CHAPTER-I

THE LAST FLICKER: A RAY OF HOPE FOR ALL DESOLATES

The Last Flicker is a rich and complex piece of fiction which deals with the socio-cultural and economic forces at work in the rural Malwa region of Punjab during the post-Independence days. The novel relates the tragedy of the worker class that suffered the brunt of a slow but definite process of change from a feudalistic societal set-up to a more oppressive capitalist order. The novel portrays the condition of low-class farm-labourers or seeries, who long to establish themselves, but the cruel system never lets them do so. In this novel, Gurdial Singh presents a realistic picture of the seeri class, their wishes and their unfulfilled desires. The novel depicts this deprived section of rural Punjab in somber hues. In this regard, the novel is representative in nature as it represents and voices the concerns of the deprived farm-labourers through the power of the written word. In the words of Dr. Amrik Singh:

What is more pertinent however is the literary quality of what gets written. In this case, it would be safe to say that more or less by common consent this novel is regarded as perhaps the best piece of writing done in Punjabi since 1947. Not only has he given utterance to the love and longings of those who, to quote the title of another novel of his, live as if they do not exist, he has also given literary standing and personality to a relatively neglected region of Punjab. (Tarsem and Sushil 39)

The novel also depicts the gradual collapse of the old feudal system which, although oppressive, did maintain some ethics. But the new capitalist order threatens to engulf all that is weak and vulnerable. As Dr. Paramjit Singh Ramana points out: “The new emerging values are presented as being even more cruel and inhuman, which leave no scope for human sympathy and selfless understanding”
This process of inevitable change gives way to selfish egotism, blind pursuit of money and dehumanization of relationships.

_The Last Flicker_ is a socially conscious novel with hard hitting realism that is based on the writer’s minute observation of rural life in times of change. Gurdial Singh depicts the complex social structure of the rural Malwa region of Punjab with great insight and detail. He has very meticulously and successfully “shifted the focus from the socially dominant classes to the exploited and neglected sections of rural society” (Tarsem and Sushil 44).

Gurdial Singh’s authenticity is based on his identification with his native soil and his “inwardness of feeling for village life which comes from a deep and intimate contact with rural reality and a strong creative imagination” (Tarsem and Sushil 38). Gurdial Singh’s sense of rootedness in the Punjab is his strength and he is one of those very few writers who have come back to their roots even after being successful. This novel bears testimony to how the love for his motherland and concern for his fellow Punjabis, has urged Gurdial Singh to give voice to their issues.

It is due to his genuine thought for the downtrodden that Gurdial Singh writes about the ordinary folk and the marginalized lot. His protagonists are the unsung people who contribute towards the welfare of the superior classes without being credited for their endeavour. Gurdial Singh does not talk about exalted characters of Sikh history, nor does he write about the mighty and the influential. He is a common man and writes about the commoners whom he looks upon with compassion and empathy.

In his essay “The Last Flicker: A Remarkable Novel”, Dr. Attar Singh elucidates that, “Gurdial Singh does not depict any impossible kind of grand hero or lover or mythical warrior but he depicts the common man as a protagonist” (Tarsem and Sushil 40). It is the woes and worries of the deprived section of society that trouble the writer’s sensibility and he sets out to give representation to
those on the fringes of the mainstream society. Dr. Amrik Singh writes in this regard that his novels “...stand out for their depiction of those dimensions of life, which had remained invisible to middle class readers ...” (Tarsem and Sushil 39).

*The Last Flicker* presents the fate of a “little” man who is a *seeri* and belongs to the *Dalit* segment of society. The tragedy lies in his inability to improve his conditions and circumstances though he strives hard to bring all adversities under control. Another trait of his tragic personality is his inexpressiveness towards the woman whom he silently loves and adores. The novel is a moving love story of two individuals, who are caught in the web of societal taboos and norms and therefore feel helpless in consummating their love for each other. The struggle of the protagonist Jagseer against his landlord’s evil plans along with his unexpressed love for Bhani forward the story and complicate the events which finally find a kind of denouement that is profoundly tragic. However, with every turn of fate or destiny Jagseer’s claim upon all that he fancies loosens and in the end leaves him a shattered man, a victim of destiny but nevertheless, he leaves behind a hope for many desolates like him.

At the very outset of the novel, it becomes evident that destiny has played its part in giving Jagseer a tainted background with socially castrated parents who bear the stigma of having eloped. They are therefore looked down upon by society. Jagseer has to live with this mark all his life without any fault of his. In the course of the novel, it is this unfavourable destiny that intervenes again and again to destroy his individuality and identity as is evident in the course of this novel. The novel, therefore chronicles the events in the life of Jagseer and his eventual fate. However, it remains for the reader to discern whether it is really the destiny or the intervention of a callous social set up that ruins him.

Dr. Attar Singh writes: “Jagseer, lives and dies-rather fades out of existence as a totally un-obtrusive fact. He is the true little man, the ‘unknown Indian’, who again and again comes up” (Tarsem and Sushil 41). Dr. Singh also points out that the very fact that the locales and villages in Gurdial Singh’s novel have no name
provides universality to his novels in the Indian context. He “selects the amorphous and faceless reality known as rural India” (41). Therefore his works are not confined to the portrayal of only one section of society in Punjab but are representative of all the downtrodden and marginalized people.

Gurdial Singh’s superiority in novel writing also lies in his perfect command over his medium and his comprehensive and coherent vision. It is due to this literary genius that Gurdial Singh stands out among other contemporaries in “the rare quality of expressing himself in remarkably restrained language” (Tarsem and Sushil 42). It is not through words but through the silences that Gurdial Singh builds up the interest of the readers and builds the emotional pressure. An example of this is the tension between Jagseer and his landlord Bhanta which is more felt than expressed.

Also, the idealized romance between Jagseer and Bhani is self-expressive though there is hardly any love-talk between the two. Gurdial Singh’s greatness lies in using fewer words but greater body language that speaks volumes. He is a writer par-excellence who values the economy of words but never compromises with depiction through suggestive writing. Dr. Paramjit Singh Ramana points out that, The Last Flicker captures “the richness and complexity of intricate social fabric, without attempting to communicate any explicit philosophy or message” (Tarsem and Sushil 46).

It is due to his literary genius that critics have found affinities between Gurdial Singh’s works and the works of other great writers of the downtrodden. Where Dr. Attar Singh finds his work The Last Flicker akin to Munshi Prem Chand’s Godan and Phuneshwar Renu’s Maila Anchal, Dr. Ramana is reminded of Mulk Raj Anand’s Coolie. It is quite obvious that it is Gurdial Singh’s diction and creative genius that give his narratives the unique regional identity and ambience that make them stand out among other works in Punjabi dialect.

Apart from the suggestive undertones of the Malwai dialect used by him, it is his taut plot construction and authenticity of life that provides a rare quality to
his novels. It is due to this, as Dr. Attar Singh points out that: "The Last Flicker, a lean novel of 168 pages, turns out to be neat and integrated piece of writing." (Tarsem and Sushil 42).

For a better understanding of Gurdial Singh’s *The Last Flicker*, an intensive analysis of the novel is being attempted. An effort is also being made alongside to understand the tragedy of class and caste-ridden culture through a landless seeri and his relation with his landlord which is narrated in fictional form. The focus will remain on the capitalist forces at work. The fading of the feudal set-up, the oppression of the landowner class and the plight of the landless farm-hands will also be dwelt upon. In addition to these the character of Jagseer will be analyzed as representative of the entire lot-the deprived people.

The subtle relationship between Jagseer and Bhani will be understood in the light of Jagseer’s downfall and his alienation from the world as he becomes increasingly aware of his personal humiliation and degradation in an unjust social set-up. Primarily, the protagonist’s destroyed self-confidence and dignity, his pain and tragedy, his mental and physical agony, his emotional inexpressiveness and his justifiable inability to consummate his love will be focused upon in detail. Finally, the protagonist’s painful and undeserved end and the ray of hope in the form of the symbolic diva lighted on his tomb, for thousands like him will bring the study to an optimistic halt.

At the very outset of the novel, Gurdial Singh sets the tone with some philosophic lines: “Man, you were destined for ten turns of fate in your life time. The first one came and consumed you, what happened to the other nine” (11). In these lines a profound thought that destiny is what makes or destroys a man is expounded. The writer explains how man is believed to have ten turns of destiny in a life-time but tragically only one blow of fate destroys him and leaves him shattered. These lines feature time and again in the course of the novel emphasizing the role of fate in Jagseer’s life.
The novel begins with the introduction to Jagseer’s mother Nandi, who has a foggy vision both literally and symbolically. On one hand, she has a problem with her vision and on the other; the future for her and her son is so bleak that she is unable to visualize what it has in store for them. In Nandi, we come across a really desperate old mother yearning to see her family tree flourish. However, the very fact that Jagseer is aged and is landless adds to Nandi’s dismay.

Gurdial Singh writes about Nandi in a very understanding and compassionate manner that:

Nandi had become a chatter-box after her husband’s death and the women of the *wehra* were fed up with her. To make things worse, Nandi was also hard of hearing and this forced other women to talk loudly when talking to her. Nandi was aware of the other women’s attitude towards her but she was helpless. Sitting alone in the empty house scared her. She would get up and go somewhere at random, but after listening to the sarcastic remarks from others she felt hurt. After only a few minutes she would come back to her mud hut, which was lonely as a cremation ground. (12-13)

In spite of knowing the attitude of the other women, Nandi’s maternal instincts drive her hard to request these very women to get her son married. It is Nandi’s loneliness and helplessness that agonizes the sensitive reader and one tends to empathize with the helpless old mother as she talks to herself saying:

Oh God, I didn’t ask for Jewels and horses as a part of the dowry! Only a simple bride. Even a blind would do! And did I ever leave a stone unturned! No damn god or goddess appeared, no peer fakir heard my pleas. What wrong did I do? Did I sow baked potatoes? They say even a dung hill gets a favourable hearing after twelve years,
but not a soul heard me in twenty years! Some have had their seven sons married. I couldn’t marry even one. Darkness! No justice! No justice from Him! (13)

At this point in the story, the readers are introduced to the protagonist of the novel Jagseer and his family background is also talked about. Through Jagseer, Nandi wishes to claim her share or seer in this world or jag. However, she is unable to do this as Mother Nature seems to prophesize: “Nandi, you may nourish your plant as much you like, but I would not let it bear fruit” (13). The reality is that no one wants to give his daughter to a landless Jagseer with a blemished past. Ominously, Nandi’s seer in the world slowly approaches its end with Jagseer’s growing age.

Through the character of Nandi, Gurdial Singh has portrayed the harsh reality of society where a tarnished family background with a runaway mother is a social blot on the family’s name and the children’s future prospects. The social stigma attached to Nandi of being born of gypsy parents and because of her running away with Jagseer’s father brings misery for her and Jagseer. Gurdial Singh’s first hand experience of Punjabi culture and his deep observation of customs and traditions can be clearly seen in his portrayal of Nandi’s plight and the family’s condition.

As the story unfolds, it comes to its central thematic concern with Jagseer mentioning, “Mother, tomorrow I’m going to plough our field…” (16). In these lines, we see the first mention of ‘our’ field, the source of tension in the novel. It is this half acre of land and a tomb with a sheesham tree on it around which the whole plot of the novel revolves. All these have deep emotional significance for Jagseer and his mother. The importance of this piece of land can be understood when Gurdial Singh writes, “To Nandi tomorrow was a day like an annual sacred day. It was the day when Jagseer went to plough his “own” field every year. And Nandi celebrated it like a holy event” (16).
This piece of land was given to Thola, Jagseer’s father by Dharam Singh’s father, Thola's landlord and friend. Thola had been brought by Dharam Singh’s father to work for him. However, he was neither a hired seerī nor a bonded labourer but a respectful equal. As a token of their mutual trust, friendship and establishment of a lifelong bond of brotherhood, both had symbolically exchanged turbans. As a mark of his love and gratitude, Thola worked hard and laboured till sunset for Dharam Singh’s father who reciprocated his sincerity with this half an acre of land. This land, though not registered in his name due to legal formalities was agreed and understood to be Thola’s in future. For more than thirty years, both remained in joint possession of it without any dispute. After his father’s demise, Dharam Singh continued to regard Jagseer as his brother and acknowledge Jagseer’s claim on this land. As a result of this, the latter and his mother call the piece of land their “own”.

The social concern of the writer paired with his humanistic approach towards writing are clearly visible in the introductory section of the novel. The writer introduces both Nandi and Jagseer keeping in mind their societal status. Gurdial Singh discusses their present condition and acquaints the reader with their past with great economy of words and terseness of phrase. He gives vivid glimpses into their psyche and the readers finds themselves already familiar with the scenario and the main characters. The writer successfully captures the richness as well as the complexities of life woven in the social fabric. However, he lets things remain as they are, without attempting to comment or philosophize. He observes and presents life as an unobtrusive, objective observer only attempting at convincing characterization and story-telling.

Gurdial Singh’s novel moves ahead with Jagseer and Nandi preparing to plough ‘their’ field for the season. The reader now comes across other characters like Dharam Singh and his son Bhanta who are Jagseer’s landlords. In contrast to Dharam Singh, who is a man of his word, Bhanta is of wicked disposition. He never misses any opportunity to hurt and humiliate Jagseer and it is only after Dharam Singh’s insistence that he allows Jagseer to take the bullocks for ploughing ‘his’ field.
Here, the indication of some unpleasantness between Jagseer and Bhanta is presented with serious undertones. The reader is quick to sense impending catastrophe for Jagseer. The approaching misery and the unhappiness for Jagseer is symbolically suggested through the condition of Jagseer’s field that lies dried up and is overgrown with weeds. In the past, in spite of Bhanta’s objections, Jagseer had somehow managed to water ‘his’ field, but now, even the field itself seems to mock at his endeavour and hint at his impending tragedy. Gurdial Singh writes, “Weeds had grown everywhere, and the grass stems, shining triumphantly in the moonlight, seemed to jeer at Jagseer” (19). Seeing this, Jagseer is reminded of the times when, “he had seen his father plough it as if it were his own” (19). Filled with noble emotions he recalls how his father never sold even a single grain and the crop was only used for consumption and seeds, even in the times of great crisis. For Thola the land and the crop were something sacred and dear to him.

Jagseer also remembers the times when his father and Dharam Singh’s father were good friends and the latter would often say, “Thola, if you were born of my mother, I would have gladly registered half my land in your name” (19). Jagseer recalls fondly how the two went to the Selwara festival wearing same turbans, same coloured shirts and similar shoes with golden silk embroidery. The two even drank and ate from the same dishes but secretly. The two were envied and admired by people who called them “a pair of swans” (19).

Disregarding the past and its cordialities, presently Bhanta seems to be bent upon discrediting Jagseer and his family. He even pesters Dharam Singh to desert Jagseer and Nandi. On such occasions, Dharam Singh tries hard to calm Bhanta by saying:

Look my son, these little things like half an acre of land, don’t matter much. What we own today is not a product of our own labour only. Others have worked hard for it. I’m not sure if we owe more to others or if it’s the other way around. God above watches everyone including smart ones like you; Who knows what He wills? Too
much pride is not good, everyone lives by his own fate here. (20-21)

However, Bhanta mocks at his father and is annoyed at the undue importance given to Jagseer.

Here, Gurdial Singh targets the deterioration in human values and hints at the clash between generations. He voices his concern over the loss of the spirit of tolerance and brotherhood. The strained relations between the powerless and the powerful are also exposed and examined through the interactions between Jagseer and Bhanta. Gurdial Singh contrasts the fading feudal relationships that were based on mutual respect to the newly emerged money-minded capitalist social order which has no value for human associations. Here, we also come across the clash between the sensibilities and values of generations. We see that with the changing times, moral bindings and human relations suffer drastic changes. More than anything else, money is seen to rule the world and every interaction and personal relationship comes to be equated on the basis of power and money.

Through this clash, Gurdial Singh mainly targets the generation of Bhanta which completely discredits the labour and sacrifice of the workers who have contributed immensely to their prosperity. The writer here adopts a Marxist approach in dealing with the relations between the employee and the employed. Gurdial Singh values the spirit of brotherhood and believes in equality for all even when the social conditions differ. His concern for the downtrodden, his reverence for hard-work and his acknowledgement for genuine endeavours are quite evident in this novel.

Apart from his social concerns, Gurdial Singh’s literary genius and creative art also impress the readers. These shine forth in his meticulous descriptions of past events which are artistically inserted in the story. The plot remains coherent and compact even as the writer acquaints the reader with the past and its characters. Through his refined art, he successfully compares and contrasts three
generation at one time making it clear to the reader how the three differ from each other. He also presents certain thought-provoking social concerns and ethical issues but never to philosophize. He just offers the problem and lets the readers discern the solutions. In the hands of a lesser writer, obtrusive philosophizing and teaching would mar the continuity and beauty of the story. It is only due to Gurdial Singh’s genius that the story retains its readers’ interest and simultaneously provokes them to think and judge.

The philosophy of *Karma* is expounded by Gurdial Singh through Jagseer’s words when he meets Nikka, the fortunate barber. When Nikka props up the topic about Jagseer’s desolate life without wife and family, the latter remarks, “Whatever God wills, brother. May be he wrote my *Karma* this way” (26). The significance of this meeting lies in Jagseer’s painful self-analysis regarding his deteriorated physical charm and degraded familial status. He painfully contrasts his present scarecrow body to his handsome youth and feels sad. Jagseer also becomes nostalgic and fondly remembers the trio of friends that included himself, Gaiba and Gheela and how the three enjoyed health and leisure then.

As for now, the cruel hands of fate and time have grabbed Jagseer invariably. He feels as if he has never been young. The remembrance of the bygone days traumatizes him greatly and he feels drained out. Jagseer further recalls how he enjoyed freedom then and did what he desired. Nandi was not a nagging mother then; food was in plenty and his father worked to support him and his mother. Jagseer is reminded of how he and his father looked after their ‘own’ field with pride.

The story complicates with the introduction of another important character in the novel. She is Bhani, Nikka’s wife, whose first glance, strikes Jagseer with something that is unknown to him but kind of likeable. Gurdial Singh subtly describes this delicate moment:
As she was trying to pull the veil back, Jagseer saw the left side of her face. As if he had been struck by lightning! Jagseer went numb. Such fair cheeks, such a broad forehead, such beautiful eyes with long eyelashes! He had never seen such beauty before. That a woman could be so miraculously beautiful, he realized only at that moment! As if mesmerized, a haze spread before Jagseer’s eyes. (32)

Perturbed and feeling deeply drawn towards Bhani, Jagseer inevitably starts visiting Nikka’s house on some pretext or the other. He also experiences a sudden change in himself that is new to him and that is something out of his control. He starts passing by Nikka’s house just like that, but every time he reaches his house, he is overcome by some sort of numbness. On being spotted, he feels helplessly ashamed. This marks a significant development in the novel. Jagseer feels strangely drawn towards Bhani but in spite of Bhani’s subtle responsiveness, he feels too shy to respond back. He silently burns in his own flames like the phoenix.

Gurdial Singh captures Jagseer’s desperation when he writes, “Jagseer felt as if Bhani’s look had drilled a hole between his two eyes. Like a mesmerized snake he kept staring at Bhani” (35). However, Jagseer never crosses his limits and maintains a respectable distance from Bhani more due to his own dignified character than Nikka’s suspicion and societal pressures.

Jagseer’s utopian love for Bhani burns dormantly but never dies. However, it does surface on various occasions as on the day when Bhani calls out to him while he is watering his fields. She says softly, “I got my whole life stained for you, and you’ve become so cold” (48). Jagseer understands her agony and replies, “Bhano, you don’t know how I pass my days” (48). He says just this sentence and falls silent. These few words aptly portray his love and his helplessness that are so strong in him. He philosophically remarks further, “Even death chooses people
who are worthy of it” (49). This single episode is enough to underline his sense of listlessness and loneliness just as Gurdial Singh himself writes: “Life for Jagseer became like cereal bun: neither sweet nor bitter nor sour, he felt it had no taste” (49).

This is how the delicate relationship between Jagseer and Bhani is unfolded. Their love shines as an epitome of purity and sacrifice. This ethereal love is evident from Jagseer’s reaction when Bhani is taunted by people about him. Pacifying her, he says: “God is our witness Bhano. We did not indulge in anything unworthy when we had the chance, why dirty our names now? Let them bark” (52). So pure are Jagseer’s emotions for Bhani that Gurdial Singh writes, “He simply loved the kind of jests made by Bhani; to reply back would be an insult to Bhani. And he no longer stared into Bhani’s eyes, even that would be an insult, he thought” (53). Their relationship is surely utopian in nature.

Gurdial Singh depicts the two lovers convincingly keeping in mind the social and cultural backdrop. The love that Jagseer has for Bhani is heavenly in nature. His self-control and restrained expressiveness is free from any lust. Although, the two feel deeply for each other, never do they take advantage. In this sense, Jagseer undoubtedly establishes himself as a hero in a personal sense because of his immense respect for womanhood and relationships. Bhani’s significance lies in the fact that she is one of those very few people who understand and appreciate Jagseer. She belongs to a respectable caste, unlike Jagseer, but never does this caste-superiority affect their relationship.

Among all worries of life, Jagseer feels lucky enough to enjoy Bhani’s company. Through their relationship, the writer’s social concerns are also voiced in the form of his criticism of societal taboos and norms that strain the relations between Jagseer and Nikka. More than honour, it is caste prejudice that maligns their relations and estranges them. However, as far as Jagseer and Bhani are concerned, Gurdial Singh writes:
She never doubted Jagseer’s loyalty. And only a woman like Bhani could appreciate the way Jagseer had maintained a dignified relationship with her, without caring for what others thought of it. (73)

In sharing their love, the readers also enjoy some secret moments shared by Bhani and Jagseer that they manage to snatch away from the sharp eyes of the cruel society. Both enjoy each other’s company but once again Jagseer’s inexpressiveness and shyness silence the amorous advances of Bhani. She gets annoyed on such occasions and says, “You’re a know-nothing, you don’t know even the time when toads drink” (74). But for Jagseer:

Bhani was a sun, shining on Jagseer’s grey life. The sun warmed his blood and saved him from freezing. He could worship the sun, bow his head to it in the morning, feel its touch on all the flowers blossoming inside him, but how could he absorb all the sunlight in his two little eyes? No, he wouldn’t be able to do that in his lifetime? (74)

Further advancement in the story emphasizes the central thematic concern—land and its ownership. Here, Jagseer is portrayed as happy and contended after he has worked hard on ‘his’ field. His sense of satisfaction on seeing ‘his’ crops flourish make his heart feel elated. But soon the reader senses complication and conflict when Bhanta reveals his upset mind on seeing Jagseer’s robust wheat, in contrast to “His own fields, uneven, with bare spots like the body of a leper” (54).

There is also a mention of ‘his’ (Jagseer’s) sheesham for the first time which a mark of Jagseer’s identification, with ‘his’ field and ‘his’ crop described by the writer as:

The field, in the vast expanse of other fields, looked to him like an outstanding flower printed on a scarf. He stood looking adoringly at the swinging plants. The fresh shoots looked intimate to him like the soft hair of his own
body. His eyes were intoxicated and his body swayed in ecstasy. (54)

However Jagseer is rudely jolted out of his intoxication by Bhanta’s ever-increasing jealousy when he refuses to agree to Jagseer’s request to water ‘his’ field first. Jagseer is also quick to sense the impending ill-fate for himself because of Bhanta’s lately changed behaviour. As apprehended by him, Jagseer soon faces some rude and unbearable insults hurled at him by Bhanta who also insults his own father Dharam Singh for supporting Jagseer.

This episode reveals the increasing uneasiness and unpleasantness in the plot. For the first time, Jagseer is made to feel like a real serf under Bhanta’s commanding ownership. Here, land re-emerges as a major source of dispute and continues to remain the centre of thematic concern. The main focus of this conflict is on the capitalist oppression of the landowner class represented by Bhanta which works against all landless farm-hands like Jagseer. The latter become victims of the callous oppressive system that threatens to engulf them. In his inevitable suffering at the hands of his typical master, Jagseer represents the agony of many such workers whose well-meaning gestures and sincere labours go waste because in any materialistic social order there is no place for emotional and sentimental attachments.

Gradually, life and circumstances start taking their toll on Jagseer. His health deteriorates and his outlook on life starts becoming doubtful and pessimistic. Through Jagseer, Gurdial Singh shows how with the deterioration in living conditions, many like Jagseer unavoidably face the danger of breaking down. Explaining Jagseer’s mental condition he writes:

‘Dog dens!’ Jagseer smiled and wondered why today he was thinking about the ghetto houses this way. He was born and had grown up in this ghetto, and was almost forty two now, but these houses never seemed to him like “dog dens” before. (59)
In these lines, the reader comes across the hard hitting reality of the deprived and less fortunate people of society who live and die without any hope of improvement. Gurdial Singh writes:

There was nothing different about passing the day. If during the day someone asked a friend or a passer by "How he was", the answer, sometimes with a deep sigh, would be: "Good! One more day’s gone". Someone else would rephrase the reply in a different way. "Good! One more day nearer to death. (60)

Jagseer too becomes increasingly aware of his own deprived condition with the passage of time. He surely has no panacea for his sufferings and once again the lines about man and his ten turns of fate figure in the text which re-emphasize the helpless and hopeless existence of the extremely deprived sections of society. Destiny it seems is bent upon making them suffer endlessly without any respite and redemption.

Thinking about the meaningless and purposeless existence of many like him, often turns Jagseer gloomy. He finds some respite in the company of Raunaki, another desolate like him, whose wife Santo has deserted him. Both, Jagseer and Raunaki can not do anything but laugh over the jests that life has played on them. And again, the ominous lines regarding man and his ten turns of fate feature in the story.

Through the relationship between Jagseer and Raunaki, a very touching and humane picture of the two have-nots is presented by Gurdial Singh. He vividly captures the class / caste ridden societal prejudices through Jagseer’s hesitation in leaving the brass bowl uncleaned, from which he has drunk water at Raunaki’s house. “Forget it man, don’t be silly” says Raunaki snatching the bowl from Jagseer’s hands. “Only they who live in Goddamn big houses believe in that kind shit; this caste and that caste. For me, friendship is all I care for” (65).
Gurdial Singh’s heart-felt empathy for the marginalized section of society is quite evident through the similar plights of Jagseer and Raunaki. The writer has given representation to the innumerable caste-sufferers through Jagseer’s character. The writer’s awareness and his concern for the underprivileged people of the Punjab also find expression through the sorry experiences of both Jagseer and Raunaki. It is Gurdial Singh’s own deep and intimate contact with rural reality and his inwardness of feeling for village life, especially for the downtrodden, that gives this novel a unique touch of authenticity, one that has been celebrated much by critics. His utterance of the longings and lackings of the low castes through Jagseer gives his text a unique representational quality.

Gurdial Singh’s repeated mention of the role of destiny in the cases of Jagseer and Raunaki hints at the philosophy of reductionism in which man is forced to believe and act as something base or rather reduced due to reduced circumstances. Reductionism and the writer’s philosophy of existentialism find apt expression through Raunaki who explains to Jagseer his loneliness and pitiful condition in the following lines:

"Look at me, I’ve no family, all alone, even she deserted me! If I die today, there’s no one to cremate me and I know damn well the world won’t miss me. Hundreds of worms like me die everyday - well, we are also worms; who counts us among men anyway? Yet I don’t want to die... I don’t understand..." (66)

It is this endurance of suffering that Gurdial Singh celebrates in this work. He salutes this spirit of stoicism through his two characters who accept their reality and live with an indomitable spirit which till conditions improve, if they do. Just as Raunaki says: “Alright, whatever you will, my master... If you’re happy burning my bones like this, go ahead! But what else can you do to me beyond this?” (67).

Jagseer’s acute material and physical downfall actually begins in the seventh chapter. Gurdial Singh writes:
On reaching the fields, Jagseer looked at ‘his’ own field first. The wheat plants looked like hungry and hurt children. In the neighbouring fields which Jagseer had watered a few days earlier, the plants were healthy and taller. Jagseer looked at both the fields turn by turn and sat on the dividing ridge. His legs had no strength to support him... .He had no courage to look at his ‘own’ field a second time. (75)

The further developments in the story bring more misery for Jagseer because of Bhanta’s evil nature. He declares that he would water the fields himself and cleverly sends away Jagseer to weed the twelve acre field along with his own brother Jebba. While Jagseer is away for five days, Bhanta executes his evil plan. He ends Jagseer’s claim on ‘his’ land by getting the sheesham tree, a symbol of Jagseer’s family honour, cut.

This event marks the material dispossession of Jagseer. He feels totally ruined as the sheesham goes down. Describing Jagseer’s deep agony Gurdial Singh writes:

From a short distance he looked at ‘his’ field. His heart pounded vigorously as he saw ‘his’ sheesham tilted... A minute later he saw his sheesham fall with a loud jerk. As if the ground had slipped from under his feet! Darkness spread before his eyes. (76)

This incident also marks the beginning of Jagseer’s disinheriance. The sheesham tree which till now stood as a symbol of his respect and his father’s remembrance stands no more. The cutting of this tree comes as a blow to his dignity. He had always felt a sense of security and pride in ‘his’ half acre of land and this sheesham tree erected on his father’s tomb or marhi. The irony of the situation is that, both are denied to him. Dr. Paramjit Singh Ramanna writes:
For Jagseer and his mother Nandi, the cutting down and selling of the tree is the ultimate act of insult and humiliation of the dead soul who had blindly served that ungrateful family all his life. (Tarsem & Sushil 45)

Due to Bhanta’s selfishness, the traditional feudal relationship stands destroyed and the dealings between two families become strained. Bhanta becomes the landlord and Jagseer the landless labourer in the real sense. Through Jagseer’s dispossession, the writer gives collective representation to all the unfortunate ones who have suffered at the hands of their heartless employers. Jagseer’s saga of suffering therefore becomes the tale of every such misfortune that his lot faces.

The question of ownership particularly of land has always been a matter of concern in hegemonic relationships. The owner becomes naturally powerful by virtue of his control over land and ownership becomes synonymous to authority. The powerless and the landless always remain servile and live futile lives. Here, the reality of the numerous faceless Indian villages and their numerous desolate inhabitants comes to be highlighted. In The Last Flicker an endless tale of exploitation, frustration and alienation is related poignantly in the Indian context.

Gurdial Singh gives a new dimension to suffering when we find the helpless Dharam Singh unable to control his family and the circumstances. This humanistic and realistic portrayal of Dharam Singh is a master-stroke by the writer. By showing the misery of Dharam Singh, Gurdial Singh manages to assert many things at one time. One is that, in the changing times, human relations undergo inevitable changes and the older generation feels helpless in front of the younger one.

Secondly, the change in social and economic scenario inevitably leads to change in social relations where the good-hearted ones like Dharam Singh find it difficult to adjust to such changes in authority and times. Another assertion that is made by the writer is that humanity survives with people like Dharam Singh who
counterbalance the bad and keep the world going. So, life continues with a mix of good and bad. More so, the noble and the vulnerable, whether rich or poor, tend to suffer equally under deprived circumstances.

This is asserted by Gurdial Singh when life brings about a cruel turn of events for Dharam Singh. Land and its ownership once again becomes the cause of his woes. His wife Dhano instigates Bhanta to ask for his share and push out Dharam Singh into a shack in the barn. Dharam Singh feels totally shattered. More than the loss of land, it is the loss of dignity and honour that agonizes him. He is hurt by the very thought of being abandoned by his ‘own’ wife and son. However, he finds it hard to vent out his anger though he feels extremely enraged. His self-respect and dignity prevent him from separating Bhanta from the rest of the family. Voicing his fears he says: “What would people say? First he let his son take charge of everything, now he’s fighting over the division of property!” (91). Sleep also evades him because, “Dhano’s harsh words stabbed him like glass splinters scattered on the bed” (91).

Through this brief but very strong episode in Jagseer’s story, Gurdial Singh shows that pain speaks the same language world over. All caste, creed, status and class barriers disappear when pain and misery strike. Here, in the case of Dharam Singh, the writer shows that even if one is wealthy, he has to face his share of woes and worries. Through Dharam Singh’s plight, Gurdial Singh gives representation to the people who suffer quietly like him under the burden of property and wealth.

Unaware of Dharam Singh’s plight, Nandi storms over the demolition of her husband’s tomb and the felling of the sheesham. “Who’d absolve you of this sin, Dharmia!” says Nandi wiping her tears. She continues:

I asked you yesterday. You duped me, sent me home, you made my honest son lie to me, curse on you! May ruin fall on you! That’s how you reward us, Dharmia, for all our loyalty and hard work? (93)
Nandi’s wailing and laments do not end with this. Addressing her husband she says, “All your life you earned for these demons...You died serving these demons....leaving me nowhere. They sold even your ashes...” (93). She is totally shattered and extremely hurt that her husband and son gave their entire lives to Dharam Singh’s family but to no avail. However, the irony here is that Dharam Singh himself has fallen a helpless victim to the callous times.

Gurdial Singh’s depiction of the inequality and acute deprivation of the seeris is also voiced by Nandi who says, “These skinners skinned him like an onion all his life. When he died he gave our son to them; my son still works for them, day and night. But look at what they have done to us!” (93). In these lines, Gurdial Singh voices the agony of the farm-labourers who toil hard all their lives but never to be appreciated or rewarded. Through Thola and his son Jagseer, he talks about the agonies of many such deprived and oppressed people who suffer throughout life and die unsung deaths.

The following prominent lines spoken by Nandi are enough to understand the class/caste divide and the sad turn of times for people who suffer due to this divide. She says:

What good can you expect from these Jat-boors who keep us at a distance, who throw us a morsel whenever they please as if we were dogs: It was only in olden days that people sacrificed their blood for others. Now... .(94)

With continuous blows on his identity, Jagseer’s bafflement over his ‘low’ existence finds expression when he too questions God as to why he must create and send such ill fated humans like himself onto this earth. The philosophies of existentialism and reductionism again find expression in Jagseer’s words: “Idiot, why do you have to reincarnate worms living in hell into human form?” (96). This disturbing thought of Jagseer is clearly self-expressive.
The writer gradually works the story towards larger concerns and builds up bonds between Jagseer and Dharam Singh—the two betrayed ones. Gurdial Singh’s aim here is to emphasize the need for brotherhood in desperate times. Dharam Singh gives up his house and his comfort and now starts living in the barn. Forgetting his own miseries, he consoles Jagseer, who feels lonely and desolate due to the death of his mother. He even helps him to arrange for her cremation.

While arranging for Nandi’s last rites with Dharam Singh’s help, Jagseer realizes that he is not the only one who suffers. He now fully understands Dharam Singh’s sorry state when the latter says:

You have one hurt, Jagsia, that’s nothing because of the circumstances of your life. But those who have everything home, children, land, property— you think they are happy? ... Man proposes but it is God who disposes. Maybe this world is made only for misled people. To live with such people, Jagsia, you need to have strength of a two-ton steel cart, a body like a sheesham trunk and a soul like a stone. A weakling has no chance in this world. Jagsia, he’d be crushed sooner or later like a toy camel made of sugarcane peelings... (99)

Listening to Dharam Singh’s beaten voice, Jagseer realizes that his pain and alienation is much more critical and agonizing. However, for the have-nots like Jagseer, things turn even more ugly when such people lie exposed to the vices of the powerful. In the ensuing happenings, Bhanta’s dislike of Jagseer takes the shape of sarcasm and taunts only to worsen the things for Jagseer, who tries hard to avoid any unpleasantness.

The reference to the barren sheesham tree, without twigs and leaves, also seems to prophesize doom for Jagseer. The trunk which lies like a dead body, hints at the lonely life of Jagseer and his much feared desolate end. The performance of
the last rites by Jagseer by circling the *sheesham* symbolizes the giving up of his stake and claim on the tree and perhaps the land too. Jagseer returns home with his shattered pride and identity after gathering some bricks from his father’s tomb as his only possession. He re-erects his father’s tomb outside his house with the eleven bricks he has brought home, but without the ceremonial ashes.

This episode marks the climax of the story as far as its theme and social voicings are concerned. Gurdial Singh’s exposition of the vanities and follies of this imperfect world characterize his attempt to represent the miseries of the weaker ones. The writer reveals the philosophy of life through Dharam Singh’s following speech:

What’s this world, Jagsia, without love, and love these days disappears fast. What for? What use is this damn land and other possessions if you can not even communicate with each other? The land, the possessions ... are nothing more than a bit of dirt off your hands. To hell with this kind of life, if you start licking the dirt. (99)

With Nandi’s last rites becoming the talk of the village, things worsen for both Jagseer. It seems that the society is forever unwilling and intolerant to see the underdogs live or die respectfully. It always keeps a sharp, critical eye on all, particularly the so called unworthy ones. One such watch dog of society is Dhano who is enraged at Nandi’s respectable funeral and refuses to acknowledge the toil and labour that Thola and his family have put in to make their household flourish. She totally negates Thola, Nandi and Jagseer’s dedication and hard work and is extremely annoyed at her own husband’s generosity. She once again pours out her venom indiscriminately on Jagseer and Dharam Singh.

This unexpected and undeserved treatment coupled with stinging sarcasm wounds Dharam Singh deeply. Gurdial Singh captures his pain when he writes, “His soul writhed like a fish thrown out on the sand” (102). The timid man that
Dharam Singh is, he is unable to set Dhano right as words stick in his throat. Adding to his misery and humiliation, Bhanta joins his mother saying, “Let’s go, mother, if he’s pig headed enough to do such a thing, we’ll go a different route” (102). This behaviour of Bhanta aggravates Dharam Singh’s pain as Dhano continues to torment him with her harsh and unrefined words. He had always apprehended Dhano’s and Bhanta’s callous greed for their share but never had he thought it would find such a crude manifestation and that too so soon.

This undeserved treatment meted out to Dharam Singh by his own wife and son exposes the negative power of money and property. The writer shows how the two can bring misery and downfall even on the ones who own and possess it. Here, the changing family values and deteriorating relationships once again figure but in a more disastrous manner. The helplessness of Dharam Singh is greater as compared to Jagseer who, unlike the former, does not suffer at the hands of his ‘own’.

In such times, all desolate and deserted ones like Dharam Singh, Raunaki and Jagseer come together. Raunaki gives Jagseer the much needed moral and emotional support. He also brings Bhani’s message who wishes to see Jagseer. However, Jagseer who is totally exhausted and drained out because of Nandi’s cremation, returns from Bhani’s house without meeting her. Raunaki comes to Jagseer’s rescue every time he is in need. He feeds him and gives him company at his own house saying “Jagsia, only a man can comfort a man” … “Left alone, he withers” (108).

Raunaki often says to Jagseer: “If God wanted to do this sort of things to people like me and you, why didn’t he make us birds or animals?” (108). Thinking about the freedom birds and animals enjoy, he painfully becomes aware that he cannot imagine big because he has been made a mere human by God. Thinking thus, his imagination shrinks and he falls like hail on the ground and becomes silent.
Here, the question of freedom is very pertinent because the cruel turns of fate leave no scope for individual assertion for people like Raunaki and Jagseer. Freedom means nothing to them because they cannot be free in any sense—neither materially or financially nor physically or emotionally. Society never grants them this luxury and they themselves cannot snatch it away from society’s claws. Their sad plight is highlighted by Raunaki through the story of an oilman (109-110). The interlude of the lucky oilman is enough to make both Jagseer and Raunaki realize how unfortunate and ill-fated the two are. They feel that they can never be absolved of the ‘sin’ of being born as unlucky, poor humans.

Considering their ill-fate, extreme hopelessness creeps into their lives. The two now do not even hope that anything will ever change for them. Here the writer shows how Raunaki who is not a farm hand or a dalit, also suffers because he is poor. Gurdial Singh here seeks to give representation to all those who live lives of poverty and squalor inspite of their upper caste. They can only wonder like Raunaki, “What worse could happen to us now Jagsia? and if it’s still not bad enough, to hell with it. Let him break our balls if he wants to?” (110).

The two desperates try to find some temporary respite in the fancy episodes read by Raunaki from Roop Basant, Jaany Chor, Nall Damyanti and Pooran Bhagat. They feel transported into another realm and their occasional escape from this harsh world brings them the much needed respite from the drudgery of life.

The playful discussions of Jagseer and Raunaki who also resort to taking drugs (poppy) to forget their miseries and fight their woes, touch the readers’ hearts. Raunaki fond rememberance of Santo and Jagseer’s silent longing for Bhani speaks volumes about their loneliness. Gurdial Singh writes, “Even in Raunaki’s indifference towards Santo, Jagseer saw a love that would not fade till Raunaki’s death” (112). Through the pretended indifference of Raunaki towards Santo’s absence and through the silences of Jagseer, the writer here wishes to assert the importance of women in their lives.
Structurally women characters may not seem quite important in this novel, but their very absence marks their presence. Both Santo and Bhani are very much present in the story and in the lives of Raunaki and Jagseer respectively even though they are physically absent from the scenes of the novel. Even in their short appearances they are powerful enough to mark their presence. They are as Raunaki explains, “Jagsia, when man boils like tea, woman enters into him like fresh milk and calms him down” (112). He furthers adds, “… may be that’s why singles die sooner than those who are married. They keep boiling on and on and on without milk: their inside dries up and there is nothing left!” (113). Such is the power of women.

Forever nurturing his utopian love for Bhani, Jagseer continues to suffer alone. His anguish on seeing his famished crops deepens his suffering. As he sees the lush green crop in the neighbouring fields he becomes sad. The hurt of his scanty crop is so deep that the piercing words of Vasakha, a villager, are nothing in comparison because, “Only the leaves of wheat now pricked his eyes deeper” (114). He returns home with some dried scraps of ‘his’ sheesham tree, the only remains of his father’s and his family’s honour.

Gurdial Singh once again brings together the desolate ones. Jagseer’s compassionate talk with the bullocks at Dharam Singh’s house is another such touching episode in the story. He carefully pens down the warm response of the bullocks and their emaciated looks which trouble Jagseer deeply. He talks to them saying:

Oh my! You’ve gone so weak… are you ever fed? Oh you greenhorns! Look at the pitted stomachs, look at the bare ribs … well, when the master himself is gone, who else would look after you? Why would they look after you now, all they need is work out of you. What a shame! Nothing but bones! (116)
Jagseer feels that bloodsucking landlords like Bhanta do not value life at all whether it is of humans or of animals. All they want is work. His understanding of how it feels to be disowned and discredited becomes more acute on seeing the skinny bulls. He is also aware of the pain that one feels when one’s hard-work is overlooked and goes totally ignored. He closely identifies his deprivation with the bullock’s sorry state. The writer puts this as, “In their big round eyes was a wetness that only Jagseer could feel” (116).

In talking to them, Jagseer temporarily forgets his own misery. He feels unknown solace in their reciprocation and warmth, Gurdial Singh writes, “The oxen squeezed Jagseer between them as if they did not want him to go” (116). Sadly, Jagseer once again comes face to face with the harsh realities of the world as Bhanta’s wife reprimands him this time. Gurdial Singh captures his pain when he writes, “Jagseer froze as the words registered … Some of the words she spoke amazed him. Some hit him like stones and still others pierced him like daggers” (116-117).

To add to the insult, Dhano too lashes out on him saying:

Wretched dog! Burn up and jump over the wall...now come to put salt on my wounds. Get out of my house, and if I even hear you have been to that field again I'll chop off your legs right there! Our field... as if it's really yours. What does that fucking piece of land mean to you? Did your old man buy it for you? And your old woman, that witch, sucked my man dry all these years. If she were alive I'd pull the hag’s hair out, strand by strand. What you dogs did to us...tore my family apart! Huh, celebrate mother’s death with our money! She'll burn in hell. Just get the fuck out of my house! If I see even your shadow in this street, I'd suck you dry! (117)
She blames him, curses him, warns him and leaves him totally drained out. He feels heavily weighed down by her insults. He is unable to bear it any longer and returns home with a heavy heart. The blasphemous ravings of Dhano strike a final blow on Jagseer’s identity and his self-confidence. He is taken aback by her rudeness. Her venomous talk leaves a deep sting on his very being and he feels totally disillusioned and disoriented by this treatment.

Here, the conflict between the land owner and landless figures once again. The former can never trust and credit their workers. The power game is clearly evident here and the reader’s sensibility is once again jolted by the harsh and undeserved treatment that Jagseer gets.

The ending of the novel summarises the general belief that the good suffer and the bad prosper in this unreasonable and unjust world. Raunaki voices the common concerns of the downtrodden and the gentle ones saying:

> Even fucking God goes after nice guys like him... and those Goddamn, scoundrels who hustle through life day and night, who bullshit around everywhere, even He dare not touch them; well, He’s afraid of them bloody big daddies, how can He go near them...? (119)

Here, the writer once again questions God’s justice and divine laws through Raunaki. He puts forward the very common belief that the shady always escape the wrath of God and it is the weak and the submissive that always face his tests. However, Jagseer is already aware how Dharam Singh has been insulted and kicked out of the house by Dhano and Bhanta’s wife. He somehow also holds himself responsible for Dharam Singh’s sad fate.

With the passage of time, a more sublime Jagseer emerges, purified in the fire of tests and trials. He understands and accepts how little people are destined to continue suffering. Ironically, his own pain gets mitigated when he thinks of the more unfortunate ones. Gurdial Singh writes:
But slowly his thinking changed. He had less to complain about people now. Their lives are even more hellish than mine, why should they care for me? He would quietly convince himself, and the agony would subside. (120)

Jagseer now renounces all that he likes and needs. He leaves food, joking and talking lightly. His talks become more questioning and critical. He asks:

Raunaka, what if man says, no, I don’t want to be born? They say man is blessed with human life after passing through eighty four lac other lives; what if man insists not to opt for a human incarnation again? What if he prefers the life of an animal? Will God still condemn him to a man’s life? (121)

In these lines the pain that Jagseer is inflicted with is no more personal in nature. It is more sublime and his existential search finds its manifestation in his much relevant questions. He feels that if human life can be so condemnable and base, why can’t the unfortunate ones be allowed to opt to become animals.

Jagseer continues to question God’s ways and worth of human actions in the vast drama of creation. He even challenges the law of karma saying:

Those who have land, nice homes, wives, children, did they do better karma than us, Raunaka. Karma, Karma, Karma, what are these God damned karma? Raunaka? Are they what we did in the previous life? Or are they the end product of our deeds in this life. Well, how could you dream about what you did in the previous life? It’s all bullshit! The barking of a bitch-race! (121)
This long complaint is from a man who is totally disillusioned with life, God and his creation, particularly the unfortunate men. For many like him and Raunaki, life has no charm. Explaining Jagseer’s mental state Gurdial Singh writes that for him life has “no continuity, no rhyme, no rhythm; this fable he felt was like a footpath in the fields passing through creaks, bushes, crap stubs, and crushed melons which lay around randomly on it” (122).

In such desperate times, Jagseer warmly remembers Bhani and longs to see her but unfortunately she is at her parent’s house. Cruel fate intervenes here too and continues to play on the dying Jagseer. He does not seem to be fortunate enough even to see this very personal and trivial wish being fulfilled. He continues to be tormented by the seemingly grotesque figures on the walls of his house. Among all this pessimism and helplessness, Jagseer voices his last words enquiring about the where-abouts of Dharam Singh and his final wish comes across through these words, “Raunaka, do ask Nikka’s wife to paint my tomb; you would construct it of course” (122). He finally dies after five days.

This powerful novel ends with the lighting of the diva or lamp by Bhani on Jagseer’s marhi or tomb. The lighting of the lamp is symbolic of hope for many like Jagseer. It is also symbolic of the bleak prosperity and happiness for the trampled lot in future. Here, the writer’s optimism is symbolised through the light of the diva which signifies the good times waiting to reward the hard working people.

Apart from this, the symbolism extends further in uniting Jagseer and Bhani into one. Gurdial Singh writes: “The flame trembled in the wind, flickered into two and merged into one again, becoming even steadier and taller” (123). This signifies the final consummation of their eternal and never-ending love that Jagseer and Bhani share. This love could not find consummation in their lives but after Jagseer death, Bhani’s everlasting love for him shines through the lamp. Its flame is symbolic of Jagseer’s and Bhani’s distinct mortal bodies uniting into one through their love and admiration and their soul felt commitment.
The novel ends with the fond remembrance of Jagseer by Raunaki, who complains, “Having given me hope, you have departed. What about me who has nothing to hold on to?” (123). His grief on losing Jagseer is so deep that he is unable to comprehend how he would live without him. In his sad absence too, Jagseer shines forth like a hero who suffered but endured endlessly. Jagseer himself burned throughout like the diva to light up his landlords’ lives. Jagseer may have died as “an unobtrusive fact” as a critic puts it but for many like Raunaki such people are the real unsung heroes.
WORK CITED LIST


