Chapter II

*The Last Flicker: A Tale of Metaphysical Rebellion*

Published in 1964, *The Last Flicker (Marhi da Deeva)* was Gurdial Singh’s first novel. It can be regarded as Gurdial Singh’s inaugural as well as impressive move from short stories to the novel writing. At the time of its publication, it was an experimental novel which broke the traditional concept of the hero by providing new dimensions and scope to the Punjabi novel. Though it is the smallest novel written by him (which contains barely one hundred pages) yet, since its publication, it has been regarded as a classic in Punjabi literature by many renowned critics. Due to its widespread popularity and amazing depiction of the rural Punjabi life, it has been translated into many Indian and foreign languages. Gurdial Singh has won many awards and acknowledgements as a first class writer on account of this novel. In this short novel, the writer has touched upon many heart-rending and humanistic subjects which certainly have managed to have a long lasting impact on its readers.

The narrative of the novel does not follow a linear sequence rather it is full of “analepsis” and “prolepsis” and consequently it moves to-and-fro randomly. In the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to an old woman Nandi who is obsessed with the idea of the marriage of her forty-two years old son Jagseer. She requests her neighbourer Sooti to find a match for her son. Sooti subtly makes fun of her and diplomatically evades the conversation by making various excuses and sarcastic remarks. The narrator then takes the readers to the past by narrating the love-story of Nandi and Jagseer’s father Thola. Nandi married Thola against the wishes of her parents and their gypsy-clan which had come in his village for a temporary stay. After that, that clan broke all the relations with Nandi and moved elsewhere. So Nandi had no support from her parents. Thola, her husband, was a noble, hard-working and honest man. Dharm Singh’s father, the *jimindar*\(^{15}\) of the neighbouring village, brought him along with his wife in his village on crop-sharing basis. Thola worked very hard in

\(^{15}\) Land lord
the fields of Dharam Singh’s father and made a great profit for him (Dharam Singh’s father). Dharam Singh’s father bought many adjoining fields with that profit which enabled him to earn respect and powerful position in his area. He treated Thola like his own brother and he (Thola) in turn left no stone unturned to make him successful. Before dying, he gave four bighas of land and a tahli to Thola but due to the complex procedure of land transforming, he could not get it registered in his (Thola’s) name. He helped Thola in every way to get her four daughters married. At the time of his death, he instructed his son Dharam Singh to take care of Thola’s family after him.

Dharam Singh kept the words given to his father and never made Thola feel that he was their seerti. When Thola was about to die, he handed over his son Jagseer to Dharam Singh and said that from now onward he would work for him (Dharam Singh). He also asked Jagseer to construct his marhi under ‘his’ tahli and he (Jagseer) did likewise. Jagseer, after the death of his father, started working in Dharam Singh’s fields with full commitment and dedication. Dharam Singh’s son Bhanta, quite opposite to the nature of his father and grandfather, is basically a cunning man who considers Jagseer nothing more than a servant. Dharam Singh himself is worried over his son’s wicked behaviour.

The narrator again uses the flash backward technique to tell us that Jagseer used to be quite handsome in his youth and had a good physique as well. Geba, Gheela and Nikka were his friends who sometimes used to feel jealous of him because, despite being a low-caste, he was exceptionally handsome and it was an unusual thing for them. By that time, Nikka got married to a tall and beautiful girl Bhani. When the other three friends Gheela, Geba and Jagseer went to see her, she got attracted towards Jagseer because of his strong physique and reserved nature. Jagseer too fell in love

---

16 A unit of land-measuring used in Punjab. 1 bigha is equal to 4 kanals or half killa/acre.
17 Indian rosewood tree (hard wood)
18 A worker whom a landlord hires on crop sharing basis. Land owners usually hire them for physical work to be done in their fields and give them some share (usually very less in comparison to their own profit) from their crops at the time of harvesting.
19 A monument erected in the memory of a dead person
with her at first sight. He started visiting Nikka’s house more often but, due to his shyness, could not dare see straight in Bhani’s “burning” eyes. Despite Bhani’s passionate advances, Jagseer could not express his feelings openly and his love remained more or less platonic in nature. When Nikka came to know about the matter, he beat up Bhani badly. After that, Bhani’s brother took her away with him. Two years later, Nikka brought Bhani back after giving assurance to her brothers that he would not behave harshly with Bhani in future. Meanwhile Jagseer developed friendship with an *amlī*20 Raunki and started taking opium regularly. Raunki’s wife had eloped with someone even after fifteen years of their marriage. After retuning from her parents, Bhani tries to contact Jagseer but due to social restrictions and his own shy nature, he did not respond the way she had expected of him. He very humbly told her that despite being in love with her he was unable to take any bold action. Bhani understood what he meant. Gradually, as the time rolled, Jagseer’s relations with Nikka improved and they start visiting each other without any hesitation. By now Bhani has become the mother of three children but something inside never allows her to forget the memories of Jagseer.

The narration then returns to its previous rhythm. Jagseer’s health has deteriorated due to regular intake of drugs for a long time and his relations with Bhanta are not pleasant. Bhanta quarrels with his father for favouring Jagseer on the matter of land which has been given to his father by his grandfather. He trickily sends Jagseer and his own son to hoe the field which was situated at the other end of the village. He knew that it would take four to five days for hoeing that field. In the mean time, he sells the *tahli* (which had been given to Jagseer’s father by his grandfather) to a *shah*21 of the *mandi*22. When Jagseer, after hoeing the fields, goes to see his fields, he is unable to believe on his eyes. A few persons sent by the *shah* were cutting down his

---

20 A drug addict (especially the one who regularly takes opium and lives his life in casual manner). In the villages of Punjab, such persons are regarded as comic figures because of their unusual talkative nature. They generally pass their time by remaining idle, sitting and playing cards in the *saths* of villages. They have a particular dialect which is often copied by the others humourously.

21 A businessman/money lender/ commission agent

22 Market
tahli. He rushes towards them and makes a futile attempt to stop them. After that, he feels heart-broken, cheated, desolate, lonely, miserable and helpless. He gathers the bricks of his father’s broken marhi and brings them home. He arranges those bricks in a corner of his house in the form of the old marhi. When Nandi comes to know about this matter, she becomes extremely upset. She goes to the house of Dharam Singh and starts cursing him. Dharam Singh, being unaware of the act of Bhanta, is unable to understand the cause of her irritation. He politely asks her about the matter and feels shocked when Nandi tells him about the cutting of the tahli. Dharam Singh’s wife Dhano behaves very badly with Nanadi and abuses her for being a low caste. She also challenges the authenticity over the possession of the tahli. Dharam Singh ignores his wife and consoles Nandi and then asks her to go home.

Nandi is unable to come out of this jolt and dies in grief few days later. Jagseer is heartbroken and alone. Dharam Singh consoles him and promises him that he would make all the arrangements for Nandi’s marna. Dharam Singh helps Jagseer with seven hundred rupees which he has brought from his adtiya. Dhano quarrels with Dharam Singh for the money he has given to Jagseer. His son Bhanta asks him to divide the land and plans with his mother to shift his father to the outside cattle-house. Dharam Singh in grief leaves the house for an unknown place. Even after searching for few days nobody comes to know where he has gone.

When Jagseer, who is unaware of all this, comes to meet Dharam Singh, Bhanta’s wife and Dhano rebuke him badly in this way:

Enough! You’ve already done what you could to ruin us…. Who knows what ditch he [Dharam Singh] fell into? It’s all your fault! The whole family is on the run. He’s been missing for four days, and you’ve come to embrace him?
....

---

23 A ceremony after the death of a person for the peace of his/her soul. In this ceremony, especially in Sikh families, Shri Guru Granth Sahib is recited and after the ceremony lunch is served to the people who have come to take part in it by the family of the dead person.

24 The money-lender
Numerous expressions flitted across his [Jagseer’s] face. Some of the words she spoke amazed him. Some hit him like stones and still others pierced him like daggers.

....

‘What the hell’s this nigger [outcaste] doing here?.... If you call yourself a son of a man, get out of here right away, or else I’ll eat you up in pieces!’ Dhano said, gnashing her teeth....

‘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 ...piece of land mean to you? Did your old man buy it for you? And your old woman, that which, 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...out of my house! If I see even your shadow in this street, I’d suck you dry.’ (116-17)

These lethal words jolt his inner conscious and prove as a fatal blow on his self-respect. He gets stuck to his broken old cot and tattered quilt for many days. Raunki tries his level best to make him revive from his despondent condition but fails. Jagseer tells Raunki his wish to meet Bhani for the last time but when Raunki enquires about her, he comes to know that she has gone to attend her brother’s marriage. Jagseer then requests Raunki to make his marhi after his death and give her message to Bhani to daub and take care of that marhi. After a few days Jagseer dies and Raunki makes a marhi by arranging some bricks clumsily. But he does not dare ask Bhani to daub it. After several days when Raunki passes by the cremation ground, he notices that the marhi of Jagseer has freshly been daubed and a deevā25 is lit in it. He keeps looking for a long while at the trembling and flickering flame of the deevā and then notices Bhani walking on the foot-path to the village.

The Projection of the Protagonist

After reading the brief outline of the novel, the personality of the protagonist i.e. Jagseer seems to be emerging out of mainly two relationships – first, his

25 A type of small lamp usually made of terracotta.
relationship with his masters in the context of the land given to his father, and second, his love affair with his friend’s wife Bhani. Although he ultimately gets defeated in both of these relationships yet he manages to compel the readers to think about the general human conditions that are being offered by society to people like him. As we move towards the end of the novel, we unconsciously start developing a negative feeling towards the whole familial and social system that has engulfed Jagseer from all directions. Instead of criticizing him for his inactiveness, we start condemning the system which has circumscribed him to such an extent that his existence or resistance appears to be losing its importance in many situations.

Jagseer has been projected as a loving and decent character in the novel. He has good relations with his parents, friends and other villagers. During his youth, Geba, Gheela and Nikka were his friends. In the later phase of his life, Raunki, though because of the similarity of their situations, becomes his fast friend. However the relationship that throws light on his persona more than anything else is his love relationship with Bhani who is his friend Nikka’s newly wed bride. Jagseer meets her when he, along with his friends Geba and Gheela, goes to see her for the first time. Jagseer who is more handsome than his friends cannot hide his excitement for her and she (Bhani) too catches his intention at once. It happens more like love-at-first-sight.

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)

Jagseer lost control over his emotions and starts visiting her house in the absence of Nikka. Bhani responds to his advancements boldly and this makes Jagseer proud of his being for a short period of time. Bhani, despite being a married woman, is ready to break all social taboos to get Jagseer’s love. She has been depicted bolder than him who does not care for “what will people think.” The peculiar thing in this Jagseer-Bhani relationship is that female partner is more vigorously active than her male counterpart whereas usually, according to the cultural conventional behaviour, the
active part is played by male partner and his beloved remains behind the scene. However, in *The Last Flicker*, the male-partner i.e. Jagseer remains behind the curtain and it is his beloved who takes the initiative and openly comes forward. She says to Jagseer:

‘Well, they didn’t lie, did they? They called you girlish that day.’ Jagseer heard Bhani’s taunt as she chucked but he still couldn’t dare turn to look back into her eyes.

‘If you’ve got the nerve, look straight into my eyes. Hiding like a rabbit won’t do; the handsome body God has given you…only if you had the guts as well!’ Then she whispered; look at the thighs of the bugger! As if rounded on a lathe….feel like biting them as if they were a piece of melon.’ (38)

Bhani’s approval of Jagseer as her lover also connotes her rejection of her husband, Nikka. Nikka fails to win Bhani’s love despite his several efforts. The name “Nikka,” in Punjabi language means “small” or “short.” When he comes to know about the intimacy between Jagseer and Bhani, he beats and abuses her. In spite of being aggressive against Jagseer, he projects his anger on Bhani which in a way indicates his own weakness and distorted psyche. Therefore the name “Nikka” goes well with his being. He also falls short in front of Bhani’s strong subjectivity. After beating her, he has to admit his mistake in front of her brothers. They (Bhani’s brothers) set some conditions for Nikka and he accepts them without any resistance. In the later part of the novel, he even accepts Jagseer’s frequent visits to his house despite knowing the fact that his wife still keeps a soft corner in her heart for him.

Jagseer on the other hand strongly believes in platonic love. He loves Bhani but at the same time considers it unethical to have physical relations with her. He can fight against Nikka for beating Bhani but cannot think of eloping with her. Despite Bhani’s several efforts, he fails to break the boundaries drawn by social limitations. He breaks the traditional concept of the romantic Punjabi hero by idealizing his love. His manner seems quite opposite to Mirza, Ranjha and Mahiwal who did not care a bit about social restrictions and customs. They even did not care for their lives in their efforts to get their loved ones. Jagseer cannot be compared with the traditional romantic heroes of
Punjab and their modes of living because he remains over-conscious about his social position, customs and rituals.

There might be some weaknesses in his manner of loving when we locate him in the background of traditional Punjabi trends of romanticism, but there is certainly something in his persona for which Bhani rejects her husband and gets attracted towards him. The unmatched qualities that Jagseer possesses are sincerity, self-control, self-respect and stability which we do not find in Nikka or any other character of the novel. Nikka is an impatient and frivolous character and it can easily be judged through his dressing sense, gestures and actions. The narrator introduces us to Nikka as:

On the way back to the village he [Jagseer] met Nikka, the village barber….
In his milk white clothes, double-layered leather shoes [jutti], neatly wound turban, Nikka seemed to be flying in the air.
‘Hunh, how do you do?’ Nikka asked Jagseer in his gusty voice.
‘Fine,’ Jagseer replied without looking at Nikka: his eyes were glued to Nikka’s clothes and shoes.
‘Hunh, how are things? Great?’ asked Nikka, and started dusting his shoes with his mooka. (26)

Nikka’s “milk white clothes” and behaviour look rather ostentatious to his work and position. His repeated “Hunh” in the beginning of his sentences demonstrates his baseless superficial authenticity that he is trying to assert on Jagseer. His way of walking also shows his frivolous and flippant attitude. Jagseer on the other hand remains very serious, sincere and stable throughout the novel. It is his stability that catches Bhani’s attention and paradoxically makes her unstable.

Any query regarding the unconscious reasons of Jagseer’s ideal love for Bhani would automatically lead us to look upon Carl Gustav Jung’s concept of “anima.” Anima is an ideal feminine figure in male psyche. According to Wilfred L. Guerin:

The anima is perhaps the most complex of Jung’s Archetypes. It is the ‘soul image’, the spirit of a man’s élan vital, his life force or vital energy. In the sense of
‘soul’, says Jung, anima is the ‘living thing in man, that which lives of itself and causes life….’ (Archetypes 26-27). Jung gives the anima a feminine designation in male psyche, pointing out that the ‘anima-image is usually projected upon women.’ In this sense, anima is the contra-sexual part of a man’s psyche, the image of the opposite sex that he carries in both his personal and his collective unconscious…in other words, the human psyche is bisexual, though the psychological characteristics of opposite sex in each of us are generally unconscious, revealing themselves only in projections on someone in our environment. The phenomenon of love, especially love at first sight, may be explained at least in part by Jung’s theory of the anima: we tend to be attracted to members of the opposite sex who mirror the characteristics of our own inner selves.

Bhani, in Jagseer’s unconscious, is the projection of an ideal feminine image that he is carrying in his inner-self. He immediately gets attracted towards her when she mirrors the characteristics which he himself has or aspires to have in his personality. Bhani is rebellious in nature. She has no fear of her husband or society. Even when she is beaten up by her husband, she does not stop loving Jagseer. Irrespective of the fact that her husband knows the reality, she continuously keeps on trying to get his love. She does not care for the shallow social rituals and is determined to break all social taboos and limitations in order to get Jagseer’s love. Though Jagseer does not openly come forward to fight against those who cause sufferings to him but he desires to do so a number of times during the discourse. He aspires to break the system in which he is being oppressed. Several times in the novel he contemplates to rebel against Bhanta, though he cannot accomplish it (Jagseer’s rebellious temperament and the nature of his rebellion have been discussed later in this chapter). He falls in love with Bahni when he notices her mirroring his own rebellious nature. Hence, Bhani is the projection of Jagseer’s ideal feminine image through which he imagines his own position as a rebel.

Guerin further says that anima is “a kind of mediator between the ego (the conscious will or thinking self) and the unconscious or the inner world of the male individual” (182). The inner world of Jagseer is full of aggression and pain because of his position as an “other” in society. And the unwholesome experiences with his master further make this soreness acute. When his “thinking self” or the “conscious will” does not allow him to pick up an axe against the tyrants, then this projection of anima image
helps him to vent his aggression. Jagseer imagines himself through the rebellious image of his beloved. In this way, she acts like a mediator of what Jagseer thinks and what he unconsciously desires.

**Identification of the Protagonist**

What makes *The Last Flicker* special from the point of view of critical appreciation is neither the sympathetic portrayal of its outcaste protagonist nor the realistic depiction of the class conflict prevailing in the rural Punjab of that time. The novel basically raises questions about essential human dignity and the struggle of an individual to sustain it in different problematic situations which characteristically seem to be designed to destroy it. It also makes a convincing effort to understand the complex relation between human aspirations and social limitations.

The basic reason behind identifying Jagseer’s social and cultural position is to find out the difficulties that prevent him from fighting against the oppressive system violently and overtly. There are several reasons why he cannot resist against the surrounding system the way Bishna does in *The Survivors*. The first and foremost is his over consciousness about the general public opinion. Under this effect, he remains careful about his conduct and behaviour so that nobody around him could get offended because of him. The second is his ideal and obliged attitude towards Dharam Singh and his family and under their effect he finds himself unable, though he wishes many a times in the discourse, to show his resentment towards Bhanta. Had Bhanta not been the son of Dharam Singh, Jagseer would certainly have challenged him openly. It is the great respect and reverence for Dharam Singh that binds him from adopting any aggressive action against Bhanta. The third and the most important factor is his social and cultural position which on the one hand ties him to the traditional ways of living and on the other fills him with disgust and anguish that ultimately leads him to a particular way of resistance. We would discuss all these different factors one-by-one so that real causes of Jagseer’s inability to rebel openly against the system can be explored.
A very special feature that dominates the discourse of this novel is the over-consciousness of its characters about the public or social opinion. Most of the incidents of this novel are either dominated or governed by the consciousness of the characters about “what would people say?” (91).

Jagseer and Dharam Singh are two such characters whom we see much worried about public opinion as far as their actions and conduct are concerned. Dharam Singh does not like his wife and his son’s behaviour towards himself and their hateful attitude towards Jagseer and his family. However he fails to take any substantial action against them. His contradiction remains on the metaphysical level only and there is no hope that this contradiction would take the form of any concrete action. He desires to give his share of land in charity for a noble cause instead of leaving it under the control of Bhanta. However after considering “what would people say?” he drops the idea. He is extremely upset when he comes to know that Bhanta has sold the tahli which his father had given to Jagseer’s father Thola for his dedicated services and untiring efforts to make his family economically sound. But he does not have adequate strength to oppose his son and wife publicly. He thinks:

‘How did everything change only in one day?’ wondered Dharam Singh painfully. He felt his head was caught in a clamp, and his eyes were tired.

An idea struck him at this moment: Why not separate Bhanta from the rest of the family by giving him his portion of the land? But thinking of his good reputation and honour in the village, Dharam Singh didn’t fancy the idea. “What would people say? First he let his son take charge of everything, now he is fighting over the divison of property! Curse on such….’ (90-91)

Sartre describes this condition of over consciousness of a being as the manner of being-for-others. This position is a “third manner of being, though not a third kind of object, namely being-for-others” (Warnock 93). In this manner, the identity of a man is fixed by the gaze of the others. In this case, one is forced to discover an aspect of his being which he would not have known otherwise. “We discover ourselves as the object that is created by the other’s gaze. We discover what Sartre calls our being-for-others. We are forced to pass judgment on ourselves as an object” (Palmer 93). One is
made conscious of his position as an object, a thing among other things. At this point a conscious being loses oneself to the gaze of the other. He is pushed back to the “looking at” position. Both Dharam Singh and Jagseer live under the effect of the gaze of the others. They do not possess strong subjectivities like Parsa, Bishna and Modan, the protagonists of his later novels. And perhaps this is the reason that they, even after recognising the act of injustice, fail to take any strong, violent action against the wrong doers.

The cause of the physical inactivity of both of these characters has been generated by their morally superlative idealistic vision of the humanity and hence it cannot be taken as an act of cowardice. This idealistic vision of the humanity presents the image of an honest, harmless, docile, sociable, cordial and co-operative man who serves as an icon for universal brotherhood and peaceful co-living on this earth. This image of the evil-free man is the basic unit of an imagined utopian society whose base is provided by the idea: what a man ought to be rather than what he really is. Dharam Singh and Jagseer in *The Last Flicker*, up to some extent, cherish this idea of an evil-free man and carry its image in their own identities. However their vision of morally excellent being is shattered time and again by Bhanta and Dhano in the discourse.

Scrutinizing the novel in the backdrop of the conceptualization of heroism, the question that strikes our mind over and over again is: Why Jagseer does not retaliate the way Bishna and Modan do in the other novels of Gurdial Singh. The answer to this question is much more complex and difficult than it appears on the surface. It can most suitably, though not absolutely, be explained through Sartre’s concept of *totalization*. Sartre explains this one of his most complicated concepts in the first part of his unfinished book *Critique of Dialectical Reason: The Intelligibility of History*, Vol. II. Under the title “Is Struggle Intelligible,” he says:

Dialectical intelligibility whether we are dealing with constituent Reason or constituted Reason is defined through totalization. This is simply praxis achieving unity on the basis of specific circumstances, and in relation to a goal to be attained. Contradictions, via the praxis of the practical organism, are defined as moments of this praxis. They spring from the fact that the labour brought to bear upon the
practical field is an irreversible temporalization. Thus any transformation accomplished in the field by action, or in action through synthetic unification of the field, must appear as a partial development of that totalization…. it is the action in its entirety at this moment of its temporalization. But at present (this functional present is defined not as an instant, but as a partial operation: hence, as a temporalization in progress) praxis is contained in its entirety, with its past and its future objective, in the preparatory task that it is accomplishing: in other words, in the totalization of the field and the ‘promotion’ of a sector or zone of that totalized unity. (3)

In simple words, any particular incident in history or historical moment propounds the entirety of history up to that point and wholly expresses it. Every historical moment thus becomes a “product of and contains traces of all the moments leading up to it.” It is at the same time a “feature of dialectical reason that acknowledges and understands events in term of their relationship to all the other events and processes involved in them” (Palmer 152). It brings together all disparate acts and related actions into an organic wholeness. Hence an incident participates in the creation of history while being a product of it at the same time.

The cause of Jagseer’s inactiveness is the unconscious totalization of the futility of his struggle. This unconscious awareness about the futility of his struggle against the dominant establishment is a historical event which has its own definite past and blurred future. Jagseer’s circumstances cannot be seen as a separated particular position from the whole social and cultural set up. According to the concept of totalization, we need to see the development of all related historical events up to that point from where his actual position and pre-consciousness about the futility of his struggle can be observed.

The social setting to which he belongs has its roots in distant past when the society was categorized in four different varnas in Vedic era. These different varnas were Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and Sudras. According to this categorization, the first three varnas were allowed to attend or participate in religious ceremonies whereas Sudras were excluded extensively. They were considered apvitaras and for this

\[26\] The categorization of Hindu society according to ancient Vedas.
\[27\] Impure
reason were banned to touch, meet and even see the members of all other varanas. They were also restricted to go on any public place. In brief, Sudras were denied all those conveniences which we know today by the name of essential human conditions and rights. Since totalization observes all the traces leading up to the present situation, we confer that Jagseer has direct or indirect association with the fourth varna i.e. Shudras. When Jagseer evaluates his position and actions against that of the whole system, he realises and consequently anticipates the futility of his struggle which further causes sickness and nausea for him. Moreover he is alone in his fight against the establishment from the beginning till the end of the novel. His friendship with Raunki does not make a “group” rather works at the level of “series” only. Sartre discusses three kinds of “we’s” or “collectives” as:

i. **Series**: A series is a collective that is created by some fact or force external to it.

ii. **Groups**: A genuine group has a common praxis that unites it. There are two kinds of these: the “fused group” and the “sworn group.”

iii. **Vestige of a Group**: When the group looses its original motive and the oath no longer has its original meaning. The group then sinks into a form of inertia that holds it together. (Palmer 133-35)

For a group, the identification of a motive is an inevitable part which is absent in the relation between Raunki and Jagseer. This may be because of their political ignorance of their actual conditions in society. Therefore we cannot call the togetherness of Jagseer and Raunki a “group.” On the other hand, they are together by virtue of their analogous marginal positions in society. They themselves have not chosen their conditions of living but it has been forced on them by some other people who are or were once in power at a particular moment in history. Their collectiveness is created by some facts and forces external to it over which they have lost control in distant past. Jagseer therefore “incarnates” all the related historical events that entail him to his present position. His aggressive inactiveness towards his exploiters consequently is the outcome of the entirety of the whole caste system that prevailed throughout the ages.
At times Jagseer asked questions which Raunki himself would have liked to have asked…. Raunki did not criticize Jagseer at such moments, but listen to his questions attentively. And Jagseer would go on asking such questions without waiting for a reply.

‘Raunka, if man had nothing – home, children, parents, how would he survive?’

‘Those who have land, nice homes, wives, children did they do better karma than us, Raunka?’

‘Karma, karma, karma, what are these God damned karma, Raunka? 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 the bitch-race!’ (121)

Even though a number of striking similarities in the behaviour and attitude of Dharam Singh and Jagseer can be observed, yet there are some radical differences between the two which segregate them in two widely apart categories. The first and major difference is that of diverse social positions from where they evaluate their internal contradictions with the outside system. Jagseer belongs to that stratum which is generally considered socially backward or inferior in comparison to other privileged classes of society. He is an outcaste who, even though being an internal part of society, is being considered as “other,” an intruder in the civilised world. His very name is symbolic in the sense that it propounds the idea of contribution of an “other” in the so-called civilised world. The name “Jagseer” is made of two different words i.e. “jag” and “seer.” “Jag” in Punjabi language means “world” and “seer” means “share.” Thus the name “Jagseer” means “one’s share in the world.” It has a very significant and notable cultural and social connotation. An outcaste considers himself not belonging to the world around him. Despite being a part of the system, he always feels a peculiar kind of alienation. There is a long history behind this particular way of thinking in which the outcastes are made to believe that even if they exist, they are not the part of this world. They take birth to serve and not to possess anything on this earth. Their existence is insignificant to the world in which they are meant to serve only. The name “Jagseer” is thus the longing of an outcaste who wants to become the part of this
distant world. It is the desire of an “other” to participate and possess something on this earth. After the death of Jagseer, Raunki says: “Having given me hope, you have departed. What about me who has nothing to hold on to?” The condition of “nothing to hold on to” alienates the outcastes from the so-called civilised world and a strong desire to possess something on the earth lurks in their hearts. This desire to possess something gives them a unique sense of belongingness to this world. Due to this desire Thola, the father of Jagseer, asks Jagseer to construct his marhi under the tahli.

Taking out a few grains of rice and a piece of unrefined sugar from his side pocket, he put them on the tomb and bowed. When his forehead touched the tomb, Jagseer recalled his father’s faint voice: ‘If you are my true son, build my tomb under the sheesham and look after it well.’ (21)

Jagseer, later in this novel, also expresses his desire to Raunki for the construction of his own marhi in this way:

‘Raunaka, do ask Nikka’s wife to paint my tomb; you would construct it of course.’ (122)

Marhi here is a symbol of one’s desire to be remembered after his death in the world he was once a part of. But the point to notice here is that this desire to be remembered and acknowledged in the world is a particular trait of a special class. In the novel it can be observed in Thola, Jagseer and Raunki but we do not observe any such desire in Dharam Singh, his father and his son. When Dharam Singh’s father was near his death, he instructs his son to take care of Thola’s family and does not mention anything for the construction of his marhi or any other remembrance. While on the other hand, Thola and Jagseer seem to be much worried for the construction of their marhis than anything else on this earth. For them, marhi symbolises a thing of possession and therefore becomes an imprint of their existence on the earth even if it happens after their deaths. Marhi fills the gap which they themselves fail to fill during their lives. Thus Jagseer belongs to that stratum which is struggling for its identity and recognition apart from economical hardships.

Dharam Singh on the other hand is a land owner and belongs to the privileged class of society. According to the cultural and professional image of a land owner, he
needs to be a stoic and strong man. After comparing his position with Jagseer, we confer that he is at better position from where he would contradict or oppose what he considers unfair or unjust. He clearly admits at a number of places in the discourse that what Bhanta and his wife Dhano do is wrong and unjust. But contrary to the expectations of the readers, he fails to oppose them adamantly. He could have stopped Bhanta from behaving harshly with Jagseer or cutting *tahli* but could not do so. Sometimes he seems to be cooperating with Bhanta even though he does not like it ideologically. He somehow has compromised with the situation as far as the case of Jagseer is concerned. It is only after he comes to know a secret from his daughter Bhilee that he decides to leave his house. Bhilee tells Dharam Singh that Dhano and Bhanta have secretly decided to part him from his house and land. She says:

‘Mother and brother, Bhanta, were muttering yesterday, ‘Right? And…and mom said, ‘Get your share of land from your father, because, he’ll give it away to others,’ right? … and Bhanta said, ‘we would live together here and I’ll make a shack for *Bapu* in the barn and let him chase dogs there,’ right?…. *Bapu*, you’d live in the shack then? Here in the barn?’ (89)

From the above conversation between Dhano and Bhanta, it seems that Dharam Singh is also an “other” in his own family. What Jagseer feels in the context of whole social and cultural set up Dharam Singh feels it in the context of his own family. If, after knowing his status in the family, it becomes very difficult and painful for Dharam Singh to face his family members, one can effortlessly guess the psychological condition of Jagseer who knows, and continuously being made aware of by different characters, his status of “other” in society. Both Jagseer and Dharam Singh are victims of the unethical behaviour of Dhano and Bhanta. However for Jagseer, it is much more difficult to break the chains of a social and cultural image of an oppressed landless labourer than to break the chains of power politics for Dharam Singh at his home.

**Rejection of the Situation**

There is no doubt about the fact that Jagseer is made a victim of the monolithic system. The nature of this system is dominating and its ways to treat its dejected
objects are also deadly. But there is certainly something different about Jagseer in this regard. Even though he is defeated by the system, yet he remains full of self-respect and dignity. His different personality can only be judged properly by comparing him to Tindi. Tindi is also a landless labourer in Gurdial Singh’s later novel Parsa who works with Parsa on share-crop basis in his fields. As Jagseer is treated by Dharam Singh, he is also treated well by Parsa. Parsa treats him like his own sons. Once one of Parsa’s sons Jetha tries to make fool of Tindi but Parsa firmly takes the side of Tindi and rebukes his son for his misbehaviour.

‘Why are you showing your teeth unnecessarily? Is that what all those people from Jalandhar-Doaba taught you?’

Parsa could not suppress his pique anymore and burst out, ‘He [Tindi] is right. If you [Jetha] take it amiss, it’s your problem. Why prove him to be a fool when it’s you who can’t figure out a thing?’ (Singh, Parsa 134).

We find this type of attitude missing in Dharam Singh. He seems a helpless creature in front of his wife and son. As far as social and cultural position is concerned both Jagseer and Tindi are on the same level but there is a huge difference between the body language and the attitudes of them. Tindi is submissive and satisfied. He does not want to change the system. Even when Basanta, under the influence of communist ideology, tries to make him understand the equal status of a landlord and a labourer, he flouts the idea by considering it a joke. Let us observe a conversation between Tindi and Basanta which would help us to understand the basic difference between the temperaments of Tindi and Jagseer:

Basanta got up and sat upright. ‘You are right, in a way,’ talking in a very serious manner, he suddenly burst out laughing. ‘So here we go, khalsa is ready, you be ready now. Tell me what all is to be done?’

Staring at him in utter bewilderment Tindi said, ‘It’s for you to tell me what to do- or will it be the other way round now?’

‘No, we both will, ask each other… Now, don’t you talk like a stranger. You better remember now we’re together…real brothers, equal partners in everything we do.’
‘Come on, don’t talk crap Bhaji. Get up and do something if you want to.’
Turning up his nose, Tindi was about to walk away when Basanta caught hold of his arm and forced him to sit on the manja.

Actually Tindi does not want to understand the difference between a master and servant. According to him, the idea of equal status of a master and servant is all “crap” and nonsense. He thinks that everything with the world is right and there is no need to change it. He is happy for being treated as a servant and wants to remain like that for his whole life. He even feels being ridiculed when Basanta insistently tries to convince him with his ideas about the equal status of all human beings. Basanta again tries:

‘So this is what it is, Tindi! I’m not just saying it- we’re actually equal partners- neither I’m your master nor you, my worker.’
‘On what basis?’
‘Basis? You work and so do I. the land belongs neither to you nor me. Let’s say that it belongs to bapu. So what does that make us? Now you may think of it whichever way you want, either call us partners or bapu’s workers. So is it drilled in your head now?’

Feeling he was simply being ridiculed, Tindi made a face, wriggled out of Basanta’s hold and walked to one side. (Singh, Parsa 168-69)

Wriggling out of Basanta’s hold and walking to one side, Tindi connotes his apathetic attitude towards the ideas of self-respect, dignity and honour. We cannot imagine Tindi feeling anguish or grief over his pathetic condition as a worker or demanding his rights with eagerness. We cannot even imagine him longing to possess something on this earth. On the whole, he, consciously or unconsciously, has compromised with the situation, or in other words, has accepted the situation as it is offered to him without any disgust or anguish. It is not only due to the good moral characters or the just behaviour of his masters that Tindi does not feel the need to change the system. But his general attitude about his underprivileged condition is of acceptance and not of resistance. Had he been working under any other cruel master, his behaviour and attitude would not have been different.
Jagseer, on the other hand, is completely different in his attitude about his underprivileged condition and his behaviour is also totally opposite to Tindi. He does not accept the situation as it is offered to him by his circumstances or the dominating system. Every time he is reminded of his marginal position, he feels sickness, repugnance and anguish. Time and again it appears to him that he has lost all his strength to live. It becomes difficult for him to move a step forward or even to stand on his strong legs. Bhanta says:

‘You dirty nigger! What do you think you’re doing? Playing tricks on me?’

Jagseer, as he approached the sheesham, heard Bhanta’s voice seething with anger. Jagseer had never been addressed in such scornful language before…. He felt bad. His legs lost the energy to move. He sat down on the embankment of the channel with his chin resting on the handle of his hoe. His head was spinning.

After a few minutes he couldn’t even sit and lay down on the embankment.

He checked his snuffbox. It had only two poppy beans; he swallowed one of them.

Jagseer cannot tolerate any word against his self-respect and dignity. And due to this reason he feels dreadfulness and sickness. He feels probably the same as Antoine Roquentin feels in Sartre’s famous novel *Nausea*. Roquentin feels sickness and nausea in the company of inanimate things because of their intrusion whenever he tries to define himself. And towards the end of the novel he becomes almost insane over physical world’s indifference towards human situation and aspirations. Although Jagseer feels same as Roquentin feels in *Nausea* yet his condition is different or we might say it is somewhat opposite. Whereas Roquentin feels dejected due to the indifference of the outside world Jagseer is disturbed because of the concern of the outside world for him. This over-burdened concern of the outside world intrudes when he tries to define himself as a human. Several times in the discourse he is compelled to define himself as sub-human and even as “worms” when he and his friend Raunki are in tremendous angst.

‘Why does man get into this bullshit at all? 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 anyway? Yet I don’t want to die…I don’t understand….’ (66)

In these words there is a complaint against the attitude of outside world which causes anguish and sickness for those who demand self-respect and dignity in exchange to their services. It is not the exploitation of their labour that causes the greater part of anguish in them but the degradation of the essential human dignity that they experience while working as labourers. Jagseer is no doubt hurt when he comes to know that the *tahli* given to his father is cut down but what breaks him from inside is the realization of his actual position as an alienated being. He is forced to realize that he has no right to feel for the things which do not legally belong to him. He is also reminded: whatever he has had been given to him out of mercy by his masters and they have the right to take it back whenever they desire. He seems to be contradicting these notions throughout the discourse but his manner of resistance is unique and different from the traditional mode typically followed by the legendary heroes of Punjab. His manner of confrontation is unique in the sense that many a times in the novel it is not even felt on the surface level.

Jagseer lay on the cot throughout the day. At sunset he got up and went out to the fields. Outside the village, he met Bhanta coming from the market place…. His eyes were flushed with anger but he walked straight with lowered head, without looking back at Bhanta….

It was dark when Jagseer reached the fields. The dense trees looked scary…. From a distance, the stars at the edge of the sky seemed strung on thorns. In earlier times, when Jagseer went to water the fields on dark nights, this sight always enchanted him…. Today the same stars looked to Jagseer like tears stuck on dirty and empty bush-eyes, tears that neither fell nor dried up. He couldn’t look at the tear-stars any more, and started walking straight with a sad face. (84-85)

After meeting Bhanta on the way, when he is going to ‘his fields’, the stars, which earlier always enchanted him and many a times he thought he could pluck them too, suddenly turn into “tears stuck on dirty and empty bush-eyes.” His vision of himself in which he had once imagined about plucking those stars for his beloved like folk-tale heroes is at once shattered as soon as he confronts Bhanta. This sudden
change in the mood of Jagseer corroborates his severe disapproval of what Bhanta has done to him. The appearance of Bhanta causes nausea in him and under this effect he looses his balance and the power to think rationally.

Jagseer walked about purposelessly in the midst of the sparse and weak plants, as if he were measuring the field with his feet. His clumsy, worn out shoes trod on them as if they were useless shrubbery. He heard the sound of the stems being crushed, but it didn’t cross his mind that he was ruining ‘his’ own plants. (85)

**Resistance of the Protagonist**

The greatness of the novel resides in the fact that nothing has been said or expressed overtly and directly. Most of the things and actions have only been suggested through different cultural metaphors or expressed through symbolic representations. Its protagonist’s anguish and resistance against the system also have been depicted in an incredibly indirect manner. His sickness, loss of strength to walk, drug addiction, and loss of interest in work - all indicate his unvoiced resistance to his circumstances.

The manner of resistance adopted by Jagseer can be best described in the background of Albert Camus’ philosophical conception of metaphysical rebellion. According to him, a rebel does not often rebel against his master but against his state of slavery in general. By slavery, he means every kind of oppression that an individual experiences when someone hinders his right to live according to his own free will. The rebel negates all those laws of creation of the world in which sufferings and injustice happen to be the internal and essential components. Camus writes:

Metaphysical rebellion is the means by which a man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation. It is metaphysical because it disputes the ends of man and of creation. The slave protests against the condition of his state of slavery; the metaphysical rebel protests against the human condition in general. The rebel slave affirms that there is something in him which will not tolerate the manner in
which his master treats him; the metaphysical rebel declares that he is frustrated by
the universe. (Camus, The Rebel 29)

The human condition proposed through the characters of Jagseer and his friend
Raunki defaces the concept of liberty and equality in all respects. This human
condition creates such a suffocating environment for Jagseer that it becomes
impossible for him to go on like this. He therefore looses interest in his work and
prefers lying idle in his “dog” pen. He projects his hatred not towards Bhanta as an
individual but towards the concept of inequality in general. After the death of his
father, the capacity to feel this inequality becomes so intense that he starts feeling it
everywhere around him. His gloomy oppressed condition compels him to feel this
inequality even in inanimate things. The place where he was born and has spent all his
childhood suddenly starts looking different and a sub-standard location, fit only to
keep “dogs” in. For Jagseer, these houses are not meant for human beings or fit only
for those who accept living a dog’s life, without any self-respect and honour. He
wonders that he himself has been living at this place for over forty years but never ever
he had felt like this. For Jagseer, the outside world is “defamiliarised” as soon as he
becomes conscious of his marginal position in society. According to Russian
Formalists, the effect of “defamiliarisation” or “making strange” is produced when
“literary language makes the familiar world appear new to us, as if we were seeing it
for the first time” (Barry 161). Victor Shklovsky says it in the context of literary
language only but if we reframe the concept in the context of general human situations,
we would find that a particular incident or experience can also cause the similar effect
i.e. with a particular experience, or a number of experiences together, the whole world
may appear new to us, “as we were seeing it for the first time.” This can be called a
transitional phase, a concrete stage from being to becoming in the life of an individual.
This is exactly what happens with Jagseer when, after realizing his actual position in
society, he notices that the place where he has been living since his childhood has been
transformed to a new place all of a sudden. He feels that everyone belonging to this
vehra must have experienced the same over and over again in their lives like him. He even feels that all men living at that place are exactly like him who must have been suffering for ages without being noticed, acknowledged and accepted by the so called civilized world.

After resting for a while, he lifted his eyes and looked towards his right; ghetto [vehra] was in front of him at a short distance. In the dark the houses looked like a cluster of dog pens.

Tiny, deep and dark; some had roofs so low that a tall person could hardly enter inside. Thornbushes instead of walls surrounded the small yards. He mud walls, daubed year after year, had patched like blisters on a leper’s body. In Jagseer’s lifetime, he had not seen anybody build a new house….

‘Dog dens!’ Jagseer smiled and wondered why today he was thinking about the ghetto houses this way. He had born and grown up in this ghetto, and was almost fortytwo now, but these houses had never seemed to him like “dog dens” before. (59)

Camus calls this stage as the awakening of the conscience of an individual. The stage when one becomes aware of his oppressed state. This is the stage when suffering is seen as a collective experience of all human beings. The recognition of one’s actual position in respect to his surroundings is the first and the most important step in the life of a rebel or hero. The next step after this stage is to prepare oneself to say ‘no’ to his master and to his condition in general. Jagseer, already conscious about his marginal position, takes this decision when Bhanta attacks his self-respect intentionally, only to make him realize that he is a substandard being. When water itself gets diverted to the field given to Jagseer by Dharam Singh, Bhanta gratuitously accuses him by calling it his deliberate action. Jagseer, who has never heard such scornful language against himself, stops and looks at Bhanta “with startled and angry eyes…. He couldn’t bear the attack on his self-respect…” (56). His perplexity over the harsh words of Bhanta is the initial stage of his rebellion. Though it does not lead him to take any violent action

---

29 In the rural setting of Punjab, the schedule caste people of a village have a separate colony called vehra which is usually situated at the outskirts of the village. In vehra the people generally live in low-roofed small mud-houses.
against Bhanta in the development of the discourse yet it makes a significant difference in his attitude towards his own position in society.

It is significant to note that he does not adopt any aggressive mode of fighting against his oppressors as most of the legendary Punjabi heroes do. Therefore from the point of view of a typical Punjabi hero, he may not even look like a hero at all at first glance. Consequently any surface level inspection of his character may prove him as a miserable and pitiable figure. However, after observing deeply, it can fairly be noticed that he is neither a weak character nor an adamant follower of nihilism. Instead, he [as Gurdial Singh himself believes] is the strongest hero because he fights against his oppressed existential conditions.

His mode of resistance looks peculiar and unique when we compare it with the ways of other legendary heroes of Punjab. He neither accepts the situation anywhere in the novel nor compromises with his status as an inferior being. He does not even neglect a single scornful word said against him. He definitely says “no” to his position. Nevertheless, being conscious about the futility of his struggle, he remains unable to say it to his oppressors. Instead of saying “no” to his masters, he says “no” to his status as an “other.” When it becomes unbearable to go on with his existing conditions, he takes the aid of opium in order to suppress his troubled mind and uncontrolled thoughts. He does not choose to fight in overt combat in which his defeat was inevitable and predetermined by his oppressors. Instead, he declares war against his pathetic condition. He says a determined “no” to that part of life which has been made by the system unqualified to possess something dignified on the earth (even if it is in the form of love for another human). He rebels against that portion of his life which does not offer him respect or dignity as a human.