



# EVOLUTION OF A REBEL HERO: A STUDY OF GURDIAL SINGH'S NIGHT OF THE HALF MOON/ADH CHANANI RAAT

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## ABSTRACT

Gurdial Singh Rahi is a reputed novelist, who has portrayed realistic Malwa region of Punjab in his fiction and is translated from original Punjabi language into many of the world languages. His fifth novel, *Night of the Half Moon/Adh Chanani Raat*, is a critically acclaimed piece of art, in which Gurdial Singh has created an immortal rebel hero, Modan, who shares heroic characteristics of the legendary heroes of Punjab like Dulla Bhatti, Jeona Morh, Jagga Daku, Sucha Surma, Mirza and Arjan Valley etc. The paper endeavours to study the nuances of the evolution of a rebel hero, by understanding what is to be a hero, hero's definition, and his inspiration from Northrop Fry's archetypal and Albert Camus' existential lenses. The paper attempts to understand the psychology of the novel's rebel hero, who strives hard for keeping his honour, putting at stake all that he has, for living a manly life, when all other, around him are falling into nihilism.

**KEYWORDS:** absurdity, existentialism, honour, meta narratives, mythology, nihilism, rebel hero.

Punjabi fiction has a rich and diverse history that spans several centuries. The literary tradition of Punjabi fiction has evolved over time, influenced by the cultural, social, and political changes in the Punjab region. The early period of Punjabi literature was dominated by religious and mystical poetry, primarily in the form of Sufi poetry by saints like Baba Farid and Guru Nanak. However, narrative elements were present in these poetic works. The 19th century saw the emergence of prose fiction in Punjabi literature. This period marked the beginning of the modern Punjabi literary tradition. Punjabi novel is said to have emerged with the works of stalwarts like Bhai Vir Singh, Mohan Singh Vaid, Charan Singh Shaheed, Joshua Fazal Din, and others. The works of Bhai Vir Singh, a prominent Sikh scholar, poet, and novelist, played a crucial role in shaping Punjabi fiction. His novels, such as *Satwant Kaur* and *Sundari*, were among the early contributions to Punjabi prose fiction. Based on the vibrant Punjabi culture, the early 20th century witnessed a significant growth in Punjabi literature in fiction, with writers exploring various themes related to social issues, cultural identity, and rural life. Nanak Singh, a renowned Punjabi novelist, made notable contributions during this period. His novel *Chitta Lahu (White Blood)* is considered a classic in Punjabi literature. The partition of India in 1947 had a profound impact on Punjabi literature. Writers from both sides of the border explored the themes of displacement, loss, and identity in their works. Prominent Punjabi fiction writers of this period include Khushwant Singh, Amrita Pritam, and Balwant Gargi. Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar (The Skeleton)* is a well-known novel that delves deep into the consequences of partition. Punjabi fiction has continued to evolve in the contemporary period, with writers exploring a wide range of themes such as militancy, class/caste struggles, urbanisation, globalisation, resistance and the challenges faced by the Punjabi diaspora. Recent Punjabi fiction writers include Gurdial Singh, Waryam Singh Sandhu, and Surjit Patar, among others. Punjabi fiction, like literature in any other language, reflects the social and

cultural makeup and evolution of the community it represents. The themes and styles have diversified over time, providing a rich tapestry of storytelling that captures the essence of heroic Punjabi life and its ever-changing dynamics.

Gurdial Singh Rahi (10 January 1933 to 16 August 2016), a celebrated writer, born in Punjab's small village Bhaini Fateh, near Jaito in Faridkot district, is an established eminent novelist who wrote in Punjabi. Gurdial Singh did not have a smooth and easy childhood. His father who was a carpenter and a blacksmith had to drop out his son from school when he was in his eighth grade. Gurdial Singh had no other option than to be an apprentice, because of his economic condition. Master Madan Mohan, the Headmaster in the Primary School, Jaito, held Gurdial Singh's hand, encouraged him to continue his education and mentored him. With his compassionate and crucial help, Gurdial Singh matriculated and was appointed as a primary teacher. He continued his studies and was promoted to High School and earned MA in Punjabi in 1967. Gurdial Singh had to leave his village for his teaching, but the village remained in him wherever he was, and, after he retired, he settled in Jaito, for rest of his life. As he lived a rustic life, he grew to be a rare literary talent portraying an authentic rural Punjab, particularly the Malwa region, in his fiction. As a successful creative writer of fiction he was honoured with various literary recognitions and awards, such as Language department, Government of Punjab's Sarvottam Pustak Puruskar consecutively for three years in 1966, 1967 and 1968. He bagged this award again in the year 1972. In 1975 he was finalised for the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award and reputed Nanak Singh Novelist Award. In 1976, he was conferred with Punjab Sahitya Academy Award followed by Soviet Nehru Award in 1986, Punjab Government's Best Litterateur Award and Guru Nanak Dev University's Bhai Veer Singh Award in 1992. The President of India honoured Gurdial



Singh with Padma Shree in 1998. He was also honoured with the prestigious Jnanpeeth Award in 1999.

Gurdial Singh is considered a pioneer of realism in modern Punjabi fiction. He has successfully depicted the changes along with the crisis at the time of the shift from feudalism to capitalism in Punjab. He has depicted the changing relations between individuals and their crises due to economic upheavals with special reference to Malwai fraternity. Gurdial Singh has passionately and realistically presented the stress of human minds in his writings. Most of his novels are concerned with the period of Green Revolution when on one side, feudalism was still in existence and on the other, commercialisation of agriculture on the capitalist pattern had already begun. Therefore, the individuals were going through a period of turbulence due to substitution of old moral and social values with relatively amoral commercial attitude. The main reason for this change may have been the shift in whole economic system as all social life/superstructure is ingrained in economic set up/base. His first short story was published in 1957 but his real break in the literary world came with the publication of his first novel *Marhi da Diva (The Last Flicker)* in 1964 as it intricately explores the lives of landless peasants, offering a poignant depiction of socio-economic disparities in rural Punjab. In *Anhe Ghode da Dan (The Gift of a Blind Horse)*, Singh delves into the harsh realities faced by Dalits, masterfully critiquing social injustices and portraying the resilience of marginalised communities. *Parsa* weaves a narrative around a folk artist, examining the preservation of cultural heritage amidst societal shifts. Singh's literary contributions, characterised by realism and depth, portraying the underdog hero weathering all odds, continue to resonate in Punjabi literature, enriching the understanding of Punjab's socio-cultural intricacies.

Gurdial Singh's critically acclaimed, fifth novel, *ਅੱਧ ਚਾਨਣੀ ਰਾਤ Night of the Half Moon (Adh Chanani Raat)* was originally published in Punjabi in the year 1972 and was later translated in English by Pushpinder Syal and Rana Nayar, published by Macmillan Publishing house in the year 1996. The novel presents an actual microcosm of the Malwa region of Punjab, as Gurdial Singh depicts the heroism of Modan, modelled on Punjabi folk heroes like Dulla Bhatti, Jeona Morh, Jagga Daku, Sucha Surma, and Mirza etc, a representative of the Jat community and their value of honour, above everything else. The novel fetched Sahitya Akademi Award and Nanak Singh Novelist Award in 1975 for its acknowledged literary merits. On one level, the novel offers the story of a dispute between two agrarian families of rural Malwai Punjab, and on another, it delves deep into the real Malwai life of Punjab of 1970s. Singh, belongs to the third generation of Punjabi novelist and is celebrated as a realist artist who writes unconventionally, fiddling with the linear chronology of the narrative and offering his plot using flashbacks and flashforwards in order to reveal the internal lives of his characters, especially in his *Night of the Half Moon/Adh Chanani Raat*.

Heroism has been a significant value and is as old as human civilisation. A hero, universally, is supposed to possess certain qualities, which establish one as superior to the common lot, undisputedly. The word hero, etymologically, came into English language from Greek word ἥρως (hērōs), meaning a

protector or a defender. Cambridge dictionary defines hero, to be "a person who is admired for having done something very brave or having achieved something great" ("Hero"). Many cultures demand some common qualities in a hero, like, courage, honour, bravery, honesty, loyalty, sacrifice, loyalty etc. Each culture has its own set of sources like myths, tales, legends, folk literature, and songs for idealising a hero. According to Andrew Bernstein, the concept of heroism is a complex one, derived from a high-level abstractions. Primarily, it is moral concept which, "requires a rational philosophical system, including the principle of mind-body integration, as its proper base. Without such a basis the concept can be neither rigorously defined nor adequately understood" ("Philosophical Foundations"). He believes:

A hero is... an individual of elevated moral stature and superior ability who pursues his goals indefatigably in the face of powerful antagonist(s). Because of his unbreached devotion to the good, no matter the opposition, a hero attains spiritual grandeur, even if he fails to achieve practical victory. Notice then the four components of heroism: moral greatness, ability or prowess, action in the face of opposition, and triumph in at least a spiritual, if not a physical, form. ("Philosophical Foundations")

Gurdial Singh, has created an immortal character, whom he has named Modan in this novel. Modan has all the characteristics mentioned by Bernstein as he displays his moral greatness, ability to sustain, action in tough times, and triumph in winning readers' hearts. No hero can be created in a vacuum, in isolation, in an absence of a good cause, without a support system, and without a great antagonist. Modan, a thorough Jat, lives in a realist Malwai village in Punjab amidst Malwai characters, and struggles for his honour, displays ample courage repeatedly, makes many sacrifices for his brothers, loves his wife Dani, behaves like a great son, brother, husband and friend, who ultimately dies for his honour.

Aristotle also shared his views on heroism in his *Poetics*. Highlighting passages from Aristotle's *Poetics*, Northrop Frye reveals:

In the second paragraph of the *Poetics* Aristotle speaks of the differences in works of fiction which are caused by the different elevations of the characters in them. In some fictions, he says, the characters are better than we are, in others worse, in still others on the same level. This passage has not received much attention from modern critics, as the importance Aristotle assigns to goodness and badness seems to indicate a somewhat narrowly moralistic view of literature. Aristotle's words for good and bad, however, are *spoudaios* and *phaulos*, which have a figurative sense of weighty and light. In literary fictions the plot consists of somebody doing something. The somebody, if an individual, is the hero, and the something he does or fails to do is what he can do, or could have done, on the level of the postulates made about him by the author and the consequent expectations of the audience. Fictions, therefore, may be classified, not morally, but by the



hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same. (Frye 33)

Aristotle considers the “weighty” characters to be heroes, who dare to go against the wind for their conviction, do some difficult tasks, which cannot be done by ordinary. His hero is a life like, a common character, but, his conviction, character, courage and determination is uncommon. The real characters in life and literature try to emulate heroic characters in mythologies, scriptures, epics etc, but, to trace the real influence is not possible, as it deals more with the unconscious than the conscious being of a society. Northrop Frye states,

Where a religion is mythological and polytheistic, where there are promiscuous incarnations, deified heroes and kings of divine descent, where the same adjective ‘godlike’ can be applied either to Zeus or to Achilles, it is hardly possible to separate the mythical, romantic, and high mimetic strands completely. (34)

Andrew Bernstein describes heroes, as, the people, “who pursue rational values in the teeth of every form of opposition” (“Philosophical Foundations”). Developing his essay on heroes, Bernstein further explores:

Some are predominantly physicalistic heroes, some primarily intellectual, some are excellent examples of the principle of mind-body integration; some are grand scale characters towering through a work of fiction, whether on the printed page, stage or screen – while some perform their great and notable deeds in actual existence.... And yet, through the teeming multiplicity of individualized differences, there runs a recurrent thread, a distinguishing essence that unites them all into a common classification, as differentiated from their antipode, from the mundane, the trivial, the everyday, the pedestrian, the non-heroic – or worse, from the evil, the villainous, the anti-heroic. (“Philosophical Foundations”)

One of the characteristic hallmarks of all heroes is their resistance or rebellion to injustice. After studying about the rebel historically and philosophically in many cultures Albert Camus in his *The Rebel* agrees that the world in which we are living is absurd because we have “no higher value to direct our action” (13). Camus realises this world is absurd and we are living in an illogical situation, where God does not control anything and we are stuck in existential being where, “man is in danger of falling into nihilism” (Todd x). In such an absurd world, man does not have any hope of being protected by God, and he has an option either to fall to nihilism or to rebel and be a rebellion. Fighting and being a rebellion is better than falling to nihilism, passively, “The will to fight injustices can counterbalance the nihilistic temptation” (Todd x). Modan, the hero, in this novel also chooses to be a rebellion, than to be an ordinary person suffering and falling to nihilism in a godless world. To rebel is to say ‘No’ to injustice and to hold on to the manliness. Oliver Todd writes in this context:

Camus claimed that the rebel is a man who says no, because he wants to defend what has to be defended in Man. True to a literary and metaphysical mood, very much in the continental French rationalist tradition,

Camus substituted ‘I rebel therefore we are’ for Descartes’ ‘I think therefore I am’. (x)

The narrative opens from the middle of the plot with revealing the psychological state of the hero, Modan, who is returning home after completing fourteen years of imprisonment for his eventual tragic death. He is mentally occupied and thinks about his life that he spent in his village before his conviction. He is unable to reconnect with his surroundings and misses his jail friends who are still living a life of prisoner. Being suffering from a sort of melancholy, he is reticent and a bit rude to answer the friendly advances of his fellow traveller. He reaches his village in the dark and registers the change that the mud houses are replaced by the brick houses. He is not warmly received by his brothers notices that his brothers have also reconstructed a portion of the house. When he sees his mother, Har Kaur in pathetic condition he gets more depressed. He feels out of place and insists that he will shift to their old house situated on a mound, outside the village. By now, the reader does not know the cause of Modan’s imprisonment and the changed attitude of his brothers. Gurdial Singh like a modernist, uses the technique of flashback and reveals the events and the characters that have led to Modan’s imprisonment. Singh introduces Pala, who was Modan’s father, and was an innocent and diligent farmer, living peacefully with his wife Har Kaur and three sons, Modan, Sajjan and Chhottu. Whole of his life, Pala lived a harmless life and never wronged anyone in his village.

The novelist also introduces another farmer Ghana *Lambardar*, who hates Pala, because the latter’s uncle, Sauna had stood against Ghana’s father trying to capture the land of his cousins fraudulently. Because of his tussle, Ghana frames Pala in a false case and gets him insulted, arrested and imprisonment for one and a half years. Pala is so shocked psychologically that after being released he cannot face society, does not get up from bed, gets weaker and weaker and ultimately dies. He keeps on wondering for the wrong for which he was so punished, “What harm have I ever done to anyone? Where lies my fault? Tell me. Can anyone answer me?” (*Night of the Half Moon* 20). All know Ghana’s conspiracy, but none dares speak about it. Not only this, young teenager Modan was also traumatised because of police’s public beating of his mother and her public disrespect, without any crime of his parents. Being the elder male in the family, though a teenager, Modan bravely takes up the responsibility of his family, after his father’s death. Some years after losing his father, one night, Modan visits his uncle, Taya Lallu, and his friends Sheri and Gyala. They invoke his anger by telling his Jat lineage, his tragedy because of the conspiracy hatched against his father by Ghana. “He felt as if his whole body was burning with fever. A deep, stabbing pain shot through his eyes, almost as if someone had pierced his eyelids with a scythe...” (41). Sheri’s words echo in Modan’s head, “The man who does not avenge his fathers and his forefathers is not a man” (37). Gurdial Singh uses a minor character to highlight that it is paramount for a Jat to take revenge for the injustice, “Jat just can’t think straight. My dear fellow, he was after all their father. And if they let his murderers go scot fi’ee, you think they will ever be able to face the people?” (61). Infuriated with anger, young Modan in frenzy, kills Ghana to avenge his father’s death, and is consequently convicted and



sent to jail for fourteen years. His brothers are also accused initially, but later are freed from the murder case, when the case is withdrawn from Sajjan and Chhottu by Ghana's family for the compensation of half of the land of Modan's family. Throughout, Ruldu Modan's only friend, stands by Modan's revenge and supports it as his duty by publicly acknowledging:

True son of his mother he has proved himself to be... people are only good at making claims about their personal courage ... but not many would do as he has done... Man makes property; but that property can't bring back a dead man. You are born only once. So what's the point in becoming a *lakhpati* if one can't even guard one's sense of honour ... money even prostitutes have. (48-50)

Modan exemplifies the courage and possesses the essential virtues befitting an individual of self-respect. Unwilling to endure a life of humiliation, he is compelled to seek retribution for the unjust murder of his father to safeguard both his self-respect and his family's reputation. Embracing a tragic course of action becomes imperative for Modan as it becomes the means through which he can live with dignity and shield his family from degradation and shame (125).

Then the story comes back to present and Modan goes to Ruldu's house. Ruldu reveals Sajjan's friendship with Ghana's sons. Modan also comes to know that Chhottu, being economically dependent on Sajjan and being of weak character is dominated by Sajjan. Modan decides not to live with his brothers and he takes his mother along and shifts to old house. He also separates his land and being a man of honour prefers his crops to wilt than being irrigated with the water from Ghana's tubewell. For him that water is, "blood-spattered water" (82). Apparently, it becomes the war of self-respect and economic interests in which Modan chooses to align with the former unlike his brothers. In *Punjabi Novel da Sanskritik Aadheyan* Dr. T. R. Vinod observes,

The crisis of *Night of the Half Moon* derives its sustenance from the crisis arising out of effect of capitalism on the inter-family and intra family of landowners. The ownership of family has an important place in feudal system. However, the cultural importance of self-respect and reputation of family is also given due importance as economic interests are surrendered to protect them. (120)

Modan like a true hero faces all the adverse circumstances so as to uphold the values of self-respect and family reputation. Ruldu like a true friend supports Modan's decision and says:

This land and property will all be left behind, but a man without honour and self-respect is as good as naught. His life is a deadly curse...It's not a matter of livelihood alone- as far as that goes, even cats and dogs know how to scrounge 164 (??) for a meal. Tell me, how else is a man different from other lowly animals? (*Night of the Half Moon* 83)

After being separated from his brothers, Modan lives a wretched life as he bears a great loss by giving his lion's share in the form of agricultural tools etc to his brothers. Ruldu helps

Modan in buying a bull for agriculture and in order to buy Dani, a widower, for Modan to start his family, Ruldu mortgages his two acres of land to one Sukhu *Lambardaar* and gets Dani, along with her son Gelu (from her previous husband) to Modan. Modan disapproves Ruldu mortgaging his land for him. Ruldu is always there for Modan, and he is determined to help Modan in whatever way is possible. He shares his commitment, "When I finally leave, I want people to sit up and say: 'Well, this was a man who was born with a purpose'... Beside's, what's the point in wasting such a precious life? .... No?" (91). Modan does not like Gelu, but with the passage of time both develop liking for each other. Modan's younger brother Chhottu keeps visiting him on regular intervals and shares with Modan about Sajjan's friendship with Ghana's sons. Chhottu also tells that since Sajjan has indulged in an illegitimate affair with one of Ghana's daughters in law, Sajjan is forcing him for the cooperative farming with Ghana's sons. This selfish attitude of Sajjan infuriates Modan, who is surprised by the proximity of his own brother to their father's enemy. Modan's days are not good, and one day in absence of Ruldu, Dani's brother Waryama comes to take his sister, and Modan separates from Dani, in times of distress. When Ruldu comes to know that Dani has gone with her brother, he complains to Modan, "you shouldn't have done this, you should have at least waited for me to get back...but let me tell you this wasn't not a very wise thing to do ... you shouldn't have driven Laxmi out of the house on such an auspicious day!" (134)

Later, from Ruldu, Modan comes to know that Waryama has resold his sister Dani to some one else. Chhottu reports Modan than Ghana's sons has rebuked him and forbidden him to use their unplanted fields to approach his fields. Modan get annoyed with Chhottu:

O my gentle soul, you mean to say that if tomorrow they tell our wives and children not to step out of our houses, we'll take it lying down? Such defensive behaviour is not going to help beyond a point. Besides, how downright demeaning for a Jat's son to show such cowardice. This won't help, I tell you. (127-128)

Burning in anger, Modan goes to his friend Ruldu, both consume liquor, and Modan shares his anger with Ruldu for Ghana's sons. Infuriated and inebriated both go towards Ghana's house to settle the score. Modan's anger escalates when he sees lush green fields of Mirab, Ghana's son. Gurdial Singh writes, "A tremendous surge of revolt appeared to rise up from the earth like a cloud, and he saw flames around him, generating a heat that nearly scorched him" (138). Burning in his own anger for Ghana's sons Modan moves towards their house, followed by Ruldu. Modan is very loud and warns Ghana's sons outside their house:

Oye ... today I'm going to chew them up alive - those bloody bastards! ... come on now, if you're the true sons of your mother - come and accept this challenge - you swine! - here I come, your 'son-in-law!' ... Do you have the guts to face me ... Oye. (141)

Modan is unaware that his brother Sajjan is there, Sajjan suddenly comes out and attacks Modan with his pickaxe. By the time Ruldu retaliates and helps his friend, Modan sustains three axe-blows, one on his head, another on his shoulder-blade and



the third on his leg. Modan refuses to go to hospital or police saying like a Malwai Jat, "We aren't going to the police station ... nor do we want any deed of compromise . . . If some how we survive and have the necessary strength ... we'll settle it on our own ... otherwise ... well, it's all right the way it is" (144). The blow on his leg happens to be mortal, and ultimately Modan dies after he accepts the apologies of his brother Sajjan, sees Dani, and Ruldu promises to avenge the death of his friend. Throughout the narrative, Modan is the only character who does not compromise and lives a life of honour, no matter what is the consequence. He is hero enough to choose the path less travelled by and that of unending strife. Modan is a living example of a Camus' rebel and dies as a Camus' rebel:

If an individual actually consents to die, and, when the occasion arises, accepts death as a consequence of his rebellion, he demonstrates that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of a common good which he considers more important than his own destiny. If he prefers the risk of death to a denial of the rights that he defends, it is because he considers that the latter are more important than he is. (*The Rebel* 21-22)

For Camus absurdity is individual and is followed by rebellion which is rather collective, "in absurdist experience suffering is individual. But from the moment that a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience – as the experience of everyone" (28).

Modan's temperament is modelled on the Punjabi folk heroes like Dulla Bhatti, Jeona Morh, Jagga Daku, Sucha Surma, and Mirza etc, that is why like them instead of falling to nihilism, he also prefers to resist, be a rebel and say no to injustice and dishonour. For him his honour is everything, more significant than his life. Following the model of sacrifice and resistance he prefers death to a compromised life of dishonour. Through Modan, Gurdial Singh captures the spirit of a rebel hero. Who inspires to pull reader out of the darkness of absurdity and nihilism and infuses him/her with the spirit to fight against, rebel, resist the injustice, dishonour and loot. For Modan to accept injustice like his brother Sajjan, is to be a part of it. To accept injustice or to be a part of it can only be avoided by rebelling against it **than mere** blaming others for injustice, exploitation or dishonour, like an unheroic and ordinary human.

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