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From Dilemma to Insanity: Representation of Colonial Horror in Gurcharan Das' *Larins Sahib*

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Abstract

The impressions and impact that India faced as a community can hardly be compensated with. The return of such memories of the past generates colonial horror within the people even today. This might be one of the reasons behind the popularity of period pieces even today. Gurcharan Das draws us back to this time through his play *Larins Sahib*. The narrative entices us to revisit the power dynamics of the time and the psychological effects it had upon the common folk. But most importantly, it addresses the issue of a White man who is apparent in his motives but gets dragged to insanity, overwhelmed by his position of power. In this plot of cruel and clear consciousness, the historical episodes of Punjab get entangled. Gurcharan Das provides a different perspective towards colonial times, breaking the distinction between power and 'othering'.

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Introduction:

Gurcharan Das is often seen pondering upon the horrors of the past that India has suffered throughout history. For his play, *Larins Sahib*, Das picked up an unusual part of history, often neglected under the garb of hyper-Indian Nationalism. While turning the pages of history, a clear distinction between the ruthless English and the fair-natured Indians comes



out as a common phenomenon. But for a refreshing change, Das highlighted his protagonist, who happens to be English by birth but an Indian compassionate by conscience. However, in the course of this historical period piece, we find him deviating from the actual historical facts on many points. Be it the discontinuation of Sati or the acquisition of the Koh-i-Noor diamond, Das takes liberty with the presentation of history. However, most of the characters celebrated in the play have their reality records, making the narrative a smooth blend between fact and fiction.

It is interesting to note how the horrors of colonial rule affected both parties alike. We often either dismiss or neglect the possible effects of colonialism upon the ruling class in order to foster the greatness of the native nationalists. Just like George Orwell, in his “Shooting of an Elephant”, talks about the façade of superiority that an English officer needs to don at every given time to maintain the dominion status, Das brings out the dilemma of a much-loved officer Lawrence, natively called as Larins Sahib, who is torn between his duty for the Nation and admiration for the king, Ranjit Singh.

Retaining the Power Structure:

One of the essential factors of the British Raj was the fact that ever since its beginning, the empire was highly dependent upon the maintenance of its status quo. As soon as the imperialistic ambitions of the British over India were laid bare, it was imperative for them to constitute a means of showcasing their own race and culture as superior to the natives. The domination could be maintained only by creating this distinction between the two. In order to maintain this distinction, a binary was established in reference to the socio-



cultural practices of English in opposition to the Indians. Though the Missionaries sprouted as an effective medium to propagate the British views as superior to natives, it was, however, the political overtaking that established a concrete superiority of the English. This binary formulated a power structure where the English cultural specificities were considered as the locus, enhancing the marginalised condition of the natives. Hence, maintaining this power structure was seen as a mandatory compulsion on their part so as to continue their regime in India. This maintaining and retaining of the authoritativeness is often seen through their various interactions with the natives. Be it the dictums thrown at various princely states, the laws formulated for the benefit of the British, or the mere disregard of the native rituals and customs, they reek of their sheer effort to maintain this air of superiority.

Gurcharan Das plays upon these controlling factors of the British while constituting his premise for the play. The complications and the mishaps created by the British ignorance, the hardship that was caused to the natives, and the political balance that the Empire needed to create for their prolonged rule in India lends to the basic plot structure of the play *Larins Saheb*. In a conversation with Rani Jindan Kaur, we find Lawrence pointing out this ignorance and disregard on the part of his fellow officers when he says:

Lawrence: (uncomfortably.) A small detachment of English soldiers was crossing the Gate towards the bazaar when the officer in command found their way blocked by a couple of cows. Not attuned to Indian sympathies and being young and impetuous, I'm afraid he cleared the street in the quickest possible way.

Rani: (Genuinely.) Hail! He killed the cows.



Lawrence: (Apologetically.) I'm afraid so. (Das 49)

Althusser, in his 'repressive state apparatus', points out how power is maintained primarily through mental and physical coercion, as well as violence. This violence inflicted by the English Officials in general was what was resented and voiced against by Lawrence throughout the course of the narrative.

In a constant urge to maintain the dominion status, any deviation, even on their own part, comes as a significant threat to them. A rise in tension is perceived whenever there is a drop in this exertion of power. Hence, Lawrence's ways that differed from the stereotype posed a threat to the cantonment when the Foreign Secretary, Curries, expressed his view to Harding, stating that it is always better to appoint "a regular sort" for higher positions. This "regular sort" comprises of a Civil servant who is not just efficient in work but a proper Christian and has apathy in mixing with the natives. Lawrence here can be perceived as the 'play', a disruption of the presence, as pointed out by Jacques Derrida in his "Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences". Here, the dominion structure of a political power play is often disrupted by the presence of a sense of morality within one of themselves, Henry Lawrence.

This exertion of power needs to be manifold for its effective implementation. Thus, not just political usurping but racial superiority comes as a natural consequence. This is implied through their fabricated ideology of the need to civilise the natives:

Currie: Very simple, sir. It's clearly a matter of racial superiority. Every pagan power,



no matter how formidable in appearance, must succumb to the civilizing mission of the white races. (32)

In this mission to colonial expansionism under the garb of civilising, they have often taken recourse to manipulation and fabrication of history suiting their narrative of their prolonged rule in India. This fabrication is highlighted by Das when Lawrence points out, “the annexation of Sind is a scandal unequalled in the modern times” (75); he is quickly reproached by his seniors to keep this information away from the general knowledge. This manipulation of facts became a necessary trope in not just creating a drift among the oppressed but also cementing their position as the formidable power not to be messed with. These lead Hardinge to say, “They’re our friends”, when Lawrence points out Lal Singh and Tej Singh are nothing more than traitors. Hardinge goes on to analyse: “They may be useful to us one day . . . Apologise to the Wazir and make the other one a Raja . . . This is politics” (77).

Finally, this sense of false superiority among the official can only be maintained and sustained over the centuries by the hollowed inferences of their sophistry and greatness in their cultural pedigree. Repetition compulsion of their flawed pride is seen to be reinfused within the Company Officials as soon as their ploy seems to dwindle at any point. At this juncture, we find Hardinge reinstating the power dynamics within his men by stating, “Don’t forget gentlemen, we’re the greatest power on this earth today” (82). Any glitch on the part of the Empire, in this case, the hasty seizing of the Punjab regency, is always seen as a necessary move to exert and maintain their power structure in the sub-continent.



The Colonial Dilemma:

The situation problematizes when, in the middle of manipulation and façade maintenance, one finds himself in the dilemma of retracting against the colonial impediments or following the dictums of their land. The eponymous character of the play, Henry Lawrence, is caught in such a dilemma where his conscience and goodwill often get the better of him. Through this fictional representation of a historical episode, Gurcharan Das rendered a perspective towards such a character who, in his genuity, wanted to do good for the natives. The play takes place after the murder of Ranjit Singh through internal betrayal in want of power. The trusted traitors on one side were seen to cede with the British; on the other hand, one such English general falls under the hallowed impression of the gallantry presented by Ranjit Singh in safeguarding his land. So much so that he is seen uttering, “He was the greatest ruler Hindustan has known” (31), in reference to the martyred ruler. With the desire to protect the land, Punjab, from the annexation of the Empire, Lawrence had time and again worked for the benefit of India. This has been a reason for much contestation among his peers when Eliot points out that: “. . . this man has built a phenomenal reputation. . . he’s become a legend. . . he’s on first-name terms with most of the nobility of the Punjab. They swear by him. . . (they) think he’s some kind of a saviour” (28).

The moralistic urges of Lawrence’s heart constantly focus on his words and actions for the Nation. His foresightedness in the impending doom of the Empire urges him to share his feelings with Sher Singh. He takes course to his consciousness when he expresses his fear of a downtrodden Empire,



Lawrence: We are to all appearances more powerful in India than we ever were.

Nevertheless, when our downfall comes it will be rapid and the world will wonder more at the suddenness of the Empire's end than at all it achieved. (57)

It is this consciousness that kept Lawrence grounded and affiliated with the native powers, most often fighting for their cause on their behalf. This pertinence of consciousness is found in his reproach to his own kind. His unbending courage is seen in his protests against the means through which the British implement ways to extract power. He opposes the reparation amount thrust upon Punjab through the 'Treaty of Lahore' to be too hefty to ever be paid off. He again stands firm in expressing his disgust about the exploitative ways used to seize power when he accuses his senior officials of confiscating the Himalayas through "deceit and trachery". His affiliation to the natives thus poses a great threat for the management where on the one hand he is tagged as not a "regular sort" on the other Hardinge orders him to quit making nuisance by protesting against his own Kingdom.

Lawrence is constantly perceived as a person who desperately tries to create a balance between his duty towards the British Raj and his moral sense towards the Indian Natives. His close affinity to the Regent Queen and the next heir to the throne brought out the integrity of his character. However, this became a threat to the Empire as well when they realised that it was the Queen that needed to be removed. Lawrence, despite accepting the charges of the high office, fighting for the cause of Rani Jindan Kaur is the colonial dilemma that he went through throughout his tenure as the officer of the East Indian Company.

With a prolonged tiff between one's own morality and the destructive forces of



imperialism fabricated under the garb of Nationalism, the “self” is often found to be at the most destructive end. Das, through his play, catered to the formation of this very destructive force, which at the end faltered at all ends through the character of Lawrence. After a continuous balancing of both the natives' and the colonial interests, at the end of the play, we find both cultures colliding, giving rise to what may seem like Bhabha's “Third Space” but in reversal. Lawrence's respect for the dead king, Ranjit Singh and his own subconscious urge to seize the domestic powers rendered him to a state of dismay without much functionality. In a desperate conversation with Sher Singh, Lawrence brings out his psychological paralysis towards the situation at hand:

Lawrence: Call me Angrez Badshah!...

(Begins to dress himself in Lion's (Ranjit Singh) ornaments slowly and desperately.
Finally he puts on the turban on his head...)

Lawrence: Angrez Badshah! Angrez Badshah!... The Punjab is mine, as surely as the Koh-i-noor is mine... The Lion has come. (83)

The hybridization takes a complete circle when he is found displacing himself and his identity with that of the Late King. A reversal of the position is hinted at by Das, where for a change, the Occidental “self” is found displacing his position with the Oriental “other”.

The Psychological Effects of the Colonial Horror:

The growth and development of horror can be traced back to situations and events of traumatic pasts. Events that generate feelings of fear and guilt within people often lead to



atrocities. In his *Colonial Horrors*, Graeme Davis points out that, "...the colonial era is the native soil from which American horror literature first sprang" (Davis 5). Therefore, recognising the contribution of a colonised history leads to the growth of horror literature in a culture. India lies no different in this aspect, as most of the modern horror erupts from the memory of the imperialistic oppression hurled over the Nation by the Colonial powers, giving rise to a sense of uncanny within the masses. In his essay, Freud states, "... the uncanniness it evokes to repetition of childhood fantasies or beliefs surviving from an earlier stage of cultural development, which have been discarded or repressed" (Freud 48) to point out the lingering consequences of oppressed memory upon a person. He terms this phenomenon as the "return of the repressed", where the horrors of the generations past come back to haunt the psychological bearings of the present.

Gurucharan Das takes recourse to this 'memory' bringing out the horrors from the pages of History to construct the plot of a psychological breakdown from a white man's point of view. This is the reason why a conscious-ridden English General, Henry Lawrence, heard about the capital the Company levied upon the Sikhs to pay through the 'Treaty of Lahore', which came as a shock to him. In utter dismay, he states: "... They'll never be able to pay that! The soldiers haven't been paid for six months" (30). Through this concern of Lawrence, Das projected not just the intolerable oppression the British embarked upon the Nation but also brought out the thought processes of the scanty Britishers, who might still have their consciousness intact.

An in-depth introspection about the narrative technique of the play would bring out a trajectory of psychological crumbling in the life and memory of Lawrence. At the beginning



of the play, we find Dalip, heir to the throne, sharing his affection for Lawrence and asking his caregiver to share stories of historical wars with the 'Angrez' rather than fairy tales. The growth of this affection towards Lawrence despite a strong affinity towards the British Raj is a testament to the welfare that Lawrence maintained in the region. We find him voicing his angst against the insensitive and inhumane activities of his official, Lumsden, when he says:

Lawrence: I think I'm losing my temper. Do I understand that you burnt a whole street because you thought someone needed to be punished for firing on us. Is that right?

Lumsden: The filthy natives needed to be taught a lesson.

Lawrence: Didn't you know that an investigation to find the culprits behind the firing was under way... (66)

Lawrence's appreciation of the Royal family is time and again projected, especially towards Ranjit Singh, who was gallantly called 'The Lion'. This goodwill towards the Royal Family led Rani Jindan, the Regent of the state and the wife of the late Ranjit Singh, to come closer to Lawrence. However, with the progression of time, we see the transformation of this appreciation taking the stance of obsession, where Lawrence feels the need and hunger to replicate Ranjit Singh's ways in every possible scenario. This obsession towards 'The Lion' brings about a deranged mental state where he faults the very people he aspired to help once, the natives. In this state of madness, Lawrence moves on to crown Tej Singh as the king of the land, despite knowing of the ill-intensions of Tej Singh, and previously despising him for the same. It comes as a shock to the readers when they find the same Lawrence who wanted



to carry forward the legacy of Ranjit Singh adorned the title of sovereignty upon his murder. This shocking change of state is the internal psychological breakdown, where his craving to attune with the greatness of the late King and his position as a White official collides to provide him with a proper vestige to emancipate his own callings. Sadly, the people around him fail to realise this psychological barrier that he is facing. We find Dilip hurling abuses at him and Sher Singh leaving his position, promising to come back and combat for the land lost. Rani Jindan, failing both in her love towards him and duty towards her land, stereotypes him just as any other English despot when she says: “You Angrez have been helping the traitor from the beginning” (87). To which Lawrence is seen uttering, “Tej Singh’s a useful man”, though he himself was the one showing his disgust towards the traitor in the beginning.

With his constant jabbering and proclaiming: “Yes, yes, the Angrez Badshah. I’m a hero...” (83) to seizing the Koh-i-Noor diamond, a psychological craving for the crown takes precedence over the correct governance of the people by their own Heir. This led Das to voice out how Lawrence’s madness against the ills of colonial forces challenges his own rationality when he completely adorns the ideologies and costumes of Raja Ranjit Singh. Das narrates, “The mental transference is nearly complete” (82), indicating the downslope Lawrence is heading, running away from the horrors of his own colonial background. At this point, Rani Jindan, in a desperate attempt to bring him back to his senses, urges upon the fact, “You’re intoxicated, Larins! Something demonic is urging you to your destruction. Believe me” (90).

Finally, the last nail in the coffin is struck with the complete derangement of Lawrence’s consciousness, forcing Sher Singh to move away from him. Sher Singh, a true



comrade to Lawrence, says: “I feel sad now. For you were our hope – our golden evening” (94). This epiphanic moment of Sher Singh and his other acquaintances brings out how the colonial horrors constituted insanity to the people who actually wanted good for the Nation. We find Lawrence responding to his situation: “But I still have Punjab. Let them go away. I don’t need them. I don’t need the Rani; nor Sher Singh. I have the Punjab. Angrez Badshah! The new Lion is here. I am the Punjab!” (96). This derangement takes a full circle as we find an otherwise morally conscious Lawrence, who is now steeped deep in the pool of power and insanity.

Conclusion:

Gurcharan Das crafted a historical legend by bringing out the psychological nuances one might feel under colonial rule. He drew upon a complex character like Henry Lawrence, who appears to serve the natives but is bound by his duties to the Empire. On the one hand, we find his popularity among the Indians because of his excellent and friendly nature. On the other, we find the Regime taking advantage of this very reputation of Lawrence to fulfil their imperialistic motives. In the middle of these two contrasting ideologies stands Lawrence, who is at his dagger’s end from both sides. The rollercoaster of events that he had to succumb to, finally leading to his madness, is an example of the oppressive forces of over-ambitious sovereignty. A dichotomy of expectations from the natives and the Empire alike, where his own desires get crushed down, forms the crux of the narrative. These snippets of the psychological paralysis in the wake of colonial horrors mark the trauma the entire nation faced over the centuries.



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