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Historical Analysis of Gurcharan Das's *Larins Sahib*

Rajani Devi

We study the past to understand the present, and we understand the present to guide the future. History is of immense value to social scientists engaged in research. It enables us to grasp one's relationship with one's past. It preserves the traditional and cultural valued of a nation, and serves as a beacon light, guiding society in confronting various crises. History is indeed, as Allen Nerins puts in his words, "a bridge connecting the past with the present and pointing the road to the future" (12). Also, as one studies the rise and fall of the empires and civilizations, the lessons of the past help one to avoid the pitfalls of the present. In my present paper, I have tried to bring forth the glimpse of Punjab after the reign of the great emperor, Maharaja Ranjit Singh 'the lion of the Punjab' in the historical play *Larins Sahib* written by the corporate guru and the Ex-vice President for Procter and Gamble Worldwide. This play highlights the various conditions of the eighteenth century Punjab revolving around Henry Lawrence.

Das notes in the introduction of this play, how during his travels in the bazaar of Punjab, marketing Vicks Vaporub, he began to delve into the history of Punjab. It was then he came across the unusual Lawrence brothers: out of whom Henry Lawrence was the most interesting and the least imperial. His brother George was a soldier in the North- West and John was an empire builder who went on to become Lord Lawrence, the Governor- General and Viceroy of India. Das says Henry unusual because he formed an easy friendship with the Sikh noble family. He shared a warm and affectionate relationship with Sher Singh, the scion of the Attari family; the fiery Rani Jindan, the widow of Ranjit Singh, and her son Dalip, who was taken away from her when he was only twelve-year-old boy who became later the tragic 'black prince' at Queen Victoria's court.

Sultan Padamsee Award winning play, *Larins Sahib* has been performed in many major Indian cities and at the Edinburgh Festival. It was first produced by Derryck Jefferies at Bhulabhai Theatre, Bombay in July 1969. This historical play competed among eighty entries, many of them from the established authors, but the award was awarded to *Larins Sahib*. The writing of this play according to Gurcharan Das is, in a sense search for his own identity. He says in the introduction of the play:

Reading the history of the Punjab was for me a search for identity. I was drawn to the events in 1847 because that is when the British first arrived in the Punjab and the first reactions of the Punjabies to the English and vice-versa determined how we would behave with each other the next hundred years. (Larins 11)

The action of the play takes place mostly in and around Lahore and briefly in Calcutta, in the year of 1846. This play is a fascinating reconstruction of the rise of power and influence of the British Empire in the state of Punjab in the year of 1846-47. the play focuses on the confusion in the history of Punjab after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. It deals with the crisis that overtook the state, when East India Company routed the Sikhs seven years after the death of Maharaja. His death was folloed by political instability and rapid change of the governments in the state of Punjab. Selfish and corrupt leaders came to the front. The brave and patriotic but

utterly undisciplined army took over the command of the kingdom. The large empire of Maharaja between river Sutlej and Himalayamountain ranges of laddakh, Karokoram, Hindukhush, and Sulaiman was plunged into chaos.

While Ranjit Singh was alive, both the sides had a head on clash. But after his death, the Sikh kingdom was plunged into chaos. The Maharaja had too many wives and too many successors, and as rival court factions sought support for their preferred candidates, the authority drained back to the army. The British saw their chance. All they needed was some kind of excuse which could enable them to say that they were not the aggressors but had to take up the sword because a war was imposed upon them. In 1845 the first Sikh war began. With the help of traitors who included some Sikh courtiers and commanders the English grabbed the victory from the clutches of defeat at Sobroan, and the Lahore treaty was signed. As per the treaty of Lahore, the Sikh kingdom not only offered surrender but also agreed to pay one and a half crores of rupees indemnity as expenses of the war to the East India Company. The Sikhs were not defeated by the British but by the traitors of their own army. As compared with the men, the chiefs and higher officers were insincere, unpatriotic, and treachous. The commanders, Lal Singh and Tej Singh, shirked their responsibilities and were reluctant to lead the troops personally, in the battle. They were interested in losing rather than winning the war for the benefit of the British. The Sikhs might have been won if Lal Singh and Tej Singh had not proved insincere. Lal Singh fled away in the midst of the fight and thereby revived the spirits of the enemy who were nearly defeated. Victory was practically within their grasp but Tej Singh and Lal Singh let it slip away treacherously. In Act 1, Scene 2, Das shows clearly how Lal Singh and Tej Singh were responsible for this defeat:

BABA. Just as the British were falling back to the second line of defence, they received a message from your commander-in-chief.

DALIP. (Savagely) Tej Singh!

BABA. The message says that your army's left was unguarded. So the Angrez put all forces there. Your Sardars then called a retreat, leaving the entire Sikh army in confusion. Your Commander-in –Chief fled back across the Sutlej, the river. The Sardars, not only betrayed their soldiers but also cut the retreat of the army!

DALIP. Traitors! The Dirty Traitors! Lal Singh! Tej Singh! I'll kill them. (Larins 47).

The play not only takes into account the history of Punjab but also certain aspects which refer to the clash of the Indian and western cultures. The cultural and moral codes of the British and the native were inherently in conflict with each other. British, being rulers of a large empire, certainly had an edge over the Indians, who though educated, lacked the cunning which the rulers of the one half of the world had. The Indians were naïve and could be taken in easily. The British considered it an advantage and succeeded in splitting them. Das succeed admirably in portraying the nineteenth century colonial India. After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh 'the Lion of Punjab', the British appointed Henry Lawrence as the resident of East India Company in the court of Ranjit Singh's twelve-years-old son Dalip Singh. He is preferred over others. As Eliot a member of British Company, observes that the greatest achievement of Lawrence is that

he is able to project himself to natives as being fully sensitive to their needs. Hence, he is given an important position. His rise from a mere clerk to the resident of the East India Company is dazzling. He is not only generous to the conquered Indians but admires them as well. Though Currie tells him to restrain himself and to keep the natives at a distance, He chooses Sher Singh his officer:

CURRIE: A word of advice, Mr. Lawrence. I hope you will restrain your
Orientalism and keep the natives at a distance. Keep in their place if
You have to rule them.

LAWRENCE: Who's going to rule anyone! His Highness Dalip Singh is the
Maharaja. His mother is the regent. Sardar Lal Singh is the Wazir. I am
merely the agent of a friendly power. (Larins 43)

It shows that the attitude of Henry Lawrence is totally different from that of the other Europeans. He shows full sympathy for the Indians and does everything to help them. He is able to impress the people, who in turn glorify him. Maharaja Dalip treats him as a good friend, so does Rani Jindan. She gives him the Kohinoor for the custody which she values greatly as it belonged to her late husband, as a mark of trust and friendship. Thus, on the surface he always appears to be a good friend of the Indians, at least in the first half of the play. He seems to know the psychology of the Indians and ways, in which they can be ruled. He acts like an imperialist when he orders to arrest Tej Singh and Lal Singh for they were behind the firing at the Shah Alami Gate, is an attempt to kidnap Maharaja Dalip Singh. He openly exults in the fact that the people have called him 'Angrej Badshah'. He imagines that he is 'the Lion of Punjab' Ranjit's incarnation.

The tracing of the development of Lawrence from a sensible, self-respecting, and conscientious officer with a firm faith in 'natural justice' to a power and glory obsessed 'Angrej Badshah' is the central purpose of the play. Through this development Das foregrounds the ambivalence inherent in his relationship with the natives and vice-versa.

There is in him a deep desire to promote the self-interest that finally results in his complete dissociation from the welfare of the natives. He incurs the wrath of the white ruler as well as the displeasures of the natives because he is inherently a very shrewd person. His cunning is boundless but subtle. Initially he seems to the natives as their protector. With the white rulers too, he adopts a strategy to convey the message that he is well-versed in handling the natives. However, more than anything it is his personal interest that reigns supreme in his mind. The last act opens when Lawrence is called to reply to the charges leveled against him. He enters to hear the strategy that was going to be adopted to annex Punjab. His presence is totally ignored and he is snubbed and told to speak when asked. The charges are read out, and his silence is taken to mean that he is guilty. He is asked to release and apologize to Lal Singh and Tej Singh. Maharaja Dalip is to be separated from his mother, the Rani. Lawrence suddenly appears in his new role as 'the little cog' in the wheels of the huge East India Company. The transformation takes place while he is still dressed in Ranjit Singh's splendour. He meekly apologizes to Lal Singh, the wazir, calling his arrest an unfortunate accident. Sher Singh voices the same pain saying that Punjab had now become another pawn in the Angrej's game. He tells Lawrence that he has not only hurt the sentiments of the Indians by separating a mother and a son, a sacred

relationship and by banishing the Queen, who is the mother of Punjab but also insulted the state itself.

In twentieth century, with the emergence of cultural studies, it has been observed that the boundaries between cultures and classes have been melted away to a great extent, but the time in which the play has been set; culture was only considered associated only with the aristocratic class. As Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan have observed in their famous essay *The Politics of Culture*, “Culture is both a means of domination, a way of articulating oppositional points of view to those in dominance” (34). Distinction existed between the high and the low classes. The whites always valued their race and everything associated with them superior, whereas the natives as well their possession were termed inferior:

ABBOT. The natives aren't Christians, Sir. Their odious religion has thousands ugly gods, and rituals. We aren't expected to know their all, are we?

Edwards. Yes Sir, we should keep as far away from them as possible. (Larins 57).

The play also highlights the way the British humiliated the natives:

LUMSDEN. I'd like to butcher the whole lot of them.

ABBOT. Let's teach the niggers a lesson.

LUMSDEN. Burn the damn street! That's what they deserve....

ABBOT. Filthy heathens! (23)

The play also highlights the sensitivity and devotion of the people of those times to customs and traditions. The Indians used to traditionally worship the cow as mother. An incident in the play suggests how callous the British establishment was towards the sensibility of the natives. While crossing the Shah Alami Gate, the English soldiers find their way blocked by a couple of cows, they kill the cows, though were well aware of the fact that this brutal act would hurt the feelings of the Indians. The citizens of the area react as expected and the soldiers are barely able to make it alive to the barracks.

Das succeeds admirably in describing the worst condition of the women in the twentieth century. Sati system was in practice and Das shows in this play how the whole village is after a woman forcing her to become a 'sati' since her husband is dead and it is her duty to do so:

FIRST BRAHMIN: Maharaj it's the custom of our land that a holy-wedded wife perform sati on the pyre of her holy-wedded husband.

SECOND BRAHMIN: Yes, Your Highness. It's the custom. And this irreligious Immoral woman refuses to abide by the custom by which her ancestors have conducted themselves. (43)

A woman was considered only and object for a man, she didn't have any right even on her life. She could live only according to the will of her husband. She was considered the negative of the man, as Simone De Beauvoir has said in her well known book, *The Second Sex*, "...of Othering where women will always be seen, not as an independent or unique but as variation and flawed version of the Male" (56). When Henry Lawrence refuses the Brahmins to compel the widow woman to be 'sati', the Brahmins get outraged saying "This is not the justice. A man has perfect right to do whatever he wants with his wife. She is his property. If he is angry with her, he can throw her in the well." It shows the attitude of the men towards women. A woman was considered only an object and nothing else.

Gurcharan Das has admirably drawn the picture of not only nineteenth century Punjab, but also India in this historical play. Through mere 71 pages, he has shown various glimpses of the nineteenth century Punjab in particular and India in general. Besides being a historical play, the play succeeds admirably in bringing the customs, traditions, and belief-system of the two conflicting classes- the natives and the rulers.

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