

## **The Novel as a Site for Cultural Memory: Gurdial Singh's *Parsa***

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This paper introduces the reader to Gurdial Singh's fiction which ranges from short stories to longer works such as *Unhoye* (1966), *Kuwela* (1968), *Addh Chanini Raat* (1972), *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* (1976) – recently made into an award winning Punjabi film by Gurvinder Singh - and *Parsa* (1991). Through these works Gurdial Singh radicalised the Punjabi novel and emerged as the messiah of the marginalised, dispossessed and oppressed. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part places Gurdial Singh as well as his work within the wider linguistic, historical and cultural frame and Punjabi literature. The second part provides nuanced readings and analyses of his novel *Parsa* and considers whether it could be perceived as an effective site for cultural memory of Punjabi people, their poetry, language and history.

### **Introduction**

As I 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 form and structure, infusing the rugged material reality with the 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 myriad hues. On being refused funding by his parents for education beyond Matric, he decided to be his own mentor, slowly toiling his way up from a JBT teacher to a school lecturer, from there to a college lecturer and ultimately 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 the Punjabi language and culture, he has served its cause for well over four decades now.

It was only once he had started reading the classics that a strong, irrepressible desire was born in him to emulate the masters. Having realised rather early on in life that the 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. His own life, and 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 his early success. In 1957, he published his first ever story called *Bhaganwale* in *Panj Darya*, a magazine edited then by Prof. Mohan Singh. Most of his stories were published in *Preetlarhi*, edited by the redoubtable 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 Deeva* in 1964. Translated into English as *The Last Flicker* (Sahitya Akademi, 1991), it was hailed as a modern classic soon after it appeared in print. However, his early success didn't either stand in way of or turn into a disincentive for his later, equally powerful and significant works of long fiction such as *Unhoye* (1966), *Kuwela* (1968), *Addh Chanini Raat* (1972), *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* (1976) and *Parsa* (1991) et al.

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* (1962), *Kutta Te Aadmi* (1971), *Begana Pindh* (1985) and *Kareer Di Dhingri* (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. Besides, he has 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 Deeva*, three other novels of his viz., *Addh Chanini Raat (Night of the Half-Moon*, Macmillan, 1996), *Parsa* (NBT, 2000) and *Unhoye (The Survivors*, Katha, 2005) are also available in the English translations.

### **Gurdial Singh's Fiction in Perspective**

Much before we start making an assessment of Gurdial Singh's fiction, we need to put him, as well as his work, within the wider linguistic, historical and cultural frame to which he essentially belongs. Making a rather slow start, the novel, as we all know, began to emerge in the Punjabi language only in the latter half of the 19th century, and initially it developed 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>2</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 *quissas*, 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 soft, delicate formless texture. In his novels, fluidity of sentimentalism goes hand in hand with the ideology of a social reformer, something that Sohan Singh Seetal and Jaswant Singh Kanwal, who were to come later, also tried to emulate, fairly successfully.

Interestingly, it was in the Punjabi language that the *anchalik upnayas* (whose beginnings literary historians often trace back to Phaneshwar Nath Renu's Hindi novel *Maila Anchal*) made its appearance first of all. Kartar Singh Duggal's *Andraan*, a novel written in the Pothoari dialect and steeped in the localism of the same region, its geography, economy, ecology, customs and conventions, was published as far back as 1948. In a way, emergence of this particular form of novel did help in foregrounding hard-core social realism in the Punjabi novel, which was to acquire its ideological underpinnings from a curious 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 obsessive, maudlin sentimentality, even quasi-romantic character, these luminaries slowly but surely paved the way for the advent of a truly modernist novel in Punjabi, with a psychological/sociological thrust entirely its own.

Until the times of Gurdial Singh, two diametrically opposed ideologies viz., a brand of naïve romanticism and an indigenous form of realism had continued to exert pressures and counter-pressures upon the content and/or form of the Punjabi novel. Apart from these ideological tensions, which helped shape the aesthetic concerns as well as their articulation, 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, even tried to attain a rare synthesis of the two, wherever possible, something that had eluded Punjabi fiction until then. Conscious of his role in re-constituting the novelistic discourse, he ruptured the tradition of Punjabi novel from within, while continuing to nurture it from without. By pulling it out of the morass of bourgeois morality into which Punjabi novel had largely sunk in its post-Independence phase, he opened up possibilities that would have otherwise remained unrealized.

Though not strictly a proponent of *anchalik upnayas*, 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 assiduously re-created a fictional replica of an insulated, self-enclosed, 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 flavour 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 stubborn, unyielding land, sandy soil and prickly air, low-roofed mud houses and vast open fields, mingle and overlap with stifling caste prejudices and intriguing questions of land ownership/possession 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 in any way prevent Gurdial Singh from giving an artistically wholesome expression to the complexities of life he has set out to explore.<sup>2</sup>

Gurdial Singh radicalised the Punjabi novel or re-inscribed its ideological and/or aesthetic space by infusing into it a new consciousness about the underprivileged and the oppressed. Commenting upon his first ever novel *Marhi Da Deeva*, published in 1964, Namwar Singh, an eminent Hindi critic, is believed to have 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 had resurrected faith in novel as a form. In a similar fashion, when in the Indian languages, novel was going through its worst ever crisis, Gurdial Singh’s *Marhi Da Deeva* revitalized this form as only he could.’<sup>3</sup> The significance of *Marhi Da Deeva* lies in the fact that for the first time ever in the history of Punjabi fiction, a social and economic outcast, leaping out of his shadowy terrain, made it to the centrestage of fictionscape. While seeking to project the sufferings and agonies of the hopelessly marginalized individuals as well as social classes/castes in a rather involved manner, Gurdial Singh has never lost sight of the imaginative/creative demands of his own vocation as a novelist. Often seen as a proponent of hard-core social realism, he is equally at ease with the poetic, symbolic mode of expression, even structuring of his fiction.

His sternest critics also concede, unhesitatingly, that he did plough a fresh ground by turning novel into a trenchant critique of social discourse, without in any way compromising on its poeiticity. Steeped in history without being explicitly historical, his fiction mediates its way through myriad, often disparate, crosscurrents of the mainstream and folk traditions of storytelling, latent in both orature and ecriture. Though he did radicalize the novel by infusing greater ideological strength and vitality into its content, at the formal level, he is neither an exhibitionist nor a maverick experimentalist.

Convinced that the 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 inherent organicity in all of his fictional work, he doesn’t return to the treatment of the same subject or style, ever again. An inveterate progressive, he subscribes to the Darwinian notion of continuous, uninterrupted struggle with the environment and also to the positivism of the evolutionary principle minus its ruthless competitiveness, as much as his characters often do.

### **Gurdial Singh’s Fiction: A Brief Overview**

In one of his novels, *Parsa*, a low-caste *siri*, Tindi, requests his benevolent master to tell him an ‘interesting story.’ On being asked as to what really makes for such a story, Tindi first hesitates and then shoots off a counter question: “Why are the stories always about kings and princes?”<sup>4</sup> 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, the dislocated and the de-privileged on the centre map of his fiction. From a poor, illiterate farmhand, a small-time worker or a peasant to an overburdened rickshaw-puller or a low-

caste carpenter, it's always the primal rawness of human life that strikes a sympathetic chord in him.

Conceived as victims of social/historical tyranny, most of his characters fight back even in face of imminent defeat. He strongly believes that man's ultimate *dharma* is to fight the tyranny and oppression built into his/her own situation. This is what often imbues his characters, even his novels with a definite sense of tragic inevitability. And this tragic sense is certainly much more pronounced in his early novels such as *Marhi Da Deeva* (1964) and *Kuwela* (1968) than it is in his later works. While Jagseer in *Marhi Da Deeva* falls an easy prey to the machinations of a beguiling feudal power play, Heera Dei in *Kuwela* 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* (1966) and Moddan in *Addh Chanini Raat* (1972). Unlike Jagseer, both Bishna and Moddan not only refuse steadfastly to become accomplices in the process of their own marginalization but also make untiring efforts to rise in revolt against this process. They even go so far as to interrogate the dehumanising social/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 intense 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* (1991) 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, and that too, with some measure of success, is, indeed, quite rare. And if such an example does exist in the contemporary Punjabi literature, it's Gurdial Singh's much-celebrated novel *Parsa*.

There is 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, without an exception, are set amid the shifting contours of the Malwa region whose economic backwardness sometimes obscures its cultural richness. What is significant is that despite his emphasis upon its 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, Gurdial Singh has managed to create richly evocative vignettes of rural life, complete with its distinctive code, its customs and conventions. Always alive to its throbbing pulse and rhythm, he sees a village not as static but an every-changing, dynamic unit. Often the trauma of change is chronicled with an unnerving sense of verisimilitude. It's the dialectics of tradition and modernity that tends to give an overarching expression to his insistent social concern.

*Marhi Da Deeva (The Last Flicker)* relocates the twin questions of ownership and dispossession within the ambit of the green revolution and redefines them. *Kuwela* probes into the problem of widow remarriage in an orthodox Hindu society. *Rete di ik Muthi* is a sensitive portrayal of how the blind pursuit of materialism leads to slow erosion of human values such as love and fidelity. *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* bemoans the loss of kinship culture, casting an oblique look at the issue of shrinking land-holding and attendant problems of forced migration, unemployment and destitution.

Set in pre-independent India, *Unhoye (The Survivors)* records the impact of early forays into industrialization with a rare precision, of how dehumanisation creeps in, almost imperceptibly. Unlike his other works *Parsa* is not so tangibly located in time-space continuum. As the main focus of the novel is on reclaiming the rich literary/cultural sources and history of Punjab, social reality impinges on it very marginally. It is almost as if, after having created the narratives of oppression in his earlier novels, in *Parsa*, Gurdial Singh finally breaks free, 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 Jagseer, Moddan or Bishna live through, *Parsa* brings the ultimate, much-awaited Dantesque vision of *Paradiso*.

Even when he does portray social reality in all its searing passion, as he does in his earlier novels, he takes care not to ever allow it to become either morbid or squeamish. 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 Deeva*, *Rete Di IK Muthi*, *Addh Chanini Raat* et al sometimes acquire a suggestive power far beyond their immediate context. It's his poetic vision, which ultimately liberates, offering a transcendent edge to everything he so feelingly portrays.

Gurdial Singh's creative imagination is imbued with a rare sense of synthesising power. Like a true artist, he understands the dilemmas and conflict of both art and life exceedingly well. No wonder, his poetic effusions go so well with a restrained expression and an economy of detail. He is a minimalist in the true sense of the word, as he manages to make it not just an expression of his style; rather the very texture of his vision and thought. No wonder, he is able to strike a precarious, though fine balance between the narrative and the dramatic, the personal and the historical, the political and the artistic.

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>5</sup> For him, tragedy is not a by-product of a fortuitous set of circumstances or an ingrained personal failing. It is immanent in the very condition of being human or rather becoming so, result of a constant dialectical struggle between the two. 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 undying 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 recognition of those who live in my pages.'<sup>6</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 rather desperately for the retrieval of honour and dignity that history has stoutly denied to them through the ages.

### **Cultural Memory as an Alterity**

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, one thing is quite clear that though Gurdial Singh may be said to belong to the mainstream tradition of the Punjabi novel, all along, his novels have synergized this tradition from below. Rather than function within the restrictive framework of the dominant tradition, he has constantly interrogated, even subverted and deconstructed it from the perspective of folk traditions residing in the popular consciousness. Rejecting the conventional notion of official, monumental historiography, all along, he has strongly advocated and subscribed to the notion of the worm's eye view of history. Often the representations of cultural history or the folk representations within the dominant tradition are seen in terms of alterity, which challenges the conventional notions of chronological, linear, and dominant history or the discourse constituted by it. Not only does Gurdial Singh locate his narratives within the larger space of cultural history, but he also posits 'cultural memory,'<sup>7</sup> an alterity within the framework of cultural history, as the basic trope for constructing his novels. In several of his novels, including *Parsa*, cultural memory functions as the basic structuring device for constituting a discourse that runs counter to the dominant discourse(s).

The notion of 'cultural memory' emerged in the social sciences in the wake of the World War II and the horrors of Nazism or the untold sufferings of the Jews in Germany.<sup>8</sup> It is only when the fragmented or fragmentary accounts of the holocaust began to emerge out of the persecuted minority of Jews who survived its horrors that 'cultural memory' became a worthwhile area of investigation for the social scientists. To this extent, it would not be wrong to say that the notion of 'cultural memory' is implicated in a definitive sense of historical consciousness. Often seen as a reaction against systematic, willful attempts of official, monumental historiography to suppress the historical

memories, especially of a very brutal, inhuman nature, it takes on the form of dialectics of 'remembering and forgetting', as has been emphasized by Jen Brockmeier.<sup>9</sup> He goes on to suggest that 'in this discourse, narrative practices are of central importance because they combine various cultural symbol systems, integrating them within one symbolic space.' According to him, three narrative orders i.e., 'the linguistic, semiotic and performative or discursive of any artwork' are examined as these 'constitute a mnemonic system, a symbolic space of remembering and forgetting in which the time orders of past and present are continuously recombined'.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, the cultural memory is said to operate in all those cultures and communities where people have either been oppressed and subjected to the process of willful suppression, or where the complex processes of hegemonic control and subsequent 'cultural repression' or 'amnesia' have taken place. If seen from this perspective, cultural memory may be perceived as an attempt to come to terms with the repressed contents and/or processes of history and is necessitated by the reclamation of subjectivity, which is threatened with extinction, especially in face of multiple historical oppressions. The extent to which 'cultural memory' plays a decisive role in the restitution or reclamation of subjectivity, it could be said to become complicit with the process of identity-formation or identity-construction, too.<sup>11</sup> It's another matter that this process of identity formation is recapitulated through a notion of history, which is not only unconventional but also pre-supposes a non-linear, discontinuous, non-chronological and anti-authoritarian representation. It is precisely this notion that Foucault supports when he refers to the discontinuous processes of history or points toward the presence of the significant gaps, silences and fissures in our reading of history.<sup>12</sup> To put it somewhat differently, cultural memory could be said to reside in those fissures, gaps and silences or in the residual elements where the history could be said to deconstruct itself. For this reason, its reclamation is possible only through such non-hierarchical, cultural sources as folk stories, songs, or little narratives of the people as opposed to the grand, universalizing narratives of the big and the powerful. In other words, the ideology behind this process of reclaiming 'cultural memory' is definitely anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalistic, anti-imperialistic and anti-hegemonic. To put it somewhat differently, 'cultural memory' constitutes a counter-hegemonic discourse, which tends to interrogate and subvert the assumptions of cultural dominance and hegemony operating within a culture.

It also needs to be pointed out that despite all its individualistic articulations, cultural memory, often enough, is as intensely personal as it is representatively communal or collective.<sup>13</sup> It essentially posits a situation where the distinction between 'individual memory' and 'collective memory' ceases to exist, as the individual is necessarily seen only as a carrier of the cultural code of 'collective memories'. Not only do the cultural memories reside inside an individual, but they also manifest themselves in and through the life-processes of an individual. As the novel often deals with the fate and fortunes of the individual characters, it has the potential to turn into an extremely fascinating site for the reclamation of cultural memory. It is as

though the past becomes a living reality or entity, with its present-ness becoming a pre-text for both what is 'remembered' as much as what is conveniently 'forgotten'. In other words, the novel becomes an archeology of hidden as well as revealed knowledge about the past or its continued, everlasting presence.

Apart from its present-ness, another fact that needs to be stressed in relation to the fictional representation of cultural memory is that, being what it is, memory often displays a characteristic tendency for a 'spill-over effect.' Not only do the memories tend to constantly elide, and go through the process of slippage (also called forgetting), but often display an equally strong tendency for simply running through the butter fingers. This is precisely why it almost becomes imperative for a fictional work dealing with cultural memories to take recourse to the framing device for structuring the events, situations and anecdotes, which can only be perceived or read, if effectively framed. The framing device marks off the boundaries of human memory, provides space for the diversified, rich material, and also provides the 'archival traces' through which memories become recognizable, identifiable, and even decipherable. It is for this reason that sometimes such narratives are also known as the 'Narratives of Recovery',<sup>14</sup> as Marita Sturken suggests through her catchphrase.

#### ***Parsa*: A Significant Cultural Text**

Having provided the context, we can now consider the question of how and in what different ways Gurdial Singh's novel *Parsa* could be perceived as an effective site for the cultural memory of its people, their poetry, language and history. Before we lay out our case in this regard, first and foremost, it is important to see how *Parsa* is completely different from the other novels of Gurdial Singh, and why it must be looked upon as a significant cultural text. Unlike the other novels of Gurdial Singh, *Parsa* operates simultaneously within a dual frame of time and space, that is, the narrative time-space and the comic or eternal/epic time-space. *Parsa*, the main protagonist, lives at two different levels at the same time, moving freely from one end of the spectrum to another, without much ado. In other words, if the other novels of Gurdial Singh bear the burden of history and its multiple oppressions, *Parsa* seeks to create its own logic of emancipation or liberation. If in the other novels, his main purpose is to create the 'narratives of oppression,' in *Parsa*, he is certainly in a far more transgressive mode as he manages to create here, what one may only describe as, a 'narrative of liberation.' This fact has certainly been lost on a number of Punjabi critics who have consistently failed to see this significant paradigm shift in Gurdial Singh's novelistic discourse and continue to insist upon reading *Parsa* as an extension of much of his earlier novels. Put simply, their readings of Gurdial Singh fail to respond to the cultural specificities of *Parsa* as much as they fail to take cognizance of the novel's epical scale and the vast, panoramic view it offers of Punjab's cultural history. Though there are basic stylistic, formal, artistic and ideological

differences between the two novels, *Parsa* tends to become a cultural text in the same sense in which Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a cultural text. Both the novelists, it seems, are seeking to excavate their respective cultural situations within a definitive historical/cultural frame. In this kind of fiction, the novelist's concern is not so much with a specific period in history as it is with the whole range of cultural history of a specific culture. As authorized versions of history are neither documented nor reproduced, but systematically challenged and interrogated within the fiction space, such type of fiction allows for only an indirect mediation of history.

### ***Parsa*: A Site of Cultural Memory**

The cultural frame of this novel *Parsa* begins to define itself the moment we start exploring the rich significance of its innocuous looking title. The title easily reminds us of a mythological character Parshu Rama, who was born a Brahmin and who had declared himself to be the sworn enemy of the Khshatriyas, having taken this deadly vow to eliminate all Khshatriyas from the face of this earth.<sup>15</sup> At this juncture, one may just as well ask oneself: Why is Gurdial Singh extending the cultural frame of his novel beyond history, into the realm of mythology and folklore? To put it simply, he is setting up a frame within which cultural history becomes not just an alterity, but perhaps the only discourse available within the novel. Moreover, it has definite implications for his characterization of Parsa, who has been conceived as a complex figure, a product of both mythology and history, a Brahmin by birth and a land-owning Jat by profession. In fact, it is by invoking this context that Gurdial Singh is able to reconstruct a specific notion of the cultural history of Punjab, within which crossing over of the boundaries of caste is as real as is the transgression of the boundaries of discourse. For it is only within such a frame that Gurdial Singh can possibly situate or locate his vision of syncretism of the Punjabi traditions, where the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh identities are not constituted separately, but are caught up in a melee of time and history, constantly shaping and re-shaping each other.<sup>16</sup>

### **Cultural Memory and Individual Identity**

In more ways than one, Parsa, the main protagonist has been presented as both a witness to the processes of history and as an active participant in them, both as a worthy inheritor of the cultural memory and tradition, and also its worst denouncer and critic. This kind of dichotomy is built into the very conception of Parsa's character, and is evident in the way in which he is located, not in the actual physical, social or moral space but instead within the plural, folk and amoral cultural space, where the rigid caste boundaries of Jat-Brahmin are as irrelevant as are the material and historical contingencies of his situation. The point that Gurdial Singh is making here is simple enough. He thus manages to establish the fact that the cultural history neither supports nor legitimizes the whole idea of caste-divisions, which in any case, has become irrelevant and

unsustainable. The sociology of such caste-distinctions in our contemporary society, he appears to be suggesting, is far more complex than is often realized.<sup>17</sup> As the division of labour and the principle of specialization have now long ceased to be the determining factors, there is much greater intra-mobility between and across the different caste-formations in an Indian/Punjabi situation than is widely accepted. And it is this kind of interpenetration of the caste boundaries that allows Parsa the advantage of the proverbial Brahmanical memory (which is traditionally regarded as the result of a long established practice of memorizing the *Vedas*, but in his case, is the result of his inheritance of the eclectic folk tradition of Sufism), and also his Jat-like inherent rebelliousness, non-conformism, and almost intransigent, self-willed rigidity. If Parsa refuses to live by any code other than the one he defines, it is only because he posits himself outside the framework of conventional social morality. His refusal to accept or honour any social, moral or religious code is what testifies to his status as an archetypal rebel, an eternal outsider, who lives life purely on his own terms.

There is another aspect of Parsa's character that deserves a somewhat closer scrutiny and attention. Though he has had no formal or informal education as such, it appears, as though the entire folk tradition not only lives inside him but is also readily available to him at recall. In his moments of intense pain or joy, he often breaks forth into snatches of poetry that he has neither heard nor read. Only on closer scrutiny do we discover that what he often sings rather unconsciously are but the eternal words of Farid, Guru Nanak, Bulleh Shah or Waris Shah et al., of course, sung in a highly inflected, even conflated style. Significantly, his attempts at reclaiming cultural memory are intensely personal as he often plays his own variations on the songs of the Sufi poets, who constitute, as it were, the most precious collective heritage of the Punjabis, even today. If there is any religion Parsa either believes in or subscribes to, it is the all embracing mysticism of a Sufi, who looks upon both life and death, with much the same unconcern, indifference and detachment. On the occasion of his wife's premature death, he performs her cremation without much fuss, blatantly refusing to go through a set of rituals or ceremonies, none of which he personally believes in. Though he brings up his three sons single-handedly, he neither has great expectations of them nor does he try to control or run their lives in any way. Initially, when his elder sons leave him one by one, he simply acquiesces, and refuses to even lodge personal protest with either of them. Later, when his youngest son, Basanta, joins in with the Naxalites and leaves home, he makes no effort whatsoever to either wean him away or dissuade him. On learning of Basanta's death later in police custody, he remains impassive, going through all the formalities as if it were someone else's tragedy. This is not to suggest that in Parsa, Gurdial Singh has created an emotionally vapid or an atrophied character, someone who is reminiscent of Meursault in Albert Camus' *The Outsider*. Much less than that, Gurdial has, in fact, bestowed this character with so much of emotional plenitude and richness that he only thinks it is worthwhile to invest his emotion, not squander it away. That he is both capable of emotional

plenitude and rich investments is evident from the way in which he goes about taking moral responsibility, initially for Mukhtiar Kaur and then their young son, though he could have easily discarded them both. His decision to pick up threads and start life all over again with Savitri and the son he had through Mukhtiar Kaur, is a fair testimony to his personal philosophy of life, which demands that human beings, too, must seek renewal and reconstruction almost as naturally as does nature. He sees no contradiction between the human and the natural worlds, and his acceptance of life as well as destiny essentially springs from this kind of understanding he has.

### **Cultural Memory and State Repression**

The Punjab has had a long and established history of state repression, the earliest recorded memories of which easily go back to the Mughals, who invaded this territory, and continue well through the later phases when the British finally managed to occupy this terrain in 1849.<sup>16</sup> There is a certain view of Punjab's history which claims that even in the post-Independence phase there has hardly been any let up or extenuation of the circumstances. It is believed by some that the process of state repression only became much worse, even more subversive after India became a free nation, as now it was practiced by our own people, not the foreigners or the cultural outsiders. Regardless of whether or not we go along with this view of the Punjab's history, the fact remains that in the post-Independence phase, Punjab has witnessed a number of ideologically driven movements such as the Naxalite movement of the 1960s, supported by the hard-core Marxist ideology, the movement for the creation of Punjabi Subha, again supported by a political outfit called the Akalis, and a more militant movement of the 1980s, supported by the hardliners and terrorists among the Sikh nationalist organizations. One way or the other, it is this long history of state repression that has led to the suppression of the people's history and its fissured contents. Though Gurdial Singh has purposively not located his novel *Parsa* in a specific time-space continuum or historical context, he has imbued his narrative with non-linear, non-chronological sense of historical consciousness, which becomes *inter alia*, a form of folk, cultural history. While no specific references have been made to the Naxalite movement of the 1960s, the entire context is poetically evoked through Basanta's involvement and complicity with it. The entire history of how the young boys, especially from the rural background initially jumped on to this bandwagon, faced police atrocities and custodial deaths, before the movement began to die down, having lost its ideological impetus and credibility, has been captured in *Parsa* with sure, almost deft strokes. However, it is not too difficult to see where the personal sympathies of the novelist essentially belong, provided we understand the absorption with which he has created the character of Master, the main ideologue. Gurdial Singh does understand that though this movement may have largely failed to realize its socio-economic objectives of social justice and/or a more equitable re-distribution of land among the landless, it certainly did leave behind a very

rich legacy of poetry that can hardly be ever ignored. To an extent, *Parsa's* poetic inheritance spreads as far back as Farid and Guru Nanak on the one hand, and Shiv Batalvi, Surjit Pattar and Paash, on the other. In other words, in his attempts at recovering the cultural memory, Gurdial abolishes the facetious distinction between the poetic and the political, which, in any case, doesn't seem to exist at the ground level of popular consciousness.

### **Cultural Memory and Fictive Time/Space Consciousness**

As already pointed out, the time-space frame of *Parsa* has been very carefully crafted and structured. Unlike other novels of Gurdial Singh, this particular novel is strategically set within the dual time-frame, with Parsa moving freely between these two disparate, unrelated time-zones, also serving as an important connecting link between the two. I may emphasize here that I'm not using this notion of double time-frame in the sense in which it has been used by Christian Metz, but essentially in the sense in which T.S. Eliot has used it in his famous play *Murder in the Cathedral*.<sup>18</sup> Christian Metz says, "Narrative is a ...doubly temporal sequence... There is the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative (the time of the signified and the time of the signifier).

This duality not only renders possible all the temporal distortions that are commonplace in narratives...More basically, it invites us to consider that one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme."<sup>19</sup> However, T.S. Eliot re-conceptualizes it in terms of 'temporality' and 'timelessness'. On the one hand, Gurdial Singh is concerned about the notion of temporality and so Parsa is made to function within the specificities of time, place and action. On the other, he also realizes that there is another, perhaps more significant trans-human, trans-historical, cosmic dimension of 'time' as well. It is the recognition of this time-scale that gives to the novel a transcendent character and sweep, transforming it from just another folk narrative into a significant cultural text. As far as the conception of the novelistic space is concerned, it has been conceived in both the terms; the real, sociological/cultural as well as the poetic, psychological. While the sociological dimension of space is reflected in the way in which linearity of the narrative is emphasized, its psychological dimension is reflected in the way linearity is disrupted, giving it a transcendent sweep of space and history. Parsa lives at the conjunction of these two distinctive time-space conceptions, almost at the same time. It is in this sense that his consciousness becomes the ultimate battleground for mediating the eternal dilemmas of man in relation to other men, time, history and also timelessness. It's here that the entire game of cultural memory, polarized by the two extremes of 'remembering and forgetting,' 'amnesia and recovery' is played out. As memory fails to follow the predictable pattern of linearity, so the narrative, too, doesn't organise itself in accordance with the principle of linearity.

This might create an impression that the narrative is 'focalized' in Parsa's consciousness, which it is not. Though Gurdial Singh has primarily used the technique of 'third person narrator' throughout, he has refused to privilege a

particular viewpoint, a definitive perspective or a dominant ideology. This is achieved in a variety of ways. First, he uses a number of framing devices which lend a definite degree of clinical objectivity to his narration. Besides, we don't always view the situations or incidents only through the eyes of Parsa. Not only do the strands of 'focalization' keep shifting in the narrative, but the vulnerability of Parsa's point of view is also constantly exposed through the dogged refusal of his sons, Jetha and Pohla, to fall in line with him or Basanta's choice to lead a life his father wouldn't have ever approved of. In more ways than one, both Basanta, his youngest son, and Tindi, his siri, become not just the commentators, but virtually the surrogate protagonists of this story, too. Tindi's relationship with Parsa is vaguely reminiscent of Lear's relationship with Fool in *King Lear*. It is through the mediation of Tindi, who represents the fascinating world of folk stories, folk songs and folk wisdom (which is what Parsa shares with him often) that Gurdial Singh deconstructs both history and dominant ideology.<sup>20</sup> Going far beyond his expectations, it is Tindi who proves to be much more than a son to Parsa, something he hadn't ever imagined. His acceptance of Tindi toward the end of the novel marks an important stage in the ultimate integration of his individual/collective psyche. This is how he manages to synthesise the residual, vestigial element of 'lowliness' into his supposedly "high and mighty" Brahmanical self.

A number of Punjabi critics have denounced *Parsa* on the grounds that here Gurdial Singh has abandoned his critical concern for the dispossessed and the marginalized, and somehow become trapped in the numbo-jumbo of such abstractions as *karma*, *dharma* and/or man's relationship with nature.<sup>21</sup> No doubt, Gurdial Singh initially built his reputation by churning out, one after another, the 'narratives of oppression,' and by so doing, also succeeded in exorcizing his impinging sense of socio-economic oppression that rattled him through his youth and middle-age. In *Parsa*, he has created a novel that transcends the narrow boundaries of caste and class, dominant and marginalized, high and low, and moves toward a more integrated vision of human consciousness, where the dualities of all kind simply cease to exist. It is important to stress here that Gurdial Singh's vision is not located so much in the exclusionary or dominant Hindu view of life or Sankara's philosophy of monism, as much as it is within the eclectic and egalitarian notion of Sufi mysticism, popular in folk consciousness.

### **Cultural Memory and Narrative Framing**

It has already been suggested earlier that the cultural memory necessarily needs the mediation of a framing device, if the 'spill-over' is to be avoided and its encryption is to be successfully realized. Conscious of this fact, Gurdial Singh has used a framing device for structuring a variety of incidents and situations in this novel. For instance, there is a kind of pattern that runs through Parsa's life, as is evident from the way in which an incident involving his father Sarupa is narrated right in the beginning. To an extent, this is primarily to suggest that Parsa is the inheritor of his 'karmic destiny' as much

as he is a victim of a curse his family is afflicted with. Like his father, Parsa, too, gets embroiled in a physical fight and emerges triumphant, and like so many of his ancestors, he, too, is condemned to become a widower at a relatively young age and bring up his children single-handed. It goes to the credit of Gurdial Singh that he manages to create a narrative that doesn't simply legitimize this pattern of life but breaches it, as it were, thus creating unimaginable possibilities for Parsa's vertical growth in the process.

Another framing device used very effectively in the novel is the story-within-a-story kind of a frame, essentially a carryover from *The Mahabharata* and *The Panchtantra Tales*. It is no coincidence that the novel opens with a *Pauranik* tale about Hiranyakashyapa, the legendary demon-king, who was Prahlad's father, and was ultimately killed by Narsingha, one of the incarnations of Vishnu.<sup>22</sup> Thus by framing the narrative with this mythological story, Gurdial Singh not only manages to extend the context of his novel beyond history, but also invokes a shared cultural context within which the moral problems confronting the characters must be examined. In the immediate context, it offers a moral twist to the fight that first Sarupa and then Parsa puts up for the vindication of personal valour and honour, and later, it becomes a metonymic frame for the moral choices other characters such as Jetha, Pohla and Basanta make from time to time. Put simply, if Gurdial Singh has created any specific moral frame for judging or evaluating the actions or deeds of his characters, it is defined only in terms of various tales, mythological or folk, he insinuates into the narrative, time and again. For instance, much before Parsa comes into contact with Mukhtiar Kaur and enters into a physical relationship with her, we have a folk-tale framing the entire incident and guiding our moral perceptions, too. It is the tale of a physically strong young man who refuses to gratify the carnal needs of a married young girl (who approaches him for this purpose), simply on the grounds that she belongs to another man. What he fails to realize is that her husband, being mentally retarded, is unable to fulfil her needs. Going beyond the commonsensical, sociological view of morality, Gurdial Singh explores its trans-human, cosmic dimensions, by suggesting that a seeker in one situation could also be a giver in another. This is what the folk tale essentially demonstrates when the same young man has to beg that very woman for the sweat off her palms to get his skin-rash healed. It is obvious that Gurdial Singh would not like us to judge Parsa-Mukhtiar Kaur episode from the standpoint of conventional or commonsensical view of morality. Nothing that Parsa ever does actually fits into the frame of ordinary logic. It is only by defying this logic of conventionality that he manages to liberate himself from the self-limiting constraints of ordinariness that often chain us down to our own small dreams, desires and fears. No wonder, despite being a householder, he is shown miles ahead of a sadhu he meets in Haridwar. If Parsa is able to acquire a larger than life stature towards the end of the novel, towering far above the level of the ordinary mortals and dwarfing virtually every other character in the novel, it is only because he shows innate strength and courage in defying

all the given frames, and displays almost existential doggedness in accepting the consequences of his own actions and choices.

Gurdial Singh's purpose in using the device of a framed tale is two-fold; to provide a frame within which a vast repertoire of cultural memories can be contained and to create a character who ultimately transgresses all frames and grows beyond them. In the person of Parsa, he has certainly created such a character. And by using the stories (drawn mostly from the folk tradition) for framing the incidents and situations, Gurdial Singh allows the reader the freedom to interpret the novel, without the mediation of the narrator or the author. It is in this double sense that *Parsa*, the novel and the character, tend to become what I earlier described as the 'narrative of liberation or emancipation.'

### Conclusion

To conclude, one may say that in *Parsa*, Gurdial Singh has managed to create the narrative space within which cultural memory/history and/or caste hierarchies can effectively be subjected to a process of re-negotiation. Here I am not using the term 'narrative' in its more specialized sense in which it is often used in 'Narratology,' but in its most generalized sense where it is considered almost co-terminus with the novel. Though the novel has traditionally been seen as a sociological tract, over the years, there has been a definitive change in our perception of its role and function. The novel is no longer seen only as a form of representation in the modernist or the pre-modernist sense, but is increasingly perceived as a self-reflexive genre, with a specific archaeological function of digging into the past. However, this archaeological digging into the past is somewhat different from its engagement with history (which gave rise to the historical novel per se), as it liberates it from the well-defined, structured notions of reality, representation and fixed notion of identity. Now, that the structured notions of reality and fiction have collapsed, 'fictive space' has concomitantly, re-negotiated its internal structure, as also its modes of representation. In fact, it has now ceased to be a 'space' and has instead become a 'site' both for the inscription and the excavation of personal/cultural memory and/or history. To an extent, this is what has now made the novel into a 'site' for the contestation of multiple ideologies, which is what *Parsa*, too, tends to become, fairly successfully.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans., by A. D. Lindsay, (London: The David Campbell Publishers Ltd., 1992), pp. 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 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 (1992), *A History of Punjabi Literature*, (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi).

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in the postscript to Gurdial Singh's *Marhi Da Deewa*, (Chandigarh: Lokgeet Prakashan), p. 167. Though the original quotation is in Hindi, it has been reproduced in the text in Punjabi and the English translation in this case, as in several other similar cases, is mine.

<sup>4</sup> Gurdial Singh, *Parsa*, trans., Rana Nayar, (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2000) p. 242.

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

<sup>6</sup> As quoted to the author in an unpublished, personal interview.

<sup>7</sup> 'Cultural Memory' is a concept introduced to the archaeological disciplines by Jan Assmann who defines it 'as the outer dimension of human memory' embracing two different concepts: 'memory culture' (*Erinnerungskultur*) and 'reference to the past' (*Vergangenheitsbezug*). Memory culture is the process by which a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics, its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for the next generations to *reconstruct* their cultural identity. When we speak about cultural memory, 'we are including in this definition two distinct characteristics: (1) the survival of a historically, politically and socially marginalized group of people, and (2) the role of spirituality as a form of resistance.' (p. 1). As Jan Assmann's writings are mostly in the German language and are not available directly, I have accessed his ideas through Jeanette Rodriguez & Ted Fortier's book. For detailed exposition of the concept, see, Jeanette Rodriguez & Ted Fortier (2007), *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith & Identity*, (Austin: University of Texas Press). For the relationship between the individual and the social memory, see, Paul Connerton (1989), *How Societies Remember*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). And for the relationship between cultural memory, narrative framing and identity, see, Lewis P. Hinchman, Sandra K. Hinchman (eds.) (2001), *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*, (New York: State university of New York Press), and Introduction by Mieke Bal in Mieke Bal, Jonathan V. Crewe & Leo Spitzer (eds.) (1999), *Acts of Memory: Cultural recall in the Present*, (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press).

<sup>8</sup> This fact has been stated by Jeanette Rodriguez & Ted Terrier in their Preface (ix-x) to the book quoted above, and has also been corroborated by Michael Stewart in his article quoted below.

<sup>9</sup> 'Memory and Forgetting' are the twin processes that Jen Brockmierer associates with 'Cultural Memory.' My understanding of this concept is

borrowed from a secondary source as Brockmierer's essays are, once again, available only in the German language, so I'm reproducing Jen Brockmierer as he is quoted by Michal Stewart (September 2004), in 'Remembering without Commemoration: The Mnemonics and Politics of Holocaust Memories among European Roma' *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 10, Issue 3, pp. 561-582.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 568.

<sup>11</sup> In their book, Dan Ben-Amos & Liliane Weissberg have sought to explore this relationship between cultural memory and identity-formation. See, Dan Ben-Amos & Liliane Weissberg (1999), *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, (Michigan: Wayne State University).

<sup>12</sup> Though Foucault was not a professional historian, he has done much to alter our perception of both history and historiography in recent times. Challenging the conventional notions of history as a chronological sequencing of events, he has emphasized, in the manner of a true post-structuralist, discontinuous, fragmented, fissured and subterranean notion of history. It is this kind of history that he often excavated in most of his works. In a way, all his works are explorations of the counter-hegemonic discourse of history, attempts to create alternative histories, be it of sexuality, social practices, legal system or madness. For detailed discussion, see, Michel Foucault (2002), *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (London & New York: Routledge).

<sup>13</sup> For cultural memory being, at once, an expression of collective as well as individual articulation, see, Paul Connerton (1989), *How Societies Remember*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>14</sup> Marita Sturken, 'Narratives of Recovery: Repressed Memory as Cultural Memory', in Mieke Bal, Jonathan V. Crewe & Leo Spitzer (eds.), (1999) *Acts of Memory: Cultural recall in the Present*, (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press).

<sup>15</sup> Parashurama is believed to be the sixth avatar of Vishnu, born in the Tretayuga to a Brahmin father, Jamadagni, and a Kshatriya mother, Renuka. Parashu means 'axe' in Sanskrit, hence the name Parashurama literally means 'Rama with the axe'. He is believed to have received an axe after undertaking an extended *tapasya* (penance) to please Shiva, the tribal deity, from whom he learned the methods of warfare and other skills. He fought the advancing ocean back thus saving the lands of Konkan and Malabar. Parashurama is said to be a Brahmakshatriya ('warrior Brahman'), the first warrior-saint. His mother was a descendant of the Kshatriya Suryavansha clan that ruled Ayodhya to which Rama also belonged. Once, when Parashurama returned home, he found his mother crying hysterically. When asked why she was crying, she said his father had been killed mercilessly by Kartavirya Arjuna. She beat her chest 21 times in sorrow and grief at her husband's death. In a rage, Parashurama vowed to exterminate the world's Haihaya-Kshatriyas 21 times. He killed the entire clan of Kartavirya Arjuna (or Sahasarjuna), thus conquering the entire earth, and then conducted the Ashvamedha sacrifice. The Ashvamedha demanded

that the kings either submit to Parashurama's imperial position or thwart the sacrifice by defeating him in battle. They did neither and were killed. Parashurama exterminated the world's Haihaya-Kshatriyas 21 times, thus fulfilling his vow. Several accounts of Parashurama's legend are to be found in *The Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavat Purana*. According to some stories available in the Punjabi folk-lore, when Guru Gobind Singh baptized the Sikhs, he was reviving the tradition of Parashurama (warrior-saint). It is for this reason that Gurdial Singh has returned to this story in his novel *Parsa* and used it to look at the dissolution of caste-divisions and the emergence of Brahmin-Jat (Hindu-Sikh) hybridity in the Punjabi culture.

<sup>16</sup> There are two ways in which History of the Punjab has been reconstructed so far; as a separatist discourse and as a shared, syncretic discourse. Over the years, attempts have been made either by the Sikh historians or the sectarian historians to construct a Sikh history of the Punjab or a community-oriented history of the Punjab. Such attempts only seek to appropriate history to build or project either the majoritarian or a minoritarian discourse. Such historical constructions have fuelled communal passions and created divisions and fissures within the communities living in the Punjab, even outside. Of late, there have been attempts, endorsed, of course, by the Cambridge School of Historians, to project History of the Punjab as History of the Jats living in Punjab. All such exercises in historical constructions are, apparently, exclusionary in nature and are not only hegemonic but also politically motivated, even biased. On the other hand, a small band of historians continue to emphasize the spirit of Punjabiyat in their constructions, and have managed to resurrect the spirit of commonality, mutuality and multiple identities that are so important for the preservation of our common heritage and principles. One of the ways in which all such notions of official, hegemonic historical constructions can possibly be challenged is by re-constructing or resurrecting the narratives of cultural history and/or cultural memory, for which there is no better form available to us than fiction itself. This explains Gurdial Singh's emphasis on cultural memory and mine as well.

<sup>17</sup> The caste-divisions enunciated by the *Manusmriti* and blindly superimposed on the Indian society for centuries now stand invalidated, even defeated, by the historical experience, as people in contemporary times, no longer follow the profession appropriate to their caste or even their parents' caste. One may hear of a Brahmin following the profession of a farmer/peasant/Jat, as is the case in this particular novel or a Khastriya sustaining himself through Brahmanical professional of teaching. This is how the rigid caste-boundaries have collapsed and consequently, a new sociology of Punjabi culture has emerged. Over a period of time, this new sociology, which draws its strength from the collapse of traditional/conservative caste-divisions, and also throws up renewed consciousness of the caste structures, has emerged. Though there is growing recognition that the rigid caste-distinctions are no longer either possible or sustainable, there are also growing efforts at articulating these caste-divisions

in social and political discourse. It is this kind of sociology that lies at the heart of Punjabi life and culture and Gurdial Singh has merely represented its many configurations in his several works of fiction.

<sup>18</sup> In his play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, T S Eliot has used a dual time-scheme to present his dramatic action. The play functions both in the temporal (material) and timeless (spiritual) worlds at the same time, as Thomas Beckett, the protagonist, freely moves in and out of these two worlds throughout the play. My understanding is that Gurdial Singh has also conceived the action of the novel at two levels, much in the way as Eliot has done.

<sup>19</sup> Christian Metz (1974), *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema*, trans., Michael Taylor (New York, 1974), p.18.

<sup>20</sup> Parsa is not a hero in the conventional sense, as he consistently refuses to fit into all our known constructions of a hero. If at all, he can be regarded as a hero, he can be regarded as a folk-hero, who inhabits 'timeless cultural space,' moves freely across the two regions, material and spiritual, and has this uncanny advantage (which no other character of Gurdial Singh seems to enjoy), of being able to observe this world from below as well as above, to feel the anguish of the common man and yet look at his mundane activities with a degree of transcendence. It is by positioning his narrative within this cultural space of the folklore and tradition that Gurdial manages to critique social, political and cultural distortions of his times, so incisively. This also enables him to deconstruct all possible hegemonic constructions and dominant ideologies operating within the Punjabi society/culture.

<sup>21</sup> On the publication of *Parsa*, a good number of Punjabi critics were extremely unhappy, even disillusioned with Gurdial Singh, for they felt that in this particular work he had abandoned his Marxist perspective and was sliding into the insidious trap of 'karma-dharma' (most of which not only constitutes the main ideological bulwark of the novel, but also the central theme of the multiple discussions Parsa and Pala *Raagi* engage in), he had scrupulously eschewed all his life. They even saw negation of his own Marxist philosophy and ideology in the conception of Parsa. They were equally resentful of the fact that he had chosen to present a Brahmin and not a *Shudra* as his main protagonist. Often, what is not understood by these critics is that Parsa has been conceived on an epic scale as someone who inheres in his person the entire cultural history (the shared and not the separatist one) of the Punjab. They also fail to see that the dialogue between Parsa and Pala *Raagi* is more in the nature of an internal dialogue, a dialogue between the lower and the higher self, a dialogue between a Brahmin and Sikh peasant, a dialogue between the two discourses they represent. In the person of Parsa, both the aspects of Punjabi culture, knowledge and action, material and spiritual, find the best ever articulation that we have ever had in the Punjabi literature. The novel *Parsa* deals as much with man's relationship with social, economic and political environment as it does with his relationship with forces like faith, destiny, nature and spirituality.

<sup>22</sup> Just as Gurdial Singh has used the legend of Parashurama in the title of his novel, he starts off his narrative by referring to the story of Hiranyakashyap. According to a story from *Bhagavata Purana*, The Four Kumaras, Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana, and Sanatkumara who were the manasaputras of *Brahma* (sons born from the mind or thought power of *Brahma*), visited Vaikuntha - the abode of *Vishnu*, to see him. Due to the strength of their *tapas*, the four Kumaras appeared to be mere children, though they were of great age. Jaya and Vijaya, the gate keepers of the Vaikuntha interrupted Kumaras at the gate, thinking them to be children. They also told the Kumaras that Sri Vishnu was resting and that they could not see him then. The enraged Kumaras replied to Jaya and Vijaya that Vishnu is available for his devotees any time, and cursed both the keepers Jaya and Vijaya, that they would have to give up their divinity, be born on Earth, and live like normal human beings. Vishnu appeared before them and gatekeepers requested Vishnu to lift the curse of the Kumaras. Vishnu says that curse of the Kumaras cannot be reverted. Instead, he gives Jaya and Vijaya two options. The first option is to take seven births on Earth as a devotee of Vishnu, while the second is to take three births as his enemy. After serving either of these sentences, they can re-attain their stature at Vaikuntha and be with him permanently. Jaya and Vijaya could not bear the thought of staying away from Vishnu for seven lives. As a result, they choose to be born three times on Earth even though it would have to be as enemies of Vishnu. In the first life they were born as Hiranyakashipu and Hiranyaksha. Vishnu takes the *avatar* of Varaha to kill Hiranyaksha, and the *Narasimha* avatar to kill Hiranyakasipu. In the second life, they were born as *Ravana* and *Kumbhakarna*, being defeated by Rama avatar as depicted in the great Hindu epic *Ramayana* during the Tretayuga. Finally, in their third life, they were born as Sishupala and *Dantavakra* during the time of *Krishna* also part of the great *Mahabharata* epic which took place during the *Dwaparayuga*.

Hiranyakashipu and Hiranyaksha were born to Diti (daughter of Daksha Prajapathi) and Sage Kashyapa. It is said that *asuras* were born to them as a result of their union at the time of sunset, which was said to be an inauspicious time for such a deed. After his brother's death at the hands of the Varaha avatar of Vishnu, Hiranyaksha's brother Hiranyakashipu, started to abhor Lord Vishnu. To which end he decided to attempt to kill Vishnu by gaining mystical powers, which he believed *Brahma*, the chief among the *devas* would award him if he underwent many years of great austerity and penance just as *Brahma* has awarded to *Rakshasas* (e.g. such as *Vibhishana*.) This initially seemed to work as planned with *Brahma* becoming pleased by Hiranyakashipu's austerities. *Brahma* thus appeared before Hiranyakashipu and offered him a boon of his choice. Upon Hiranyakashipu's asking for immortality, however, *Brahma* refused. Hiranyakashipu then requested the following:

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O my lord, O best of the givers of benediction, grant me that I not die within any residence or outside any residence, during the daytime or at night, nor on the ground or in the sky. Grant me that my death not be brought by any being other than those created by you, nor by any weapon, nor by any human being or animal. Grant me that I not meet death from any entity, living or nonliving. Grant me, further, that I not be killed by any demigod or demon or by any great snake from the lower planets. Since no one can kill you in the battlefield, you have no competitor. Therefore, grant me the benediction that I too may have no rival. Give me sole lordship over all the living entities and presiding deities, and give me all the glories obtained by that position. Furthermore, give me all the mystic powers attained by long austerities and the practice of yoga, for these cannot be lost at any time.

It is this aspect of the boon that Gurdial Singh has recapitulated in the opening section of the novel. In the opening section, as elsewhere, too, Gurdial Singh has used the story of Hiranyakashipu as a framing device. This mode of a 'framing device' helps him invest his narrative with multiple possibilities, while allowing him to scrupulously stay away from becoming a controlling, intrusive presence within the narrative. Gurdial Singh never becomes a narrator/commentator in his fiction; as he scrupulously allows his dramatic narration to speak for itself, a quality that sets him apart from his other contemporaries, even predecessors.