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## Anti-Orient Equation in Gurdial Singh's *The Last Flicker*

**Kiran deep Singh**

Ph.D. Research Scholar,  
I. K. Gujral Punjab Technical University,  
Kapurthala, Punjab.

**&**

**Dr. Narinder Sharma**

Assistant Professor,  
DAV Institute of Engineering and Technology,  
Jalandhar.

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### **Abstract:**

It has been observed that biasing social, economic and political hierarchies have become the bane of the rural edifice of Punjab's society, for; these hierarchies have created anti-orient equation and resulted in injustice, exploitation, suffering and agony of the low class/caste orient perpetrated by the upper class/caste individuals who have perched upon the pinnacle of hegemonic power.

In the light of the above-outlined scenario, the present paper aims to address the prevalence of anti-orient equation in Gurdial Singh's *Marhi Da Deeva (The Last Flicker)*. To begin with, it attempts to delineate the definitional contour of the concept of orient and anti-orient equation. Having done so, it seeks to spotlight its rationale. Thereafter, it aims to home in on its ramifications and ultimately wind up the discussion.

**Keywords:** Binary, Class, Caste, Hierarchy, Orient.

### **Introduction**

Analysis of the anti-orient equation has come to the fore as one of the most important issues in postcolonial studies, since such equation is pervasive in all societies. It differentiates among human beings on the basis of colour, class, caste or creed. It vitiates the lives of persons relegated to the lowest rung of this hierarchy. The present paper is an endeavour to expose the rationale and ramifications of exploitive socio-cultural equation and the ensuing social, cultural and economic exploitation, the oppressive operation of power and the spectacle of violence through the critical examination of Gurdial Singh's *Marhi Da Deeva (The Last Flicker)*.

Penned down in 1964 by Gurdial Singh, translated by Ajmer S. Rode in 2010 and adapted into a film in 1989, the novel is often paralleled with Premchand's *magnum opus Godan*.

It traces the trajectory of the havoc wrought in the lives of the low caste protagonist Jagseer and his mother Nandi owing to the anti-orient equation. It narrates the story of Jagseer who is born to lower caste parents. His father Thola and mother Nandi who is of a gypsy origin, are share croppers in the fields of Dharam Singh. Dharam Singh has given them some acres to farm. He has four sisters who are married off to incompatible husbands since nobody is willing to wed them because of their mixed parentage. Jagseer himself stays bachelor for this as well as for other reasons.

His father has an affable bond with Dharam Singh. However, Bhanta Singh, Dharam's son does not have a friendly relationship with Jagseer. So much so, the *sheesham* tree (Indian rosewood), about which Thola wishes Jagseer to plant in his memory, is maliciously sold by Bhanta to a trader without informing Jagseer. The tree is hacked down by the trader because of which Nandi dies untimely. Ill-timed death of Nandi wrought by the oppressive operation of power exercised by the feudal class wallowing in the privileges of upper class, to which Banta belongs, tells upon physical as well as psychological health of Jagseer and hastens his ill-timed death. Tyrannical forces of the caste and the class kill, not only, Jagseer's mother – the only one interested in the marriage of her son, but also, the possibility of Jagseer's posterity to light a lamp on his tomb.

Through the exposure of such anti-orient equation, the novel offers us the opportunity to delve deeper into the psychology of the both the colonizer and the colonized to expose widespread exploitation and discrimination. Also, the novel carves out a new narrative niche for the downtrodden experience, a study of which can prove to be a useful method for reclaiming the past and forging culturally sensitive paradigms for the future.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research methodology has been employed to expose the anti-orient equation. Gurdial Singh's *Marhi Da Deeva (The Last Flicker)* has been chosen as the primary text. Besides, the works brought out by a volley of books, newspapers, journals, and websites which have some bearing on this novel have also been consulted.

### **Contour of Key Terms**

Before expatiating upon the rationale and the ramifications of the anti-orient equation, a contour of the terms orient, colonizer, colonized and anti-orient equation need to be chalked out.

### **Orient**

The term orient comes from Edward Said's epoch-making work *Orientalism* which seeks to expose the biasing design of "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3) Orient is "a mirror image of what is supposedly inferior" (Sharma 299). It is the essentialized image of the orient as "one who was biologically inferior, culturally backward and

unchanging, and one who not only deserved but even desired to be dominated by the colonizers in every way” (Sharma302). Orient is “discursively represented in literature and history as binary opposites” (Nayar 161).

### **Anti-orient equation**

Anti-orient equation which brings out the marginalization of the orient and his resultant oppression is one of the burning issues in the postcolonial studies. Many scholars including Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha and others have brought to the fore plight of the orient. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, analysed the binarized hegemonic cultural as well as political apparatus afflicted with “a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said 5) which engenders anti-orient equation.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, another important figure in postcolonial theory, also spotlighted the oppression of the orient by the dominant essentialist forces which relegate the orient to the secondary position and the inferior role. Homi K. Bhabha also expatiated upon anti-orient equation as “a politics of struggle where the representation of social antagonisms and historical contradictions can take no other form than binarism” (Bhabha 28). By exposing the social hierarchies containing binarized “relation of oppressor and oppressed, centre and periphery, negative image and positive image” (Bhabha 28), he corroborates the occurrence of anti-orient equation.

Likewise, Frantz Fanon in *Wretched of the Earth (1967)*—the manifesto on decolonization – exposes an anti-orient compartmentalized society in which binaries are generated in such a way that the blacks are always the evil side against the humane whites. This division initiates brewing of a tension in the society which can be eliminated only if the devilish dichotomy is exterminated and the binary is overturned. That is what Fanon terms the true decolonization.

Thus, anti-orient equation is the complex trajectory of variable social, economic and political which embed violent social, economic and political hierarchies containing biasing binary oppositions. These binary oppositions ascertain a relation of dominance in which one term of the opposition is always dominant and the other always subservient. Such oppositional relation may be between centre and margin; colonizer and colonized; upper class and lower class, upper caste and lower caste and powerful and powerless.

In the present context, these factors constituting anti-orient equation include a long-standing and traditional feudal structure, caste system, a pro-landlord agrarian system, a lop-sided social, economic and political classification and biased stratification of a society. Such biasing binary oppositions marginalize the orient and make him reel under the oppressive operation of violence unleashed by the colonizer.

Such equation endows the colonizer with the authority of power over the orient/colonized. The colonizer exercises this power oppressively to exploit the orient. Such power operates through a slew of repressive apparatus (class/caste-based apparatus to name a few) to interpellate the orient into structures which hinder his freedom of thought and action. The orient is subjected to repression and oppression that he endures mutely.

### **Colonizer and colonized**

The term colonizer has been metaphorically employed to define a person who subjugates and oppresses the orient because of having perched upon the pinnacle of hegemonic power. On the other hand, the term colonized has been metaphorically used to define a person who is subjugated and oppressed by the colonizer. In this sense, the terms colonized and orient are synonymously used.

### **Prevalence of Anti-Orient Equation in the Novel**

Having scrutinized to the text of the novel under consideration for the pervasiveness of the hierarchies and the biased binaries, the linchpin of the concept of anti-orient equation, it has been found out that vicious social, economic and political hierarchies – impregnated with the biased binaries – are innate in the text. Therefore, each of the hierarchies has been analysed to unearth the biased binaries implicit in it.

On scanning the text for social hierarchies, it has been noticed that a volley of biased binaries has bobbed out of the caste-ridden social hierarchies. For instance, social hierarchies within Punjabi rural edifice have infested it with biasing binaries of upper and lower caste. Characters such as Dharam Singh, Bhanta, Dhano have been attached to the upper caste, i.e., dominant side of the binarized pair while characters, for example, Thola, Nandi, Jagseer and Raunki have been fixed to the lower caste, i.e., subservient side of the binarized pair. The following dialogue between Nikka and his cousin appeared in the chapter six exposes how the social hierarchies within Punjabi rural edifice have infested it with biasing binaries of upper and lower caste:

Jagseer felt as if a line etched deep inside him... the line that divided people into 'high' & 'low' categories and castes. In his youth, Gaiba & Gheela were his close friends; he ate with them, drank with them, but they never shared the plate with Jagseer. (63)

“Bai Nikka, this is very bad. An outcaste allowed to come to your house when you are away doesn't look good. It'd be alright if he were of our caste. (71)

These binaries are evidently exemplified in a sharp line drawn between the superior feudal landlords and the inferior farm labourers, the oppressor and the oppressed, seen generally in the socio-cultural edifice of Punjab's rural society and specifically in the experiences of Jagseer, his

mother, Nandi and his three sisters on the one hand & Dharam Singh, Bhanta, Dhano, on the other.

Similarly, on examining the text for economic hierarchies, it has been discovered that a slew of binaries are cropped out of the class-ridden economic hierarchies. These economic binaries are visibly shown in a contrast between the feudal landlords and the peasants, the upper class and the lower class, the rich and the poor, seen generally in the economic edifice of Punjab's rural society. Jagseer, his father Thola, his mother Nandi and his three sisters are found to have been attached to the lower position of the poor, low class peasantry i.e., subservient side of the binarized pair whereas Dharam Singh, Banta Singh and Dhano have been tagged to the upper position of the rich feudal upper class, i.e., dominant side of the binarized pair.

Likewise, on scrutinizing the text for political hierarchies, a number of binaries, for instance, colonizer-colonized, powerful and powerless, oppressor/oppressed are identified to have derived from class-ridden political hierarchies. Jagseer, Thola, Nandi, Raunki, three sisters of Jagseer and even & Dharam Singh (otherwise belonging to the upper class/caste) have been attached to the lower position of the colonized, powerless and oppressed, i.e., subservient side of the binarized pair whereas Banta Singh and Dhano have been affixed to the upper position of the colonizer, powerful and oppressor, i.e., dominant side of the binarized pair.

### **Rationale & Ramifications of Anti-Orient Equation**

As regards the rationale of the anti-orient equation, it has been detected that dynamics of long-standing and traditional feudal structure, caste system and pro-landlord agrarian system eggs on the perpetration and proliferation of the anti-orient equation which is consequent upon injustice, exploitation, suffering and agony of those who are tagged to the subservient side of the biased binaries.

With regard to the ramifications of the anti-orient equation, scrutiny of the novel results in a slew of observations that underline an important point: the caste-inflicted social hierarchies blight the lives of persons downgraded to the lowest rung of this hierarchy and bestow boon on the lives of the persons raised to the highest rung; the fact exemplified through Jagseer, His father, Thola and mother, Nandi, his three sisters belonging to the lower caste & Dharam Singh, Banta Singh & Dhano belonging to the upper caste. Being the upper class, life of Dharam Singh, Banta Singh & Dhano is trouble-free whereas life of Jagseer, his mother, Nandi and his four sisters is troublesome. For example, Jagseer dies unmarried and three sisters are married off to mismatched husbands because of their mixed parentage and lower caste. The following lines offer a peep into the troublesome life of Jagseer's family:

Even if Nandi had somehow succeeded in tackling all other obstacles in Jagseer's marriage, one blot on her family which she could no way wash away was the uncertainty about her own ancestry. It was such a blot due to which many schemes almost finalized had gone awry. Whenever someone came with a

proposal of a match for Jagseer, prompted by others, the first thing he would enquire about was Nandi's parentage. (4)

...

Owing to this unusual background of hers, her four daughters couldn't be married into good families. Three of them were given away to men already rejected many times over by other people. (5)

It has also been revealed that people from the upper class helping the downtrodden uplift have to bear the brunt for their blithe benevolence. To illustrate, Dharam Singh himself is cold-shouldered by his family because of his closeness with Jagseer. Even such persons are yanked to the subservient side the subservient side and, thus, subjected to the oppression. The following lines corroborate the above-said proposition:

“For those low-caste mean people who sucked us dry all our lives, who didn't spare even a louse on our body, you throw away seven hundred rupees; and for your own children, you don't give a damn!... If that's how you are going to ruin the family, why not strangle both your sons and get me a begging bowl? I'll atleast be able to beg at every door and spread your 'good name' all around.”

Dhano's finding out the secret about the seven hundred rupees and her stinging sarcasm in uttering the word 'good name' wounded Dharam Singh deeply. His soul writhed like a fish thrown out of water. He wanted to shriek at the top of his voice, “Get lost you damned bitch. I'll shred you to pieces...” But words got stuck in his throat. A twinge of hurt rose inside him and pricked every pore of his body. (105-106)

It has also been discovered that binaries sprung from the class-ridden economic hierarchies empowers those tagged to its dominant side of the binarized pair so much that can deteriorate the life of those appended to the subservient side by dint of the economic clout they enjoy. So much so, those appended to the subservient side do not even have the right to plant even a sapling in the memory of their kith and kin. For instance, Jagseer does not have any stake in the land he has tilled all his life. Being a poor, lower class landless labourer, even *asheesham* tree planted by Jagseer in memory of his dead father is got uprooted by a rich, upper class, landlord, Banta Singh which epitomizes the blatant abuse of high economic status.

Likewise, binaries popped out of the class-ridden political hierarchies tend to gag the voice of the colonized/powerless/oppressed/exploited on the one hand and aggrandize substantially and unaccountably the power of the colonizer/powerful/oppressor/exploiter on the other hand that the latter can do or say anything to the former no matter how undignified, inhuman & disastrous that deed or utterance may be. Several allusions are made in the text to this paradigm in the following lines of the chapter fifteen of the novel:

...Performed the last rites of that old hag, and earned the praise from the people but you have ruined our house... You call yourself a man?...

Banta's wife went on speaking nonstop. Jagseer heard her stunned. During those few moments, numerous expressions fitted across his face. Some of the words she spoke shocked him and left him wondering wide-eyed. Some hit his head like stones and still others pierced him like daggers and made his whole body tremble. (122)

Referring to undignified, inhuman & disastrous deed, incidence of uprooting of *asheesham* tree may be illustrated, as it reeks of oppression/exploitation/abuse of power by Bhanta Singh who symbolizes the colonizer/powerful/oppressor/exploiter spectrum of the class-ridden political hierarchies. By uprooting of *asheesham* tree planted by Jagseer in memory of his dead father without taking permission of Jagseer, Bhanta Singh abuses his power to oppress the powerless share cropper Jagseer and his mother Nandi. So much so, Nandi succumbs to the oppression. The following lines reveal the plight of Jagseer at uprooting of *asheesham* tree caused because of the oppression/exploitation/abuse of power by Bhanta Singh:

And looking at 'his *sheesham* 'without twigs and leaves, he felt all life drained out of him. The trunk lay alone like a dead body; all the big and small branches had been chopped off and carried away. Jagseer kept looking at the trunk, standing on a little sad dune on this side but then a gloom overcame him. (85)

The following lines reveal the plight of Nandi at uprooting of *asheesham* tree:

"Why did he do that, why?" Nandi said trembling with anger. "I'll burn myself at your door, Dharmia! What do you think of me...! Why did he do it?" (78)

## Conclusion

Overall, analysis of the selected literary text unveils ubiquity of anti-orient equation in the agrarian Punjabi society due to which the orient is subjected to repression and oppression throughout his life. Such equation stereotypes the lop-sided social roles which smack of pro-elitist and anti-orient outlook. It sketches abysmal scenario for the orient while the rosy one for its elitist counterpart. Thus, the elitist being at the privileged side of the binaries leads a magnificent life and the orient being at the unprivileged side of the binaries leads a marginalized life. Unless the orient himself asserts his agency against the occurrence of such oppressive anti-orient equation, he will continue to be victimized.



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