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ALMS IN THE NAME OF A BLIND HORSE: A STUDY OF SYSTEMATIC OPPRESSION OF
DALITS IN A CAPITALIST SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Gurdial Singh was one of the most celebrated writers of the Punjabi Literature and famously viewed as the first writers to give a Dalit hero to Punjabi Literature in "The Last Flicker". Singh, through his writings, wanted to exhibit the sufferings of the marginalized communities of different social classes and castes and has been seen as "the last ones in the Munshi Premchand tradition of writing about the downtrodden" by the President of Punjabi Sahit Akademi.

The novel "Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse" is set around the 1960s like most of his works, when feudalism was being mutated into capitalism in Punjab resulting in a shift in the social and economical structure as well as in the mindset of people. Singh chose the voice of the marginalized to reflect on what capitalism has brought to them, through his novel, he has painted a realist picture of the struggles of the working class. The novel is not just a piece of writing but an act of resisting the oppressors and the capitalists by portraying the plight of the Dalits in Punjab's new economy. Throughout the novel, Singh has tried to challenge the belief that capitalism frees a Dalit from the Feudal system of villages and the evils of caste discrimination and allows them a chance at freedom and equality.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Capitalism, Feudalism, Caste Discrimination, Resistance and Myth

"The confidence of carrying the self as a Dalit without the immediate fear of social death, psychic death and spiritual death is a characteristic of being a Dalit." - Suraj Yengde, Caste Matters

Introduction

Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse captures rural Punjab in its true spirit; it is not just a novel but a repository of the culture and history of rustic Punjab in its most natural form. Written by Gurdial Singh originally as 'Anhe Ghore Da Daan' and translated in English by Rana Nayar, it is a narrative of Dalits shuttling back and forth amidst the rural and urban society to escape the marginalization, subjugation and utter financial adversity suffered by them. With the advent of the tradition of the novel in the nineteenth century, early writers were largely influenced by their European counterparts. Writers like Bhai Vir Singh began writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century, creating a replica of the European tradition of the novel by

mimicking writers like Walter Scott. Nanak Singh, under the influence of Singh Sabha Movement, aspired to break free from this colonized attitude of looking up to the west for inspiration instead adopted the literary forms of rural Punjab by embracing the *quissas* that were popular earlier.

Being brought up in the Malwa region of Punjab, Gurdial Singh recreated an imaginary world like that of Thomas Hardy and R. K. Narayan, that was the replica of the place he spent his entire life in, the 'home' that he empathizes with, where his 'roots' lie. The significance of his works lies in the fact that his works comprised both the elements of tradition and modernity. The hegemonic popular culture that was being portrayed in the earlier works didn't find any space in Singh's novel, he depicted a realistic image of rural Punjab that he was familiar with.

Myriads of his works are set in post-independent India while the trauma of partition was still alive in the minds of people and India was struggling to cope up with the modernizing world around it. A perceptible transitional phase was evident in society when the traditional, agrarian economy was collapsing and modernity crept into the life of people slithering stealthily like a serpent that was reflected in the technological advancements, economical changes, social set-ups and moral values etc. This shift was strikingly evident in the works of Singh, who embodied the very essence of this transitional phase in his works through settings, characters, symbols and images.

Gurdial Singh, in his works, emphasised on the condition of the socio-economically exploited, marginalized people encapsulating the consciousness of the downtrodden or the oppressed people. The question 'Why are the stories always about kings and princes' has been raised by Tindi in his novel *Parsa*, thus challenging the very base of hegemonic discourses that has always been linear. He was the first writer in Punjabi literature to place a Dalit hero in the centre stage in his novel *Marhi Da Deeva* (The Last Flicker). Singh, through his writings, wanted to exhibit the sufferings and agonising fate of the marginalised communities of different social classes and horrors of untouchability, caste consciousness; gaining the status of 'the messiah of the marginalised' by Rana Nayar (who translated *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* and many other works of Gurdial Singh in English). He has been seen as 'one of the last ones in the Munshi Prem Chand tradition of writing about the downtrodden' by the president of the Punjabi Sahit Akademi who believed that Singh 'brought alive the struggle of the working classes of rural Punjab.' Gurdial Singh utilised the weapon that he was privileged to be able to use, to write about social inequality, casteism, injustices incorporating the lives of the poor, illiterate farm helpers, peasants, marginalized carpenters and rickshaw pullers in his writings. Rana Nayar asserted that for Gurdial Singh "writing was a form of activism, a way of transforming our decadent, putrefying social order".

As stated by Suraj Yengde, a writer and a Dalit scholar, the term 'Dalit' is itself equivalent to anti-oppression as the word itself sprouted up as a protest against the derogatory and oppressive words that were used to refer to the lower castes. To Gangadhar Pantawane, a Dalit Marathi writer, the term Dalit was not just associated with a caste but was a symbol of change and revolution. Gurdial Singh believed that it is the responsibility of the victims of social oppression to face and fight back their oppressors like his characters like Jagseer in *Marhi Da Deeva* and Heera Dei did in *Kuwela*. *Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse* is one such tale set in rural Punjab, revolving around the lives its Dalit characters set in a single day of a lunar eclipse from dawn to dusk.

The Novel

The novel encapsulates the time period when the agrarian economy was facing a downfall in the wake of industrialisation and feudalism was being transformed into capitalism. As a result, the market value of the lands in villages tremendously increased to provide the capitalists considerable amounts of land for setting up industries and factories, threatening the feudal system. Due to this, Dharma and his family were forcefully uprooted from the land they have lived on for over seven years by demolishing their *kothri*. An oral agreement in front of the Panchayat between Dharma and Wadhawa, the owner of the land, confirmed Dharma's status as the owner of a piece of land measuring 'a kanal-and-a-half'. Dharma's *kothas* were built on this land which legally belonged to Wadhawa and his ancestors after he was uprooted from the village and made to settle

here to look after the orchards. Longing for the economic elevation that the disposal of the sixteen acres of land would bring him, Wadhawa sold the land to factory owners, dismissing the family of Dharma forcibly after failing to persuade them. This forced displacement leaves them in a state of 'homelessness', creating a consciousness in the other characters as well by inculcating in them a fear of exodus of the entire community. This feeling of powerlessness causes anguish and agitation in them, considered 'lowly' and 'polluted' they are forced to live as outcasts on their own land. On the other hand, Melu, a migrant rickshaw puller struggles to find means of survival in the city after the preference of auto rickshaw elevates.

Significance of the Title

The title of the novel illustrates the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed more vividly by drawing the power dynamics between the upper castes and the Dalits who are imposed with inferiority by the former. The title is associated with the ancient Hindu myth of the churning of the ocean or *Samudra Manthan* mentioned in the Mahabharata, Vishnu Purana and Bhagavata Purana. As stated in the myth, the *Asuras* were deceived by the *devas* during the dispensation of the nectar by Vishnu. The *devas* collaborated with the *Asuras* in order to obtain the gift of immortality or *Amrit* from the ocean with the promise of equal share. But when the elixir was revealed both the parties resorting to their rivalry tried to claim it entirely for themselves. Vishnu in the disguise of Mohini enchanted and distracted the *Asuras* while the *devas* gulped down the *Amrit*, however, *Rahuketu*, one of the *Asuras*, managed to consume the nectar in the disguise of a God. Vishnu was infuriated and cut off his head separating his head and body which later came to be known as *Rahu* and *Ketu*. In Gurdial Singh's novel, just like the *Asuras* had to depend on Vishnu for *Amrit*, in the same way, the Dalits, who are supposedly recognised as the descendants of the *Asuras*, have to depend on the mercy and charity of the rich landlords.

The myth persists to remain a significant part in the lives of people as they go around asking for alms on the days of the solar and lunar eclipse in the name of the blind horse that drew the chariot of *Rahu* and *Ketu*. The novel doesn't glorify this myth but criticizes it and ends with a positive symbol of resistance when one such seeker of alms is criticized by a panch who tells him '*It's because you aren't willing to give up such ritualistic practices that you have been dragging on like this since the times of your forefathers.*' The panch believed that nothing will change until the Dalits stop colluding in their own oppression. Gurdial challenges these social customs that are embedded in the mindset of people fueling the caste conflicts like fuel to the fire.

Historical Background:

The novel is not just a story of a single protagonist but a story of a community with several characters thrown together to form several micro-narratives exposing the inner lives of the community of Dalits in a single macro-narratives. Through the life of Melu's family, which acts as the focus of macro-narrative, we see the difficult situation that the people of his *vehra* find themselves in as the focus is laid on the lives of Dalits during the onset of capitalism where they are hopelessly seesawing up and down between the rural and the urban lives dreaming for a better life. Struggling to sustain in the villages, a lot of these marginalised people migrate to the nearby towns with the illusion of finding more opportunities in the urban world. In the changing scenario of Punjab, the experiences of a member of the Dalit community is very different from the dominant castes.

With the advent of the Green Revolution, the interdependence between the landlords and the labourers was reduced due to the expanding technological improvements in farm mechanisms largely helping the landowning agriculturalists. As a result, a large number of unprivileged people were forced to take up meager jobs or migrate to the town to find survival in urban spaces. The exclusion of Dalits has also been multilayered, in the world of commerce they called upon to offer the leftover of the traditional industrial sections, that no other group considered themselves befitting for. Whereas, in the modern world, they suffer an 'unfavourable inclusion' where Dalit capitalism has entered the modern world which is nothing but a facade designed by the dominant castes to safeguard their position in the world terminating any potential risk of revolt by Dalits against capitalism. The idea of Dalit capitalism juxtaposes with the idea of Dalit which is a

symbol of resistance seeking to resist any form of enslavement whereas, capitalism keeps the oppression alive endorsing a kind of 'caste terrorism'.

Caste and Capitalism

The novel illustrates the efforts of the characters to survive against all odds. Melu has migrated to the nearby town with his wife and two sons in search of a livelihood. Trying his luck with different kinds of meager jobs, he finally buys a manual rickshaw and exploits himself day and night to make ends meet. Melu and his friends struggle every day to survive but ever since the arrival of the battery-operated rickshaw their plight has become worse. They find themselves in a liminal position, in a state of trishanku, where they have been displaced from their native land carrying with themselves a feeling of abandonment and placed in the town that never accepts them leaving them with an overwhelming feeling of alienation. When asked about why Melu and his wife doesn't want to return to the village by his wife's brother, she says,

'There in the village, it's not as though we are sitting atop a large heap of freshly threshed grain. Labour is what we do here, and that's what we are condemned to do there....Now, we are nowhere, neither here nor there. He is so weak and fragile that he can no longer work as a siri. So you tell me, where should we go.' (60)

Oblivious of the life led by Melu in the town, Melu's bapu lives with the false notion that relocating to the town has brought prosperity to his son and yearns to move there himself in the future to get away from the tyranny of the Jats. He always appears to be bragging about city life parading the village after Melu's visit saying, '*Now what should I tell you about city life! All I can say is that people really have a good time there*'. Also, Bahoo's brother dreams of settling in the town brimming with the illusion that,

'our jats are more miserly than the Banias. They don't let you take anything for free...In the town, at least, you get money in your pocket on a daily basis. Here they skin you alive for more than six months, and then say, "Wait for another month. Let me marry off my son, and then I'll settle your account"'. (30)

Whereas in the town, Melu is constantly advised to return to the village, Dheera tells him, '*Bhai Melu Singha, you are not fit to live here. It'd have been much better for you to have gone back to the village*' as he has a family to support. Dulla also reminds him that even after staying in the town for seven years, Melu hasn't gained much, he is just wearing himself out by peddling his rickshaw day and night. Melu and his friends curse their existence, complaining of being treated like dogs, they believe that only death can relieve them from this tyranny. Venting their long-suppressed anger, Dulla and Dheeru pick a fight with some auto-rickshaw drivers and get arrested.

Gurdial criticizes the capitalists who with their notion of development and modernity try to grab the land of the indigenous people, uprooting them from their native land to pollute it by setting up industries and factories feeding their 'civilized notion of modernity'. They try to tempt people by offering a large amount of money which is nothing compared to the values attached to the land. However, people like Wadhawa fall victim to these capitalists and give up his land in exchange for some amount of money that will sustain him for a while. In the modern world, capitalists often resort to forceful measures to attain the land of indigenous people when they refuse to comply with them.

Melu's family, in both the worlds of urban and rural, live in extreme economic distress, Melu waste himself away drinking obnoxiously with most of the money he makes in order to relieve himself of his exhaustion, excruciating pain and wobbliness of his legs because of peddling all day and night. He steals the money saved by his wife to feed his addiction. Whereas at home his sister Dyalo rummages the empty boxes of flour and molasses to feed her bapu and Shinda, her younger brother, they find it difficult to feed their cattle as there is no land on which to graze. They don't have enough firewood to light up the *chulha*. Melu's bebe, criticizing her misfortunes, reminisces about the time when people used to give away firewoods freely to the poor whereas, now all they get is abuses and ill-treatment. Even though they don't have enough to feed themselves, they worry about feeding Dharma's children who are crying from hunger.

Even though the characters feel helpless suffering from extreme hardship and exploitation by the Jats but this mutual hate towards the oppressors strengthens their love for themselves as a community and binds them together with a feeling of belongingness. They stand together during good and bad times, as Dharma says, *'They belong to my community. And they must share my joys and sorrows'*. The Dalits unite together to fight back their colonizers when Dharam's house is demolished and he is arrested, the men of his community come together with the hope of overpowering the dominant group but fails. The Dalits assemble in the ruined *kothri* of Dharma to discuss their plan of action to help Dharma escape this atrocity. When Dharma is arrested, they walk together towards the Sarpanch's house for the release of Dharma and to resolve the conflict, their frustration is evident as they run hither and thither trying to resolve the conflict. This collective effort to support Dharma also sprouts from their own fear of displacement, the fear of meeting the same fate as Dharma. Dheeru says, *'We'll have to rise to the challenge...Today, "they" have been ruined tomorrow it could be "us".'* The Dalits felt like 'a band of aliens' in their own village as their hopes began to crush and they started accepting their fate.

Multilayered Oppression & Exclusion:

Suppression runs on different levels, the men of the Dalit community are oppressed but the women are twice oppressed as they are. This can be very well seen through the character of Dyalo who is a submissive daughter, locked up within the four walls of her house, performing the gender roles that have been assigned by society. Dyalo represents all the women who are the silent sufferers of tyranny and have never experienced freedom. She observes everything around her but hardly speaks, like the spectator, like us readers. Most of Gurdial Singh's characters hardly speak, making the readers uncomfortable, they just observe the situations unfolding around them, helplessly and devastated. It appears like they are condemning the readers for being silent on what they had been suffering. Their silence is louder than words and condemns us to reflect on their plight.

Gurdial has been more than just in his representation of the chaotic rural and urban lives, he aptly represents the industrial advancement that was taking place around that time. He doesn't shy away to reveal the ugly side of these advancements, the pollution it adds to the environment, the effect of these advancements on people like Melu who, as a result, are deprived of their daily bread. Even though the community of the rickshaw pullers unite to fight the system with a union strike but are violently thrashed by the police. Far off Dharma's demolished house, near the city, 'sky-high, demon-sized chimneys of the thermal plant' is visible. Contrary to the size of the chimneys, people like Melu are forced to settle in small tenements made out of whatever they could find, old bricks, tin sheets etc. He lives in a marginalized neighbourhood, in a segregated filthy ghetto that remains neglected.

Power Dynamics

The abuse of power by the dominant people has been criticized by the characters in the novel. With the support of the Police, a plot was set up to arrest Dharma's sons before his eviction to avoid brawl and protest. The Panch states, *'If you are powerful, then the law is on your side; and if someone else becomes more powerful than you, the law becomes their chattel'*. The relationship between the hierarchy of power and law is made explicit with the statement, *'With the powerful, even 'seven scores' equal a hundred'*, we are taken to the dystopian Orwellian world where two plus two equals five delineating that the powerful have the authority to control and manipulate your perception. Gazing at two male sparrows squabbling, he imagines them to be fighting over a piece of land; with the intervention of another sparrow the duo abandons their fight. Melu finds it difficult to fathom that *'why another sparrow had to intervene to settle their dispute or why she couldn't let those idiots just kill each other'*.

Existentialism

Melu and his friends, like a band of vagabonds, try to seek solace in a world they have created for themselves with the motive of getting away from the harsh realities of their daily lives. They waste themselves drinking away cheap liquor to get rid of worries concerning their families who depend solely on their income.

Melu emerges more like an existentialist who is constantly running away from his family, avoiding them and his responsibilities, idly peddling his rickshaw around the city. He runs towards the road leading to the power plant after his sons called out to him feeling *'as though he had come towards this side, only to escape the tyranny of that sound'*. His mind is eaten away by the worries about how long he will be able to work when his body seems to be giving up. To cope up with the painful thumping of his legs, he also began taking drugs. Dulla, his friend, curses the power plants that have wrecked any possibility of happiness imaginable for them and abuses the cruelty of the modern world. However, there are also people like Dheesiya who were able to climb up the social ladder after leaving the past behind and don't wish to deal with the humiliation faced back in the village, he says, *'Why would we go to the village now? Do we have to lick the leftovers of the jats there? Here, everyone comes and touches my feet. There, no one ever spoke to me without hurling an abuse first.'*

Exploitation of the Marginalized:

The evolving world represented by Gurdial appears to be a grim and ugly world to live in. The industrialization taking place has been represented by filthy and dark imagery. Melu constantly view his surroundings with fear and anxiety, the beginning of the novel when Melu laying on his *manji* hears the knock on his door, then witness the *'frightening spectre flickering on the opposite wall'*, the things around him in the darkness of night begins to take ugly shapes reflecting the state of his disturbed mind. He is even haunted in his dreams, having nightmares of huge buildings and minarets crashing down lying in ruins clearly showing his bitter feelings towards the ongoing development. As he goes wandering around the city on the *'serpentine course'* of a road circling the *'monstrous chimneys of the thermal plant'* he reflects on the destiny of the factory workers who he stops to gaze at. He sees the workers strapped to the iron ropes, standing on swinging logs around the chimney cleaning its outer surface, he wonders, *'What if someone were to fall from that height...?'* reflecting on the value of the workers that was just reduced to as a working hand whose life no one cares about. They were not even considered people, their identity was reduced to their occupation, and their enslavement brought them nothing but destruction and bondage.

The exploitation and oppression of the Dalits persists throughout the novel; Melu's bebe is ill-treated by her employer for cutting some mustard stalks for cattle to eat. Singh tries to portray a chaotic world loaded with oppression and degradation where Shinda is beaten because his cattle mistakenly enter the fields of a village overlord who also hurt the ankle of his calf with a spade. This abuse reaches its climax when a boy is killed in cold blood for allegedly stealing cotton from the field of a landlord. These incidents that Singh writes about aren't foreign to us, we come across such incidents in the news and mass media regularly, things still haven't changed much, Dalits are still being exploited and killed. The term Dalit was coined by Jyotiba Phule which translates to 'broken, crushed or scattered', used in the context of the unrelieved agonies and suffering faced by the Dalits. The novel has not been divided into chapters or sections and runs smoothly without any interruptions like an extended 'narrative about oppression' portraying the Dalits as 'crushed or broken' leaving the readers to deconstruct the multiple layers of oppression faced by the Dalits. The Dalits have always been denied basic human rights, equal opportunities in work and education and suffer discrimination and violence. The experiences of Dalit has either been altogether excluded or were projected in an unfavourable light by their colonisers.

The novel reaches a symbolic end illustrating the 'in-betweenness' of the dilemma of Dalits where both the world has abandoned them, Melu and his father, run back and forth between the rural and urban worlds desperate to lead a comforting life but none promises them a future. Melu's babu starts for the town during the night hoping that he could stay with his son who he assumes to be leading a happy life. Melu is deeply aggravated with his life in the town and wishes to return back to the village and start over again. With the hope of a better future in the village, he too starts for the village while his father is coming to the town. Melu finally declares, *'It's much better to be home and be hungry than live in this hellhole.'* They appear to be running in circles hopelessly going back and forth unable to find peace. The pastoral world of Melu's babu is the opposite of the chaotic city life led by his son; however, their experiences of oppression are similar.

Film Adaptation

The audio visual adaptation of the novel by the renowned filmmaker, Gurdial Singh has won several awards on national and international levels for its direction and cinematography including the 59th National Awards of India for the best feature film in Punjabi. The film carries a dark tone and minimal dialogues featuring the pastoral fields, men parading in turban and shawls, taking us inside Punjab showing the realities of the feudal system and the power enjoyed by the rich landlords whereas the cities are polluted, large chimneys appear in the backdrop, smoke rising from the power plants and we see how this factory life is slowly evading the village life.

Conclusion

Through this novel, Gurdial Singh challenges the myth that a capitalistic society elevates the chances of Dalits towards prosperity freeing themselves from the clutches of caste discrimination, poverty and the evils of feudalism, however, on the contrary, it transfers them from one state of oppression, i.e. feudalism, towards another. As stated by Suraj Yengde in his book 'Caste Matters': '*The inherent form of capitalism reproduced with it the age-old structure of oppression. The conditions of working in a field as a landless tiller or working in a factory in modern industrial society were premised on the extraction of labour and exploitation of its productive value. The misuse of power remains at the core of the execution of capitalism.*' The contract labourers that were enslaved by the rich landlords were now being enslaved by the factory owners, their status was changed from contract labourers to daily wage labourers. Gurdial made use of the voice of the marginalized to explain these changes that were taking place around them, the characters appear in a state of panic as the new order evades the villages establishing itself. His works played a crucial role in mobilizing the people from the marginalized community and shaping the mindset of people.

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