



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

Tugging at the Heartstrings

(Book Review: Sakoon Singh, *In the Land of the Lovers: A Punjab Qissa.*)

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Sakoon Singh's debut novel *In the Land of the Lovers: A Punjab Qissa*, puts Punjab in the spotlight and designates the protagonist Nanaki, showstopper- not on synthetic, make-shift ramps but real turf of everyday existence, leading her from smoke screen to epiphany. Sakoon as cartographer traces Punjab in her novel, from Chandigarh to pre-partition Okara, Amritsar, Jalandhar Cantonment, Malerkotla and even Srinagar and Kasauli thrown in. What begins as a Partition account that wrenches the heart and makes insignificant lines politically and geographically sacrosanct overnight, turns into a narrative of forced fresh beginnings by two generations of women, with a third in embryonic circumstance.

The Partition tale, which begins with languorous pace in the second chapter, "Winter of Our Discontent", provides the trellis of the story, with its branches of mayhem and tragedy providing the seed for the rest of the narrative. Sardar Gurbaaz Singh has had a bumper crop and everything seems to be working out right until a "vague tumult" turns into complete madness as he hides his wife and pregnant daughter in the *toodi* (fodder) room. From then on, the poison of hate first trickles then reaches their gates and is only satiated after Gurbaaz's "face was cold and mouth twisted with frozen horror". The powerless women are transfused with unimaginable strength as Maanji rides buggy and mother-daughter cremate Gurbaaz followed by the arduous trudge all the way to Amritsar from Okara. The rest, as they say, is history!

The establishment of Chandigarh as new capital of Punjab had, according to the author, a deep-seated desire for amnesia- forgetting the *galis* and the *kootchas* of Punjab where madness was let loose and thus to start afresh and sanitized. But the new Punjab also has to go through the birth throes and beyond, and so, Sakoon, with the help of *Marasis*, who make interesting tongue-in-cheek remarks, showcases all that afflicts and beautifies the community. Drug addiction, feudal-patriarchy, nepotism, debasement of academia, gaudy affluence and complete disregard of original art afflict the community and gnaw its insides. To counter such pathology, there is however, an equally encouraging mélange of delicate force in the form of people who stand for truth, resilience, love and beauty, who, with singularity of purpose, dislodge power structures and script a new storyline. And in the midst of this emanating landscape there is Guru Nanak- an



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eternal presence, who, with his teachings of love and devotion offered a new paradigm to the beleaguered seeker or even to the most casually curious.

The important connection between the cover of the book, art and Subedar Joginder Singh is made early, in the third chapter, “Such as We Are”. An adept needle-worker who combines old phulkari stitches with world classical embroidery techniques, Joginder Singh becomes a movement propped up by the instinctive eye of Nanaki who sees his intricate work and recommends him as official artist over the Chief Secretary’s wife. The palpable heartburn and resistance from sycophantic quarters is what follows, but Nanaki is not made of gossamer and she turns the story on its head.

Love becomes the leitmotif *In the Land of the Lovers*- love with all its hints and tints-unrequited love, tender motherly love, obdurate love of art, love infused with sacrifice, anxious grandmotherly love and the culmination comes with the love and lovemaking of Nanaki and Himmat. The organic budding of their love complete with Royal Enfield trips to Kasauli on “official work” makes love appear human and ethereal at the same stroke. Deep seated loss and loneliness is diffused in the vapours of love and the reader is ensconced in the security of the tale.

Sakoon is able to create her characters with a deftness that makes them walking-talking-thinking people and not shadows in a pantomime. Maanji with her initial strength and her later fragility almost makes her mirror Manto’s Bishan Singh of Toba Tek Singh; Beeji, by far the most incredible- Partition survivor, army wife and doting grandmother to orphan Nanaki; Gurbaaz Singh- fallen in a pool of blood but never fallen in pride; Brig. Arjan Singh- upright army man and respecting son-in-law; Subedar Joginder Singh- unlettered connoisseur of art; Karmo- small time entrepreneur and unrelenting mother; Himmat Kaleka- injured yet disarmingly suave and of course dear Nanaki, who like her namesake, the sister of Nanak is able to see “over and above, below and beyond”(words which Sakoon Singh uses in her dedication of the book to her father). All the characters add to the spirit of the novel with their individuality and course they choose to orbit, lending dimension and insight to the plot.

In the Land of the Lovers is strewn with language that is highly evocative of place, time, season and mood. The trope of rain which is employed not just as an aspect of weather but as a metaphor for mood and revelation is beautifully captured in the early lines of the book, “The sun, radiating just the right warmth to get you by on a reasonably cold day, was suddenly eclipsed by raucous grey clouds-unruly kindergarten boys kicking up a ruckus”. Examine the description of Joginder Singh’s decrepit house, “Loneliness is an address and if you are also old, it comes with



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a curious smell” and the insightful description of love, “That two in love might be looking in one direction but never at the same thing”. Or the description of Sahib Singh and Sons Pharmacy in Sector 17 where little Nanaki went for her vaccination shots, “Each time she entered the space, a cloud of dread seemed to emerge from the aged tinctures stored in the bottles, most of which had, by now become viscous and cloudy with age”. And how can one forget Himmat and his mother’s Sunday head-bath-ritual, “She would then sit with me in the sun running her supple fingers through my hair, disentangling the curls while the heat of her fingers moving circuitously through the hair would dry them”. The novel has such and many potions conjured in the cauldron of words.

This debut novel of Sakoon Singh has been able to bring together seemingly disparate experiences of individuals and tied them up together in a fraternal caress. Punjab is examined with closeness and yet with ample objectivity so that the author has the reins in her hands and yet never appears patronizing or insular. She lets the dust out of the carpet and is able to see the dancing fragments in the light but is not enamored by the patterns they create- she knows she has to tame the whirlwind and so she does with élan- never losing sight of the human element, the tautness of plot and the beauty of her characters.