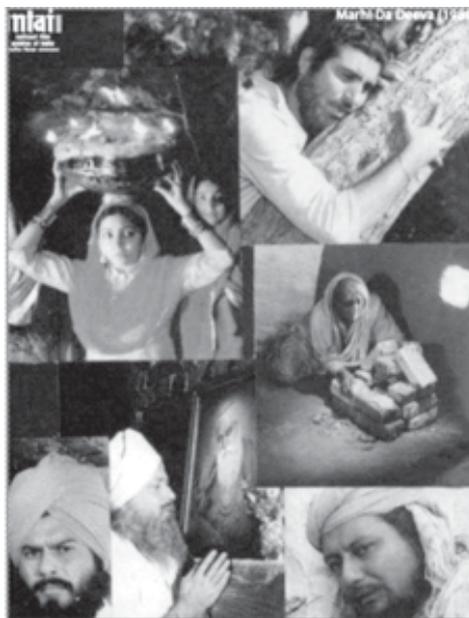
In the documentary titled, *Kalm Da Safar* (2020), Gurdial Singh mentions the vital role that his teacher Madan Mohan Sharma played in shaping him into the person that he eventually became. Sharma painstakingly brought Gurdial

back to academics, took care of him when he fell ill before his matric exam, warned him against continuing his temporary teaching job at a private institute and instead asked him to go for higher studies. Calling himself Gurdial's 'foster-father', he even asked one of his students for a job for Gurdial. Gurdial Singh, in turn, played the role of a true disciple as he passed on his joining letter into the hands of his teacher with eyes full of gratitude and tears.

While his teacher and *taya* were his support system during the difficult times, in a few deeply moving moments in the autobiography, he recalls how his family as an institution failed him as none of the relatives, not even his father and mother came to ask about their whereabouts in years. The incident where his wife offers her *Saggi Phul*, the traditional emblem of prestige for a woman, to be sold to buy milk for the children is marked by his emotional and psychological turbulence. Instances such as these left an indelible mark on his psyche and when he employed them as inspiration for his work (short story *Saggi Phul* in this case), he gave voice to the larger marginalized sections of the society. This lifelong preoccupation with portraying the world of marginalized has been clearly borne out of his own personal experiences. In fact, his entire literary oeuvre reflects his deep commitment as a 'critical realist', a category borrowed from György Lukács that he willingly aligns himself with. His most acclaimed novel, *Marhi Da Deeva* (1968), became a landmark work in the history of Punjabi literature for its successful attempt to throw light on the suffering of the low caste sections of the society which jolted the consciousness of its readers as much as his autobiography does. The novel has been adapted into an award-winning national film with the same name by Surinder Singh in 1989.



**Figure 1.** Poster of *Marhi Da Deeva* (1989).  
Courtesy: National Film Archives of India.



**Figure 2.** Collage of stills from *Marhi Da Deeva* (1989).  
 Courtesy: National Film Archives of India.

In his autobiography, the personal becomes a pretext to unravel the collective as he creates such a minute picture of the social, religious, political and historical milieu; he also becomes a critic of the prejudices prevalent in the society. Being a miniaturist, he delves into the details of stifling caste prejudices, of malpractices by *sevadars* within Gurudwara because of which he could not continue to sing as a *raagi* in *keertans*, of political parties murdering their own party members as a consequence of religious bigotry, of the effect of the second world war on ordinary men in villages, of the nostalgia of a lost ‘Lahore’ in the wake of Partition and of the gory details of slaughtering in the name of religion on each side. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the entire background against which he paints his autobiography but it becomes imperative to reiterate that his social interactions and an acute observation of injustices impelled him to portray the world of the marginalized and oppressed sections of the society in his literary works.

NS Tasneem in “Tradition and experiment in Punjabi Novel” (1974) mentions, “A streak of sadness runs through all his creations...They [his characters] have become hypersensitive in an unkind world. They are full of passion, anger, hatred and jealousy but deep down in their souls there stirs an intense longing for the soothing touch of love” (14). In a similar vein, against the personal crisis and barbaric external world that the author creates in his

autobiography, some of the most appealing moments that present a “soothing touch of love” appear through simplest humane gestures which had indelible impressions on him. When he is reminded of his *taya*'s words at a life threatening moment, when his *tayi* slides twenty five rupees into his pocket without saying a word about his financial condition, when Sharma has tears in his eyes after looking at his joining letter, when a comfortable silence prevails between the husband and wife in the times of crisis as well as in peace, when he throws his little girl up in the air who starts clapping in a moment of ecstasy, when he tastes *desighees* weets as a primary school teacher after a lapse of many years, are some of the many experiences of Gurdial Singh that forms the essence of the person that he was.

Singh had been able to mould himself into several roles without conforming to any one of them and simultaneously document these experiences with an objective eye of the writer. Such an endeavour is contingent upon the ability to surrender the pomposity of the self that manifests itself in terms of ego. In the words of the author, “Until a writer gets rid of his ego, he cannot reach the depth of his own experience or his context. An ego is like a stone wall beyond which you cannot see anything” (Singh 52). Randal Collin in *Theoretical Sociology* (1988) asserts that “We are compelled to have an individual self, not because we actually have one but because social interaction requires us to act as if we do” (256). Keneth Allan's article, “A Postmodern Self; A theoretical Consideration” analyses Collins arguments on multiplicity of self by claiming, “people play multiple and fleeting roles at any one given time and that those roles may be played in double fashion, simultaneously enacting and distancing one's self from the role. Thus, multiple, fluctuating, and situational selves is normal” (3). Interestingly, his life itself can be understood as a mosaic of ‘variegated hues’ which is seen differently by different people at different junctures of his life. Besides playing the role of a son, husband and father in his personal life, he became a future *raagi* in a Gurudwara for his uncle, a mere slacker for his father, a skilled labourer for his *taya*, an emotional support for Sarla and Pushpa, a disciple and a son for Sharma, a traveller for elderly people yearning for a lost Lahore, a lost friend for Basheera in the wake of Partition, a painter for the school inspector, a sculptor for Prof. Bhatti, a translator for the publisher of Gorky, an invaluable Professor at Patiala University and one of the greatest writers of our times. He is at once all of it and none of it, leaving vast interpretive possibilities for his readers without conforming himself to any singular unidimensional identity. Commenting on his autobiography in an interview to Dr Vinod Shahi he says, “. . . you must figure out for yourself as to what kind of person I am” (Singh 50). This reminds the readers to think more about the title of his autobiography: *Kya Jaanu Mei Kaun*.

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