

Review Article**Historical Studies of Punjabi Literature****Tejwant S Gill**

J S Grewal, *Historical Studies of Punjabi Literature*, Publishers, Publication Bureau Punjabi University Patiala 2011, Pages, 307, hb, Rs 300.

This book has papers on certain poets of the Punjabi language and their lyrical compositions in specific genres of the past, that is, of the medieval and the pre-modern eras. These poets were votaries of Sufism and wrote *dohas*, *kafis*, *baramahs*, *kissas* and in a few more literary forms, popular with the people of Punjab. These articles are authored by J S Grewal, a widely known Punjabi historian. For the last half century, he has written with great authority on varied aspects of the history of the region. This has earned him recognition from academic institutions at regional, national and international level. Doing so, he has observed historiography for which evidences matter the most. In these articles, he has sought to bear such a historiography upon Sufi poets writing from the first quarter of the 13th century and the *kissakars*, come to the fore, almost after three centuries.

From this, distinctly arises Grewal's literary historiography, so attentive to the milieu, the moment and the man i. e. the poet. For evoking the milieu, his attention rivets upon the social, religious and caste factors. For the moment, he looks upon the historical events, the changes to have ensued in the coming and going of the rulers, their interest or disinterest in the affairs of the kingdom and the conquests and defeats during their reigns. For knowing the concerned poet as a person, attention is turned to his genealogy, upbringing, education and career. So far as his determination goes, personal and impersonal factors are considered in juxtaposition, rather than in interaction. The wider factors, social, political, religious, are there as mostly framework.

No wonder, in interpretation more emphasis falls upon the subject matter rather than the truth content. To use an analogy from Walter Benjamin, subject matter is like the wood without which fire cannot be ignited. When the flame touches the wood, there spreads conflagration all around. Light, emitting from the conflagration, is identical with truth content. Secondly, conditioned by the milieu, moment and personal-cum-impersonal factors, literary compositions tend to pass as components of a trajectory, rising and falling but never turning back to the point of its origin. Posited thus, they have life in the time, they were written. No after-life accrues to them so as to alter their past significance, award present meaning and foretell future value. If imagination, experience and foresight have

gone into their writing, they tend to figure as stars in the constellation. Like stars, they do shine, get dim, disappear, again to reappear but they do not vanish altogether into oblivion.

Needless to say, to evoke truth content without elaborating subject matter results in whimsical judgments. Such was the treatment meted out to Punjabi literature by literary historians before Sant Singh Sekhon. The book carries a lengthy article upon Sekhon's study of *Gurbani* and *Kissa-kav*, comprising two of the six volumes he had contemplated to write upon the history of Punjabi literature in all its extent and depth. In the course of writing this paper, factors concerning Sekhon's historiography and literary history are vividly present in Grewal's mind. In the beginning of this article, he is all in admiration for Sekhon being "supremely confident about his own views and insights." At the end, he has no compunction to conclude that "his History may not be a fully adequate introduction to Punjabi literature but there can be no introduction to Punjabi literature without his History." On the strength of evidences at his disposal, he does not withhold himself from drawing attention to Sekhon's oversights, omissions and commissions. In particular, they are to be found in his writings upon the kissakars and the Sufi poets, which figure prominently in the book under review. In spite of this, Sekhon's presence hovers sometimes distinctly and at other times indistinctly, over all the other articles comprising this volume. In this context, it may not be out of place to underline the impulses and commitments, which differentiate Grewal's historiography from that of Sekhon. While attempting the literary history of writing, Sekhon, in the first instance, seeks to decode its leitmotif. He hints at secondary motifs as well but does not bother to forge them all into a totality. After all, he does not believe in weaving them into a web. By relating the leitmotif to the cultural-historical and social-political factors of the time, he brings the past significance of the writing, with keen focus on its present meaning. Such literary history of his is at its best in his study of *Gurbani in Punjabi Kav Sharomini*, wherein it comprises an organic network. For Grewal, more urgent is to weave a web of all the motifs. This is because academic interest is primary for him where for Sekhon more crucial is the ideological concern. As compared with Sekhon's organic network, Grewal's web is more entangled and less organic. With diligent devotion, he performs this task. The interpretation of the web, sometimes arduous to comprehend, draws all his attention, in particular to bring out the past significance of the motifs woven into the academic web. Drawing upon evidences, trudging through summaries, quotations and appropriating their texts for his purpose through quasi-indirect discourse, this past significance does not strive as much to project present meaning. While hovering over all the articles included in this book, Sekhon's presence is marked precisely by this difference.

Unlike Dr. Mohan Singh Dewana and Principal Teja Singh who believed Punjabi language to have arisen in the Vedic or the late Aryan era, it arose around the 10th century as evidenced by the folklore of those times. Its written literature appeared three centuries later with the *shalokas* of Sheikh Farid. Against the whimsical contentions of the above-mentioned literary historians, Grewal agrees with Sekhon that it emerged from the *Lehndi* dialect, At the same

time, he reinforces his view by adding that therein the role of *Prakrit* and *Apabhramsha* could not be discounted. He holds that written literature in Punjabi arose with Sheikh Farid in the 13th century as against Dr. Dewana who credited this origin to the *Jogis* in the 7th or the 8th century. They might have employed a few Punjabi words but discourse, authentic to its foremost dialect, *khari boli*, came to the fore with Sheikh Farid in particular. Most of what Sekhon found exceptional in this savant, his choice of the female consort as the interlocutor, lyrical articulation of humility, unequivocal emphasis upon the fear of death and the shearing consciousness of sin, meet with Prof. Grewal's approval. He rightly finds "Sekhon's interpretation of sin" as "the most interesting dimension of Farid."

In his view, the lacuna in Sekhon's view is that he does not lay adequate stress upon Sufi Islam that for Prof. Grewal envelopes the poetry of Sheikh Farid. Reading through all that Grewal writes about Sufi Islam, one is led to believe that for his own private satisfaction, Farid might have delved into its mystery. But his public choice articulated by Waris Shah as "*Shakarganj de vich mukam kita/ Dukh dard Punjab da dur haisi*" left him with little aptitude to burden his heart-rending couplets with scholasticism borrowed from Sufi Islam. Though Grewal has thought it better to overlook this aspect so vouchsafed by Waris Shah, it was this heart-rending rendition of feelings of piety, penitence, humility and sobriety, which moved Guru Arjan Dev to include his couplets in *Guru Granth* alongwith his own compositions and those of his predecessors, coming after Guru Nanak, the most illustrious of them all.

Naturally, the determination of the poet to deal with has impelled him to be selective in the choice of the compositions to be analyzed. Since the selected compositions are interlinked, the task to elaborate his point of view with quotations from them gets emphatic enough. He employs the quotations so opulently in the course of his elaboration that sometimes, it gets cumbersome to separate his argument from the web, woven by the quotations. The more elaborate the quotation, the more quantitative is its burden for knowing its import. This import acquires significance only if its intricacies are revealed towards which Grewal does proceed by paraphrasing the quotation partly in his own and partly in the language of the quotation itself.

No doubt, paraphrase is a step that goes beyond quotation from which the reader is helped to draw the logical sense, howsoever much he or she may stay literal. Its operation remains essentially of the sequential nature that precludes simultaneous grasp of the semantics of the text. As a result, a different text, simpler than the original one, comes into existence, only to explain the rationale of the text under analysis and not to provide its multiple grasp in simultaneity. This sounds like after-life accruing to the life of the original composition, but essentially in the derivative sense.

Subsidiary to quotation and paraphrase is reference to which Prof. Grewal has recourse in almost all the articles included in this book. He has recourse both to direct and indirect reference in the cases meant to underline the specificity of his analysis, the distinctiveness of his insight. That the authority being referred to misses some significant aspect or essential facet, is only implied and is rarely

stated in explicit terms. So much does he remain on the side of discretion that even an ironical comment is avoided. The question of getting satirical and pejorative does not arise at all. This is because his academic interest remains in the foreground. To state any ideological may not be altogether absent but its presence, if any, is essentially in the background.

So far as his article on Shah Hussain goes, this attempt succeeds only to a partial extent. Crucial issues are either ignored or only partially resolved. The first concerns the perplexity the late Prof. Jaidev raised with regard to the use of the masculine terminal voice in the verses articulating the female voice. For Grewal, the issue sounded interesting and depressing. It was a reply that did little to resolve the perplexity of the interlocutor. The second concerns the non-inclusion of any of Shah Hussain's compositions in *Guru Granth*. Does Grewal regard this issue as of no consequence? This conjecture may be in tune with his historiography drawing upon evidence, quotation and paraphrase. But someone, anxious to go beyond these tactics and see some strategy at work cannot rest content with evasions and partial resolutions.

To the contrary, Grewal's articles on Sultan Bahu and Bulle Shah are very satisfying indeed. Some deep-seated personal impulse, going beyond academic interest, seems to have gone into their writing. In his article on Sultan Bahu, he draws attention to his Arabic origin, aristocratic living, and affiliation with the orthodox nobles holding the reins of the kingdom but filiation with the liberal section of the ruling elite. His mind is racked by conflict between faith and love, the former organizing his behavioral pattern and the latter subverting it in ingenious ways. Living in the patriarchal world, he observes the norms of orthodox Islam but at the same time reserves special fondness for mysticism inhering it. In the loneliness of his heart, he rates love above this mysticism as well. This is not wholly spiritual love for conjugal love is a part of it. In this, his preference rests upon his female partner as wife but any manifestation of her wifeness as menstruation for example, is disregarded. Rather than take this interpretation forwarded with unusual insight by Grewal as intractable, it impels the interested reader to cast a look at the contemporary elite, including the academic ones, who accept the system in public, in private find fault with it, regard tradition as faulty but have neither the sense nor the sensibility to bring some veritable change. Grewal's interpretation rests content with its past significance but the subversive hints inhering it impel the interested reader, though not its disinterested counterpart, to derive from it some present meaning as well.

Bulle Shah is contrapuntal to Sultan Bahu in every respect. Very diligently, with scrupulous detail, Grewal seeks to prove that he was the most catholic poet. He indicates that Shah Hussain was equally liberal but Bulle Shah was supremely catholic. What distinguishes liberalism from catholicity, he does not articulate in specific terms. From Grewal's interpretation, impression goes that Shah Hussain's liberalism is anchored in autochthony whereas Bulle Shah's catholicity having ideological roots grows from Sufism but exfoliates in all its richness and diversity by imbibing influences from the Indian lore. Does it grow into an emergent life-experience or rests content only by amalgamating residual

and dominant elements drawn from the Indian lore into those of Sufism? This issue remains inarticulate in the article, written so circumspectly. Though his aspiration might have been to forge an organic network from them, it was essentially their web that he could weave. This is what critically interested reader is likely to gather by reading in between the lines of Grewal's interpretation

How such a network could have been forged was shown in part by Waris Shah by depicting Heer's life-experience in the house of her in-laws. In this regard, her three reactions are so worthy of notice. First comes to the fore when she is told by the village-damsels that a handsome youth turned a yogi, has settled in the outskirts of the village. She laments and from her lamentation rises high not only beloved's pang but also sister's regret and mother's concern. Second, on her return from rendezvous with Ranjha, she feels her in-law's house a source of torment and terror as if it is owned by a marauder. Third, when Sahiti quarrels with Ranjha, she, in words reminiscent of Guru Nanak's discourse pleading for suffering humanity, accosts her for tormenting the wretched yogi. Together, these reactions, articulated by Heer in Waris Shah's masterpiece, establish an emergent icon of Punjabi woman, distinct from its counterparts in the Indian and the Islamic lore. In his sprawling article, "Indigenous Tales of Punjab", my fond wish was to identify insights of the sort from his depiction of the heroes and heroines, comprising the emotional-cum erotic capital of Punjabi culture.

I have no hesitation in holding that the sort of diligent application and scrupulous understanding Grewal has brought to bear upon the Sufi poets and Kissakars of the medieval and pre-modern eras of Punjabi literature are worthy of emulation. Any neglect on this score is so very harmful both in the present context and the future perspective.