



DES RAJ KALI'S SHANTI PARAV: NOVEL AS DISCOURSE AND PALIMPSEST

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ABSTRACT

As translator of Des Raj Kali's novel *Shanti Parav*, and as an inquiring mind in English literary studies my engagement with the rich context and nuances of Kali's work has led me into yet deeper engagements with the history, ethnography and politics of the Punjabi Dalit. The dalits of Punjab are seen as a lot 'privileged' in comparison to dalits from other states across the Indian nation state. A significant contributing factor is the presence of indigenous spiritual traditions led by dalit sants and sufis operating from their respective deras or ashrams. The teachings of these progressive spiritual leaders are deeply rooted in the psyche of the Punjabi Dalit who continues to seek from them, spiritual strength and intellectual light, in the absence of succour through mainstream religions which function primarily on the dynamics of partisanship, privilege and caste based politics. Kali's novel *Shanti Parav*, makes an extensive and an intense representation of the life conditions and political dynamics of the dalits of Punjab.

This paper surveys in brief, the history, ethnography and politics of the cause of the Punjabi Dalit, and then proceeds to examine the structural and stylistic dynamics that underlie *Shanti Parav* - a fourth in a row of six novels published by Desraj Kali till date. Considering that the novel runs a length of just eighty pages in print, it spans an impressive scope in terms of content, structure and experimentation. Positioned between fiction and non-fiction, the narrative employs with brilliant ingenuity, the concept of the divided page, to accommodate a parallel rendering. On the one hand, in the upper half of the page, runs the flow of autobiographical stories from the protagonist's world, and on the other hand is the continuous, surreal (albeit intellectual) babble of three old characters in the underbelly - the lower half - of each page. Kali's combining of fiction and non-fiction, the unique page layout, and the multi-layered polyphony that is achieved, is bold, unique and brilliant to say the least. It is mouldy as a palimpsest and creates a sense of what I would like to call, the dalit-carnavalesque.

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INTRODUCTION

The novel *Shanti Parav*, can be read as a brilliant enactment of Bakhtin's concept of the novel as discourse that is polyphonic and 'carnavalesque'. The strategies it employs to combine history and ideology with the flesh and blood of lived dalit reality exemplify also, the order of the palimpsest. On several fronts the novel subverts standard structures of fictional narrative. It teases the reader out of habits of lethargy, and prompts the cultivation of active reading-skills; it is in its own flavour, as Roland Barthes would say, 'a writerly text'. With *Shanti Parav*, Des Raj Kali has opened up new possibilities in narration and narrative technique. To quote from the Punjabi novel, In this novel of mine I have taken a format from the *Mahabharata*.

That format is of *Shanti Parva* - the last book, 'book of peace' in the *Mahabharata*; it makes an aesthetic presentation of actions performed in the past, and thereby attempts to rationalise and justify them.... This *parav* of the *Mahabharata* is extremely important. Till date we can see recurrent manifestation of this line of thought - the ideology that has continuously reproduced itself. It is a means to entering the folds of our *Raj tantar*. * It is a pathway to an understanding of the theology of our *Hakkam Pirs**2. (7, Des Raj Kali. Tr. Neeti Singh)

The *Shanti Parva* translated as the *Book of Peace*, is the twelfth *Parva* - section, of the *Mahabharata*. Just as it is situated in the post war period after the great battle of Kurukshetra has been fought and is over, the *Shanti Parav* Des Raj Kali is similarly located in the aftermath of the colonial saga and partition violence to which the novel offers a reflection and a subversive response. *Shanti Parav*, subverts standard expectations of a fictional narrative. It teases the reader out of habits of lethargy, and prompts him/her to

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employ active reading-skills; it is in its own flavour, as Roland Barthes would say, 'a writerly text'. With *Shanti Parav* Kali has opened up new possibilities in narration and narrative technique. As translator of Des Raj Kali's novel *Shanti Parav*, the purpose of this essay is to introduce the work and to critically examine the structural and stylistic dynamics that inform and frame it. Kali experiments here, with the literary form by combining fiction and nonfiction to create a discourse that is polyphonic, layered and resonant. The paper examines aspects of Kali's idiom and the challenges that are unique to this experiment.

Considering that the novel runs a length of just 80 pages in print, it spans an impressive scope in terms of content, structure and experimentation. Positioned between fiction and non-fiction, and perhaps the first of its kind, *Shanti Parav* presents (1) the concept of the over-text and the under-text. (2) To accommodate a parallel rendering Kali has evolved a unique page layout: a horizontal line runs through the centre of each page to divide it into two sections: in the upper half flow the short stories and in the lower half run three intellectual discourses presented in a babbling conversational style. Thus we have simultaneously on the same page, in its upper half, the polyphony of autobiographical stories from the protagonist's world, and in the lower half of each page - in the under text, are three informed monologues on the fate of dalits in colonial, post colonial times - suppressed, abused and tossed around as they were, in the bowl of State and partisan politics.. Through the prattle of three old characters in the underbelly of each page, Kali thus constructs brilliant essays into the psychology of terror and counter terror, the state machinery and Indian federal structure, and the dalit's rendering of the Indian saga in colonial and post colonial times.

Bakhtin's Polyphony and a sense of the Palimpsest in the Punjabi Dalit Discourse

Through *Shanti Parav*, Kali on one hand, experiments with the conventional use of the printed page by cutting the page into half and employing a unique page layout; and on the other hand, he introduces a new genre in literary form - a post modern, dialogic approach to the fictional text that rises like a phoenix and blends back into a larger non-fictional (con)text - the history and ideology of the dalit discourse that simultaneously forms and frames it. While the seventeen stories in the upper-text recreate in flesh and blood, the lived reality of the dalit tree of life, the dramatic monologues of a Comrade, a Politician and a retired Professor, in the under-text, dig up a blueprint of the socio-political roots that have led in time, to the distortion of the dalit tree. Together the fictional and the non-fictional create a macrocosmic dalit discourse that is richly textured, unpredictable in its rendering, and demands an alert attentive readership. *Shanti Parav* is truly a 'novel of discourse' - it celebrates the 'polyphony' of multiple voices and carries with it a sense of the palimpsest (the overlap of the over and under text) both literally and symbolically.

The 'novel as discourse,' is a concept forwarded by Mikhail Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, the novel illustrated the confluence of many voices. It was according to him, a literary depiction of the interaction of different social classes and characters. Also in the novel, the method of dialogism is illustrated as the interplay of heteroglossia reveals other aspects of character, theme, and interaction. Thus the novel as "a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse,

each of which is not merely a verbal but a social phenomenon, and as such is the product of manifold determinants of class, social group, and speech community."

In an essay on "Discourse in the Novel" (1934-35), Bakhtin develops his view that the novel is a literary form that is constituted by a multiplicity of divergent and contending social voices that achieve their full significance only in the sustained process of their dialogic interaction both with each other and with the voice of the narrator." ...here Bakhtin elevates "discourse as a medley of voices that are not only opposed, but irreconcilable, with the result that the work remains unresolved and open-ended. (231, Abrams)

Shanti Parav resonates deeply with Bakhtin's sensibility of the literary aesthetic. It is a 'novel of discourse' and yet it is not a novel at all in the accepted sense. It is, literally speaking, a medley of 17 short stories and three long prattling monologues united by shared themes, contexts and locale which in turn are furnished by Kali's realism, his quirky sense of humour, the use of irony and metaphor. These are stories that spin around characters picked up from among the marginalised and the abused, the labouring lower caste dalits. The mode of description is unsparing, crisp and realistic. Aristotle's concept that a story must have a beginning, a middle and an end is totally absent in this novel, so also ideas of grandeur, great art or romance. The only form of art is a portrait sketch made by Phaagmull's nephew in a dalit hovel, the owner of that painting is proud to own that painting and at the same time sad that his talented nephew is now an alcoholic. The poor, the sick and the aged characters of *Shanti Parav* are in absolute contrast to the grand, handsome, larger than life characters from the *Mahabharata*. The characters of the dalit world struggle for survival, they are the sweepers in misshapen bodies, and cheap lipstick, hollow eyed men in soiled clothes or young boys with laptops and alcoholic fathers at home, old muttering crones with problems of uterus and constipation, lesbians, lovers - the whole lot of ordinary labouring humans that do not even find mention in the original epic. Structurally speaking, the chaos of the upper text is undermined literally in the lower pages of the book by politicians and professors who extend the discourse and raise it to insightful, rational levels. Thus the *Shanti Parav* paints a very Bakhtinian landscape, a subversive dalit discourse that pervades all through its rendering, in "a medley of voices that are not only opposed, but irreconcilable, with the result that the work remains unresolved and open-ended."

Shanti Parav as subversive rebuttal to 'Shanti Parva' of the Mahabharata

The people who dwell in the pages of Kali's *Shanti Parav* are in stark contrast to the royal demigods in the original *Mahabharata*. Kali's characters are humans that seem to exist in a partial stupor like zombies - dimly aware of their minds and bodies, dragging on from one day to another day's realities. The dalit women characters, it is refreshing to note, defy patriarchal norms of the glamorised submissive feminine, they are unapologetically loud, misshapen, ugly or gaudy, and more assertive, more aggressive even than their male dalit counterparts who are cast in a milder mould as men who are either responsible or insane or into addictions of all sorts. To say the least, Kali's novel is an exercise in subversion at multiple levels.

As literature it subverts our standard expectations of a novel as literary form and fictional narrative. As readers, it teases us out of the lethargy of habit, and compels us to acquire in the process, a set of new reading-skills. For instance one learns to be extra alert to the quickly changing scene as Kali's sentences move involutedly in patterns, shifting from one story or speaker in a sentence to another in the next without any labels or warnings – to hold on to shifting vantage points in the narrative, is the onus of the reader not Kali's. Another challenge is the ingenuous layout of the pages with two narratives running parallel but without any tangible connections whatsoever – one wonders initially, how one must proceed to read, what must be read first and when must one approach the essays that tunnel away in the underbelly of each printed page. It is therefore very essential to first go through Des Raj Kali's instructions at the onstart. Yet another aspect of Kali's syntax is his use of the conversational – the short sentences, repetitions, the intrusions and the gaps as suddenly without warning the focus shifts to yet another speaker or point of vantage... All this and the author's unsparing realism, especially when it comes to characterisation, his eye for factual detail, the richly embedded colloquialisms and the involuted patterns of storytelling, create a sense of what Bakhtin calls, 'heteroglossia' - multiple voices that churn up an atmosphere of the dalit carnivalesque. To illustrate the point, here is a passage from the first story in the novel: the story is titled 'Tadaksaar', 'DayBreak.'

"In every house there lives a *buddhi rooh* - old female spirit. Her white tresses - hoary and dishevelled. Gleaming in the lines of her face, red eyes with threads. Ears torn. Earrings dangling at the edge. Her visage, sometimes wilted, lacklustre, and sometimes fresh as morning dew. *Kade chihraa mooloN ee digiyaa hoyaa, te kade phir no-bur-no*. Not the spirit, but the body, the hag's body perhaps dwells in here. Like a toy with a winding key. 'Tarr-tarr'. Just continues to speak. What you speak, neither you know nor the one who is listening; yes gradually in the listener's mind, cacophony begins to collect and fester. "These people cannot manage anything. What will they do. We the damned and old, of what use are we now. We do not even remember. Even basic bread is denied us. If we go to other people's homes they feel embarrassed. What will others say. That we lack even the crumbs of shame. Days of winter, you'll catch a cold.... *Bawaasir*/constipation has troubled me no end. I'm now ripe with despair. The isabgol* powder, I don't know where I kept it. Since last night I can't find it. Now if the stomach clears, then alone will the *bawaasir* go. Once the *bawaasir* dissipates, it will bring some relief to the haemorrhoids. Who will explain all this to them."

The listener's blood rises in a boil all across the body and clambers up to the brain. 'phooN phooN....'. Through the nasal tract such sounds emerge and emit. Thoughts in the brain like green peas in boiling water dance a jig. Like girls that are stupid and disorderly, or say like a bull that is enraged. No, in fact like an enraged, poisonous cobra. 'PhooN phooN!' All sorts of sounds begin to sputter. In the *rajjaai* [comforter] the face and head will get wrapped. 'Tarr Tarr,' like a hammer it will continue to ring in the ears. 'Tarr-Tarr!' Ayurvedic roots of *guggal*, *lubaan* and *mushakpoor* will char and release fumes. She would then have begun to give *tuHni* - fumigation. That is why I say, she cannot be a rooh, a spirit. It certainly is body. In spite of the fact that the fumigation drives us, the rest of the family, berserk. She is least concerned. She

only concentrates on the treatment of *bawaasir*." (9, *Shanti Parav*. Tr. NS) This more or less reflects the vigour, the swift pace and the 'heteroglossia' that characterises Kali's fictional and non-fictional discourse. 'Heteroglossia' refers to the circumstance that what we think of as a single, unitary language is actually comprised of a multiplicity of languages interacting with, and often ideologically competing with, one another. 'Heteroglossia' may also be translated as 'other-languageness.' By countering accepted norms of mainstream discourse, literary form and history, and by replacing them with brilliant alternatives, Kali opens up through this brilliant novel of his, a Pandora's box – a heteroglossia of discourse where there are dialogues and dialogues galore.

The 17 stories that have run in the upper half for seventy three pages of the novel, spill downwards at the end and occupy all of the last seven pages - they take over literally and symbolically, for the real impact of ideology finds its manifestation in the lived day-to-day reality. A very melee marks the space. The seventeen short stories teem with dalit characters – a polyphony of forms and voices collide into one another as they meld and flow in the swift flow of the narrative - half conscious, struggling, falling, celebrating or trying to celebrate, trapped in debts and addictions or even, dead. The narrative moves, quick paced and terse, sketching cameos of dalit lives, spanning grades of dalit poverty and wellbeing, from the educated youth to aged and middle aged characters, from sweepers to jaded political leaders – even in terms of time there are vignettes – ranging from post partition to as far as 60 years down the line. The hand that writes is shrewd and unsparing – women in cheap bras and uterus problems or the *resha*/phlegm that Pbhagmull spits all is scripted with the sincerity of a realist. We have here a celebration of the anti romantic and the reverse aesthetic. It would not be out of place to say that the stories are rendered in an atmosphere that has a sense of the carnival – a very celebration of the dalit carnivalesque.* The 'Carnivalesque' again is a term introduced by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, to refer to a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere, through humour and chaos.

The world that Kali writes of is a world that has been familiar to him – it is his own world and he presents it as he thinks it and feels it – the dalits embroiled in the puss and pother of a survival challenged constantly on multiple levels are not merely the lower caste illiterate numbers that make the teeming Indian masses. Dalit is a term that can be used to subsume and symbolise all those categories that live in the margins and are abused and exploited. While the stories in the upper text provide us with an experience of the lived dalit reality, the literature in the under text provides us with the reasons that have led to it.

The three monologues that run through the lower regions of the text are in their tone and content, philosophical and academic; they reflect on issues of hegemony - state power, ideology, religion, philosophy and history. The monologue in which they are located adopts a partial mode of the 'stream of consciousness'. 'Stream of consciousness' is a phrase used by William James, to describe the unbroken flow of perceptions, thoughts and feelings in the waking mind. In literature it came to indicate "a special mode of writing that undertakes to reproduce, (without the narrator's intervention) the full spectrum and continuous flow of a character's mental process in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-

conscious thoughts, memories, expectations, feelings, and random associations.” (Abrams) Des Raj Kali employs a similar mode of rendering the three prattling monologues in the under-text. A loosely structured and an informed commentary, the prattle of the three aged speakers pans across locations in time and space, to make rational inroads and connections that expose with brilliant insight, the systems of violence and dalit oppression, for as the author notes in the beginning, since the seed of historic time, ruling state authorities have tended to replicate and reproduce the same old patterns of exploitation, control and dissemination of power. Through *Shanti Parav* the author endeavours to subvert the cyclic patterns of abuse and control and thereby register a protest, and initiate perhaps, a change, however great or small. To look a little closely at the under text, the author examines with an uncanny clarity the depth and expanse of what it is in Indian history that has plagued its social landscape and politics. He puts before us his vision of the underlying network of systems of use and abuse, that continue to undermine and sabotage the health of marginalised humanities at the level of society, state, nation and the world at large. Thus, through the prattle of the Comrade, the Politician and the retired Professor, Kali discourses upon the following aspects of State polity: (i) the trajectory of violence which maps the issue of minority-majority, terror/counter terror and religious vendetta. (ii) The second discourse opens up issues of the dalits in colonial and post colonial India. And of course, Dr Ambedkar the dalit messiah, who procured for them the basic right to land purchase and school education. (iii) The last section of non-fiction, analyses, interrogates and critiques structures of governance, which were passed down to us by the British and which perform more disservice than service to the Indian nation.

Although the essays speak of issues that are dense and compelling, the author has lightened them up by casting them as monologues delivered by eccentric, heavily caricatured speakers who prattle on to a real or an imagined audience. The tone is conversational, the speakers being old and unpretentious bring to the prattle their own colloquialisms and personal quirks, plus other digressions that amuse and lighten the prose. Then there are those curious but funny interventions in the form the old crone –PbhaagMull’s wife - who distracts her neurotic husband by disturbing his flow of thoughts, with much glaring and caustic mutterings, ‘tarr-tarr.’ Or for instance the imaginary gathering where the Comrade speaks to an enrapt audience about the insidious nature of terror and violence, his address is repeatedly interrupted, by inebriated sloganeering and the shouting of cuss words by an excited voice in the gathering.

So also the retired professor in the third essay - he keeps straying from an academic sharing of a very serious nature into personal remarks on his poor memory, his wife, ailing mother and the tension and anxiety of human sufferings. Such uncalled for interventions which expose the sincerity of the speakers and their human failings, the colloquialisms, the burlesque juxtapositions and caricaturing – all of these bring much relief to the intellectual exercise; they anchor us to the ordinary fact of lived reality, and at the same time, refurbish our connect with the stories in the upper part of the page - stories that fester in the actual sweat and soil of routine life and of which the novel is a brilliant reflection. The novel is thus a meditation on both, the reflection in the mirror and that which lies behind that reflection.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, therefore, Des Raj Kali’s *Shanti Parav* comes through as a major breakthrough in the history of literary form and aesthetics. The author opens up a new canon of possibilities. Naturalism, anti romance and stream of consciousness are terms that describe his style of narration. The novel more than realises the vision of Bakhtin – it is richly dialogic, celebrates heteroglossia and is carnivalesque to the core. By a strategic patterning of the fictional and the non fictional it constructs a new 21st century model for Bakhtin’s framework of the ‘novel as discourse’ and the novel/discourse as palimpsest. Traditionally speaking a palimpsest was a manuscript written on a surface from which an earlier text had been partly or wholly erased. Palimpsests were common in the Middle Ages before paper became available... In a figurative sense the term is sometimes applied to a literary work that has more than one layer or level of meaning which holds good with reference to Kali’s *Shanti Parav*. However, I have also used the term here with reference to Kali’s juxta-positioning of the fictional and non-fictional narratives on the same page, in such a way that there is a sense of appropriation - a sense of the palimpsest, when one is present the other is absent. This play of absence and presence creates a sense of reality that is larger than life as it is resonant, palimpsest and dialogic in a continuous play of absent present, absent present...

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