

Sukhwant Kaur Mann: Preserving Cultural Memory Through Fiction

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Though the literary critics have been slow in recognizing Sukhwant Kaur Mann's contribution to Punjabi literature, the reading public has showered all praise on her writings. Very different from her female contemporary writers, Mann's primary interests are centered on human beings entangled in socio-historical and politico-ideological situations. As a result, her writings attempt to document the key historical developments of the second-half of the twentieth century Punjab.

In an interview published in *Sankh* (May, 2006), Sukhwant Kaur Mann (b. 1933) claims that both the circumstances that brought her to writing and the primary concerns that appear in her writings are different from those of her fellow female writers. This observation provides us an interesting entry into the life and art of this prominent writer. Let us trace what we know about Mann's life and then examine the key issues that surface in her writings.

Sukhwant was born into a landed family in West Punjab. Her great grandfather, Basant Singh Mann, had moved there as part of the canal colony project that the British had created in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. He was allotted 300 acres of land and assigned the status of an honorary magistrate. The family remembers that he knew Urdu and Persian well and had a great fondness for reading. Whether he could read English or not is not clear. Sukhwant's early memories are comprised of the presence of books at home and the general encouragement by the elders that reading was an excellent habit. Sukhwant's father, Kishan Singh Mann, loved farming and preferred to do the work himself rather than employ tenants. The love for intellectual pursuits passed on by his great grandfather and respect for physical labor by her father provided the context in which Sukhwant grew up as a child.

Her beautiful world was soon to shatter as the events pertaining to Partition of the Punjab began to unfold. The Manns had to leave their comfortable home and belongings and arrive in East Punjab and wait to be rehabilitated. The family moved to Amritsar, Raja Sansi, Ludhiana, and eventually got land in Talanhia, a village near Sirhind and settled down there. The loss of the family fortune was part of the overall collapse of Punjabi society in which ten million people moved from their native places in search of new homes and the extent of violence that erupted is yet to be fully fathomed.

Young Sukhwant witnessed her family's problems as well as the madness that infected the society in general. As the dust settled, her father became a

successful farmer and the family regained its economic security. She joined Mata Gujari College, Fatehgarh. Her family had some role in the establishment of this college, which made it possible for her to meet Sant Singh Sekhon and Sujjan Singh, two major literary figures of the time, who both served as principals there. Their presence inspired her to read literature, which included Shakespeare, British Romantics, and Russian writers like Tolstoy, Gorky, and Dostoevsky. While at college, she remembers translating Shakespeare's Julius Caesar into Punjabi.

In the early 1960s, she got married in Chandigarh but the relationship did not work out. This resulted in her return to Talanahia. While living in the village, Sukhwant had the first-hand experience of the Green Revolution, which contributed to her family fortunes as well as that of the region. She also saw the rise and collapse of the Naxalite movement under the state pressure. She left the village in the early 1980s and moved to Mohali, a satellite town near Chandigarh, and continues to live there. In the 1980s, like everyone else, she lived through the headlong clash between the forces of Sikh nationalism and the Indian state.

With Partition experience still alive in her nerves, Sukhwant had begun to write short stories toward the end of the 1950s. She, however, took a long time to publish them, and they began to appear in print only in the early 1980s after her move to Mohali. Once available in print, they became an instant success and the readers' admiration for her works has remained firm.

While comparing her experiences of life and writing with two illustrious contemporaries, Ajit Cour (b. 1934) and Dalip Kaur Tiwana (b. 1935), Mann points out distinctions in the interview mentioned earlier. Ajit was born in an urban family in West Punjab and had witnessed all the travails associated with Partition. She, however, moved to Delhi and ended up earning her living as a single mother with two daughters to rear. Her fiction focuses on illicit relationships in the middle and upper-middle class people and how within this context, women struggled to realize their identities beyond mere objects in the hands of their husbands. These efforts, however, do not go that far. The males, with whom they cohabit, first in excitement and then in boredom, are not under any obligation to remain faithful. If fidelity is the exception then infidelity is the rule. Men regard women as disposable commodities. Without proving the nuances which rapid life changes have imparted to man-woman relations, she has persisted in replicating, with new situations and characters, what she has been portraying from the beginning of her literary career. It is hard to find any new perception arising from her later writings.

Dalip Kaur Tiwana, on the other hand, has a different trajectory. Though born in a village, her family moved out from there and she had the best education available at that time. She eventually had 'a doctoral degree and a teaching position in a university.' Quite soon, she rose to become one of the front-ranking academicians in the field of Punjabi literature. As part of her teaching, Tiwana devoted herself to the dissemination of feminist issues. She eventually became focused on female suffering at the hands of Punjabi males, a

topic which became almost an obsession with her. The context of her literature is the household in which the females, as daughters, sisters, mothers, are at the receiving end. She made it her mission to show how lust, greed and vanity led the males to perpetrate oppression on the females, who are accustomed to internalizing suppression and accept it without objection. The hold of these issues on her literary imagination has been so over-powering that they have ended up as monolithic entities in her writings.

Mann is candid in accepting that most of her life was passed in a village, where family and kinship ties were extremely important. Consequently, unlike the situation with Cour and Tiwana, the individual identity of her characters does not constitute the center of her literary world. She is interested in a society in which human beings live together and often have to confront circumstances that completely dislocate their physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural, and existential state. Whether they survive the catastrophe that envelops them or get sucked into it, depends upon the sustenance they get from their fellow human beings. In the process, Mann does not ignore depicting what happens to individual characters, their sufferings and ordeal, or the transformations they undergo, but attempts to present them as part of the larger picture. Their destinies are closely related to their collaterals, co-villagers, and the lives of others around them. Mann's concerns are social but finely nuanced. Gurbachan Singh Bhullar, one of the outstanding male short story writers of Mann's generation, rightly claims: "Whereas female short story writers rest content with revelation of themselves as women, Mann, by becoming unmindful of her gender-specific identity, has consciously chosen the path of a short story writer, rather than one of the feminine gender."

Placed in the historical chronology, the dislocations that Mann is concerned about are Partition in 1947, the Green Revolution, the Naxalite movement, the violence that engulfed during the 1980s, and the winds of urbanization, which have swayed over East Punjab in the last decade or so. In the process, Mann has created a set of short stories, which effectively chronicle the history of the Punjab in the second-half of the twentieth century.

This rich backdrop serves as an inexhaustible source of themes for Mann to successfully portray, explain and explore her understanding of life. She started with *Bhakhrrhe de Phul* (Flowers of a Thorny Weed) in 1983, and subsequently brought out four more collections: *Tarerhan* (Cracks), *Is de Bavjud* (Inspite of This), *Moh Mitti* (Love for the Land) and *Chadar hethla Baladh* (Ox beneath the Cover). She also wrote longer stories or short novels entitled *Jazire* (Islands), *Pairan hethle Angiar* (Embers beneath the Feet). In addition, she has written tales for children. This wide-ranging corpus has ensured her a place of respect in Punjabi literature.

Let us look at some of her stories closely. Mann's stories on Partition are poignant pieces to begin this discussion. The context is as follows. Migration has taken place and refugees from across the border have come to East Punjab in overwhelming numbers. All that they owned is left behind. Deprived of their land and homes, they feel broken and woeful. The resistance of the local people

in East Punjab toward their comfortable settlement further adds to this complicated situation. The feelings of remorse, nostalgia, despair and despondence become part of their beings, and no viable respite seems to be in the cards.

For instance, In *Chathoo* (The Grinder), the women of the house have grown indifferent to the home setting. In earlier times, the grinder was at the center of their lives. They would need it all the time to add flavor to what they cooked. Deprived and dispossessed, they have lost interest in making food that tastes of various spices. These women had left behind courtyards overflowing with boxes and utensils, and were trying to learn to make sense of their new lives. They all share the collective pain and “none goes to the other even to utter a word of consolation.” If a near or dear one dies, there is no crying, tears were shed in ample measure at the time of Partition. (*Manmattian*, 8).

The irony is that these people were not aware of the impending disaster at all. Even when the British had announced their resolve to leave the subcontinent, these people were under the illusion that nothing untoward would happen and they will be able to stay in their homes. When the inevitable stares them in the face, they do not know what to do. This is how the matriarch of the house deals with the situation, with patronizing equanimity so rare at that historical juncture. Thus goes the description in *Laddu* (Sweet Ball): “When it came to be known that Pakistan was going to be carved out and our living over there was impossible, grandmother called her three daughters-in-law and told them to fill a trunk each with costly items from their dowries. When the trunks were ready, Lahina, a Mirasi servant, and his three sons were asked to come at midnight. Swearing that they would never go back on their promise to return what was given to them in trust, they carried away the trunks to their house. We had hoped that the outcry would not last beyond a few days and with the restoration of peace, we would return to our homes.” (*Manmattian*, 241)

But this was not to be! The description goes: “Here was the deafening sound of the carts, firing of guns, plunderers running about, all the time when our tall and robust uncle lay in the middle of the door writhing heavily. None knew how many spears had pierced his chest. Suppressing the wave of tears within, absorbing his remorse and indignation in the heart within, he got up after heaving a sigh, all wordless and dumb. When the women of the house began to cry, our grandfather reprimanded them into silence. He reminded them what the military personnel had told them to do, that is, not to take any thing along with them. So leaving all the bundles and bags beside the dead body of our uncle, we went ahead, crossing the pool of blood, inconsolably sighing, stumbling, trembling, and finding it hard to move or draw our breath.” (*Manmattian*, 43).

Facing all the odds on the way, the family reaches the deserted village in which land is allotted to the family in lieu of that left behind in West Punjab. Of course, there is no danger lurking overhead. Plunderers are not around. Sisters and daughters are safe from the marauders. Yet there is no end to privations that the family had to deal with. A heart-felt picture of this is found in *Kanha Deo* (One-Eyed Giant). Mann describes the situation as follows:

All the houses vacated by the Muslims had been allotted to the refugees come over there. A bit of normalcy had returned and the people were to forget the past. But where was one to find the wide and fertile fields of Sandal Bar and the canals which supplied them water in abundance! My grandfather and uncle did not like the new land but they had reconciled themselves to their fate. Only my grandmother would spread a carpet beside the decayed wall, mourn over the loss of her middle son, curse Jinnah and Nehru and recalled her innocent grandsons and granddaughters slaughtered by the marauders. (*Manmattian*, 343-344)

In *Sapp te Shahir* (The Snake and the City), Mann goes beyond description to project an ideological perspective. The story revolves around Sardara Singh, a member of a family that has recently migrated to East Punjab. With no way to make ends meet, the members of the family have to gather dry wood, which they sell to procure food. While Sardara is busy doing this, a cobra comes out of the barren ground and bites him. His elder brother kills the snake at the very spot, sucks out blood from where the snake has bitten and ties Sardara's leg so that poison may not go further. He is made to eat leaves of *akk* and a conjurer utters spells to ward off the effect of the bite. Various methods are tried to ward off the evil effect but the mortal fear of having been bitten does not disappear.

Parallel to the bite of the snake is the effect of a communal poison that is presented in the second part of the story. The very next day, Sardara Singh is on the way to the district courts to procure a certificate meant to pronounce him a refugee. While in the vicinity of the city, he meets a group of people who stop him. Having been associated with Muslims, Sardara kept his beard trimmed and moustache plucked. From his appearance, they think him to be a Muslim. These markers of identification had helped him a few weeks back to extricate his brother from the conflagrations of Muslim rioters. That had happened in West Punjab, however. But in East Punjab, his beard dyed with henna, his hairs combed backward, and turban tucked under the arm pointed to his being a Muslim. Confronted by the rioters, he tells them his name but fails to convince them of being a Sikh. They think of him to be a Muslim who deserves to die. They hurl bricks and stones at him killing him at the spot. A person bitten by a snake may survive but there is no escape from the poison of a communalized environment.

Moving on to the happenings of the 1980s in East Punjab, Mann deals with a wide range of themes. In *Chadar hethla Baladh*, a magical show is being enacted. A man covered with a piece of cloth lies in front of a magician, who then enacts the scene of cutting his neck. The man gives out a heart-rending cry and the cloth covering him gets drenched with blood. The magician then lifts the cloth and the man lying beneath it leaps upward. A little girl, who is watching the whole enactment, cannot comprehend how the man survived when he had uttered a heart-rending cry and the cover had become drenched with blood.

Another story focuses on the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. The house and showroom of master Satnam Singh are razed to the ground; his son and grandson are killed.

Other houses, shops, showrooms that belong to the Sikhs are likewise burnt and demolished. The girl, who is watching the whole scene, cannot make any sense of this phenomenon. 'How can all this happen? How can all this be heard?' (*Manmattian*, 325) Such are the intractable questions that lurk in her mind.

Mann is well aware that the violence of the 1980s may be over but the civic society is quite feeble and cannot do any thing to resist the unjust policies of the oppressive structures and institutions. This theme appears in *Jiaunh Joge* (Helpless Ones). The story begins with the arrival of a bulldozer in the village. 'After the public announcement, it began pushing through homes. Commotion spread all around. Men and women ran hither and thither after snatching objects of daily needs. Driving the cattle with sticks, opening the windows of the roosts, with the hens crowing, horses neighing, the goats bleating and carrying trunks, pushing cots, panting and puffing, children, young men and old men went ahead crying, wailing and hurling abuses.' (*Manmattian*, 252)

What is baffling on the political front seems irrevocable in agriculture, which remains the dominant mode of earning a livelihood for the people of Punjab. Dependent on fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides, the old life style is undergoing changes. Mann's concerns for the loss of the age-old belief that agriculture is the noblest of all vocations, far superior to trade and employment, are clear. *Moh Mitti* beautifully illustrates these problems. Every year, the narrator brings the seed from the agriculture university, sows them, supplies proper dose of fertilizers and sprays to keep the insects under control. All this is done according to the instructions given by the university. He also rears fish on the side. Yet there are always problems. Pepper-plants get afflicted with termites, the leaves of the potato-plants are blighted, the price of cauliflower crashes steeply. In a nutshell, there is no way to stop the reprimands from the family, as the narrator cannot provide for them.' (*Manmattian*, 287)

Finally, Mann writes about the move to the cities and the life-style changes that this development has introduced in the culture of the region. A set of stories, *Vapsi ton Pahilan* (Before Return), *Putar kol* (With the Son), *Pratidhavanian* (Overtones) and *Kachhukuma* (Tortoise), deal with this situation. In the cities, the people, young persons in particular, are able to procure jobs with monthly salaries; the rooms in which they live are cleaner than their village homes. No wonder their quality of life has improved. Mann testifies to this without any reservation. She is, however, extremely concerned about its impact on Punjabi culture. Characters populating these stories often return to their villages. They do so to ask for their share from the harvests. Those who live in villages are invariably older men and women. Partly because they are unable to do hard labor and partly because doing so does not bring any return anyway. They expect some monetary help from their more fortunate urban relatives. Mann with a great degree of sensitivity delineates this newly developed situation.

Mann's observant eye focuses on the current plight of the lower castes in the Punjabi society too. In the story, *Kachhukuma* two young men of a lower caste family are able to get jobs in the city. Their jobs are not terribly remunerative but

provide a basis for them to feel arrogant toward their families. Easy targets of their recriminations are the poor farmers working in the fields. In *Pratidhavanian*, success in the city goes so much to the head of a person from the lower caste that he seeks pleasure in abusing his village people. Mentally and emotionally, he oscillates from anger to pity, from irritation to grievance, and is unable to define his attitude to life in the village. Residents of the village seem to him like insects who, 'for day-today livelihood, put in hard labor, moan and lament, indulging in petty pranks, and leading depraved and meaningless lives.' (*Manmattian*, 279) His fond wish is that young girls of his caste should not have any compulsion to work in the fields owned by the farmers. Mann's stories depict that the reservation policy to help the lower caste has only made limited accomplishments.

Mann is deeply aware that given the situation, the people resort to all types of measures with no concern to their being right or wrong. The illegitimate means seem to work more effectively than the rightful ones. Stories such as *Bol Meri Machhali* (Speak my Fish) and *Dubde Suraj nal* (With the Setting Sun) present this theme with a great degree of deftness. In the process, Mann touches upon the issues of a disintegrating social system with vanishing family ties, and increasing insecurity in all facets of life.

While dealing with this rich texture of Punjabi life, Mann's stories do not lose sight of technical merit. To achieve this aim, she uses interesting devices. First she creates a situation of the supplementary type. What is depicted in the first seeks corroboration in the second. Thereby, the proclivity to repeat is avoided. Secondly, she populates the situations with detailed scenes, to work out a collage of a sort. Though not of the linear type, a narrative is inherent to this collage. In this way, she remains steady on the path of literary pursuit, although the wish for turning her stories into cultural documents remains her paramount concern. This is a formidable achievement. Mann's readers are appreciative of this and she should be genuinely proud of her achievement.

All references come from Sukhwant Kaur Mann's collected short stories published under the title of *Manmattian*. Ludhiana: Chetna Prakashan, 2002.