

# *Larins Sahib: A Drama of Hubris*

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## *Abstract*

Henry Lawrence, an East India Company officer is the protagonist of the play. Gurcharan Das has created this protagonist on the basis of written and oral historical evidences. Gurcharan Das has presented Lawrence as a tragic hero because he struggles between personal ethics, duty and pride. In his struggle, he tries to strike a balance between the three facets of his self—the enlightened empire builder, an agent in the British government's unprincipled and unethical persistent expansion of its Indian territories, and the inner and hidden urge to be the Lion of Punjab. Due to his extreme pride, arrogance and his unlimited power, the protagonist overestimates his capabilities. Finally, he becomes the victim and hath a tragic fall and gives the play the hue of a Hubris Drama.

**Key Words:** Hubris, Tragic hero, British, Lion of Punjab, Pride, arrogance

The prominence gained by English Drama in India is a stupendous achievement. “The multifaceted opus of Asif Curriombhoy, Girish Karnad’s own translations of his powerful Kannada plays, the biting social commentaries of Mahesh Dattani” (Ray n.p.) gave new impetus to Anglo-Indian Drama which were once considered to be the “bedroom farce” (Ray n.p.). Gurcharan Das—better known in his avatar as corporate guru—is another dramatist of significance with a potential to give voice to the muffled social issues. The personal ethics variegated by the corporate Guru Gurcharan Das has made Indian English drama accomplished with decipherable richness and solid dramatic substance. Contemporary Indian dramatic writing is now budding richer in quantity as well as in quality. New and unique experimentations find place in terms of themes, techniques, the use of models and language in modern Indian Drama. Among these pioneers Gurcharan Das’s contribution to success of Indian drama is equally commendable. His three plays

*Larins Sahib*, *Mira* and *9, Jakhoo Hill* depict three distinct dramatic models—history play, total theatre and Social Realism respectively. Each of these plays is endowed with his distinct versatility and proficiency as a playwright. Gurcharan Das took up the task of writing plays at the age of 22 but he was very nervous because he felt that “writing a play is much more difficult than any other form of writing. Theatre audiences are critical. One false note and you are done for” (Das 2). He holds that the prime function of theatre is “to entertain people” (Das 2). Aristotle also demanded that even tragedy should entertain.

Gurcharan Das’s first play *Larins Sahib* is set in mid-19th Century Punjab. The action of the play unfolds against the backdrop of political turmoil and murky maneuver that marked the time immediately following the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh- “the One-eyed Lion” (Das 39). Henry Lawrence, an East India Company officer is the protagonist of the play. Gucharan Das has created this protagonist on the basis of written and oral historical evidences. Gurcharan Das has presented Lawrence as a tragic hero because he struggles between personal ethics, duty and pride. In his struggle, he tries to strike a balance between the three facets of his self—the enlightened empire builder, an agent in the British government's unprincipled and unethical persistent expansion of its Indian territories, and the inner and hidden urge to be the Lion of Punjab. Naik rightly observes that Lawrence is the amalgamation of three incarnation of Henry Lawrence in the play: “Lawrence, the enlightened empire builder: Lawrence, the latter-day ‘Lion of Punjab’, and Lawrence, the little cog in the wheels of the East India Company Machine” (182). Due to his extreme pride, arrogance and his unlimited power, the protagonist overestimates his capabilities. Finally, he becomes the victim and hath a tragic fall and gives the play the hue of a Hubris Drama.

“Hubris is a typical flaw in the personality of a character who enjoys a powerful position; as a result of which, he overestimates his capabilities to such an extent that he loses contact with reality. A character suffering from hubris tries to cross normal human limits, and violates moral codes. Examples of hubris are found in major characters of tragic plays” (Watts 129).

Aristotle in his book *Rhetoric* also defines Hubris as:

Hubris consists in doing and saying things that cause shame to the victim...simply for the pleasure of it. Retaliation is not hubris, but revenge...Young men and the rich are hubristic because they think they are better than other people (Kuiper 219).

Aristotle believes that people indulge in crimes like sexual misdemeanors and maltreating others only to fulfill their basic desire to make themselves feel and pose superior to others. Similarly, Greek mythology presents hubris as a great crime that demands harsh punishment. Generally, the Greek idea of hubris is that a character in authoritative position becomes so arrogant of his exceptional qualities that he forms a fantasy that he is equal to Gods, and ultimately he tries to defy the Gods and His providence. Hubris is not a new term, Sophocles in his famous play *Oedipus Rex* also used this flaw in the character of Oedipus the king, whose reversal of fortune and fall is caused by his hubris. John Milton has also portrayed Satan as a character that suffers from hubris and loses his glorious position for giving in to his excessive pride. An instance of hubris is also portrayed in Marlowe's famous tragedy *Doctor Faustus*. Faustus's arrogance and extreme pride in his scholarship and his irresistible desire to become superior to all is the cause of his tragic end and finally, he has to pay in the same coin for his arrogance and pride.

In this play *Larin Sahib*, the protagonist has a fractured personality. He is torn between two forces—the British Imperialism represented by the East India Company with all its power vectors like Hardinge, Curie and Elliot, and the minor Indian King, Dalip Singh. Henry Lawrence, who has proven his mettle for his administrative efficiency and dutifulness, raised him to the status of the Regent of the Sikh Kingdom. The Britishers entrusted him with the task to be the regent of Dalip Singh in place of Rani Jindan. The play captures the muddled relationship between the Britishers and the natives. On one hand there is political contempt and hatred and on the other there is emotional sympathy and understanding.

Larins Sahib, who is compassionate to the natives and the royalty, is much impressed by the late Raja Ranjit Singh's personality. He wants to copy him in all respect so that people may see the reflection of the late Maharaja in him. This attitude may be due to an identity crisis or a complex. One thing is clear that

Lawrence's keen desire to have an analogy with the Lion is to acquire name and fame and this intention is evident from his conversation with Rani Jindan, when he confides with Rani—"Yes, yes, just as it was in the days of the Lion. We'll make it rich and happy. We'll build, build. Build roads, canals, and the land will sing with joy (Das 73)". This desire may be termed as an acute identity crisis, where he is torn between the effort to compare himself with the 'One-eyed Lion' and to acquire the magnanimity of his fame as an able British administrator. In this duality, most of the Henry Lawrence's energy is consumed in settling and solving a number of challenges in his administration due to difference between Christian and Sikh cultures and laws. In reality British Government is in no mood to come to terms with Sikhs and the same they were expecting from Lawrence.

Swayed by his intent and long cherished desire to rule the Punjab, Lawrence is very ably noticed by Sher Singh. In the beginning, Sher Singh is also trapped in the honey comb trap of Lawrence but very soon he realized that Lawrence is primarily a servant of the company and there is an element of hypocrisy in him as he thinks that "even the wisest men forget where good ends and power begins" (Das 66). The diamond which is clandestinely handed over to Henry Lawrence by Rani Jindan with an advice not to wear it in public shows the nature of the natives who trust anybody without any suspicion. The trust shown by Rani symbolizes the bond of friendship between the two. Lawrence is so much allured by the beauty and magnificence of Kohinoor that he has consciously or unconsciously harbored a desire to be compared with Late Raja Ranjit Singh. When he is told that "only His late Highness could wear it" (Das 66), Lawrence becomes restive, he is tormented by this assertion as his "face shows him struggling with himself" (Das 67). On the contrary, Lawrence is so much fascinated by the beautiful Koh-i-noor and forgets that it is a property of somebody else. He claims, "The Punjab is mine, as surely as the Koh-i-noor is mine" (Das 91). He starts wearing it publicly—breach of trust reposed in him by Rani Jindan. "The power's gone to [his] head and [he has] forgotten [his] friendship" (98) to project himself as "a hero" (Das 81).

As the play progresses, this desire to rule Punjab like the lion of Punjab and his ego that "I am the Punjab" (Das 86) start obsessing him. He persuades people to address him as "Angrez Badshah" (Das 91). He commands Sher Singh, "Bow down to the Angrez Badshah!" (Das 91), thus hinting at that he is the

reincarnation of the Lion. His display of complete imitation of the image of the Late Maharaja shows his obsession with the stature of “Lion of Punjab”. When Rani shows her intention to make once again this land of five rivers a bastion of prosperity and peace, Lawrence listens to her very indifferently but with hidden attentiveness.

RANI. Together we will make something of the Punjab. You as my Resident and I as the Rani. We'll make it strong and prosperous—just as the days of the lion.

RANI. Oh Larins, I know you will do it too... then they'll say the Lion has returned!

LAWRENCE. (*Glowing*) Yes, they'll say the Lion has returned! The Lion has returned!  
(*Pause. Rani watches Lawrence glowing face.*)

RANI. (*Tenderly*) Oh Larins...Larins... (*Lawrence kisses her passionately*) (Das 73).

From this conversation one thing is clear that there is gradual change in the attitude of Lawrence. His clothes and lifestyle, tell a different story. Irrespective of intermittent warnings and advice by Rani jindan to give up Indian lifestyle, Lawrence pays no heed to Rani's implorations. This arrogant and irresponsible attitude shows him as a “changing Lawrence”. The Queen says:

RANI. I thought there was something different in you, Larins. You were simple, austere, single-minded. Now you're behaving the way the other Ferangis did when they got power under my husband. They became swollen. (*Lawrence makes no answer attempting to hide the traces of an inner conflict. Rani comes closer.*) Larins, are you alright? [*Pause*] You were so free of vanity. That's what I liked about you. You were different (Das 72).

The desire is to become a Badshah soars so high that Lawrence starts holding *Durbar* for the commoners to dispense justice. He delivers judgment sagaciously, wisely and with generosity to win the hearts of the people. But Lawrence was so much drunk with power that he fails to assess the damage done to him by his own confidante trio. Back in Calcutta, where the top officers of the East India Company are planning to expand the British Empire's jurisdiction by annexing Punjab are framing a different plan. They have a different plan to execute and the main hurdle is Lawrence who is standing in between. So to remove Lawrence from the authoritative position is a part of the stratagem. The trio—Hardinge, Currie and Elliot

prepare a chart of allegations which are leveled against Lawrence to curtail his power and confidence. Although the allegations are fabricated and slippery but are enough to clip the wings of Lawrence. Lawrence who imagines himself as “the Lion of Punjab” with the same air and propensity is now standing at a point where he has to show his loyalty either to the British Government or the Royalty of Punjab. In the later case, he has to part with the power and position he is enjoying and in the former case there are chances of retaining the same status not in Punjab but somewhere else in India.

Pretentiousness of Lawrence as Maharaja is so much puffed up with false identity that this identity weakness forces him to imitate the personality of Maharaja in terms of garments and ornaments. He is so much enthralled by the publicity and the exhibits of his self-glorification that he transforms into a megalomaniac. Lawrence speaks with assumed air:

Angrez Badshah; (*put his hand with the diamond condescendingly before him*) Bow down to the Angrez Badshah; Bow down, you Lal Singhs and Tej Singh. You can kiss the jewel. the Punjab is mine, as surely as the Koh-i-noor oh, she's in the *haram*, is she? So much the better. Where is my son? Asleep. Let him sleep. He needs his sleep. The tribes are restless? We shall teach the tribes. They are dealing with a great Badshah of a great land. Let's go on to battle. The Lion has come. (*He yells*) Arhh!” (Das 91).

Obviously Lawrence tries to bite off more than he can chew by identifying himself with the one eyed lion of Punjab. Here we see a sudden and ignoble transformation of the Angrez lion into a meek lamb. From here the relegation of Larins Sahib career in the Punjab begins. Rani Jindan and Lawrence look at each other with equal personal esteem or patriotic obligation. Lawrence is also made to tackle Sher Singh at the juncture of personal comradeship and political contingency. The noose of choice is made apparent by Sher Singh when he says:

It is a matter of choice, you've chosen. You could have chosen the way of the heart. Because she was your friend—you won't deny that? Or you could have chosen to obey your country's order. Your duty to her or your duty to *your* Queen. You've chosen. In my terms, Larins Sahib, it's a choice between the Punjab and England. Your Queen and my Queen.

That's where we part. I won't have anything to do with the Company Raj. Farewell! (Das 102).

Beset Sher Singh growls at him and calls him a hypocrite of top class. Sher Singh snubs Lawrence and says: "You never loved anyone. You don't deserve anyone's friendship you're incapable of giving. You turned into a hypocrite when you saw how powerful you'd become. You imagined that you had become Ranjit Singh" (Das 101). Lawrence who is not in the habit of listening to taunts and jeering becomes so impatient that he asks Sher Singh to whom he is addressing and talking. Sher Singh continues: "Your Angrez Badshahs, your *chogahs*, your jewels, purple cushions—they were signals. I understand you now! You're evil. (*Laughs bitterly*) you still think you're doing it for the Punjab—as though... as though nothing had happened. If you realized it, I'd call you ambitious. Not evil. But you don't know yourself and that terrifies me" (Das 101). Sher Singh continues the vein of dissent and disapproval when Rani leaves with the same vehemence. Sher Singh regrets: "For you were our hope—our golden evening. You gave us a sense of life – to me, to Rani, to Dalip. We returned it with the only one thing we had: our love. But we were mistaken" (Das 102). Lawrence has lost everything—the faith, the compassion, the love, the camaraderie, the loyalty and the brotherhood. Sher Singh who was always ready to lay his life for Lawrence is seen rebellious. He gives an open challenge to Lawrence that one day "I shall return. When I do, I shall be on the other side. I shall come to avenge my Queen. I shall be armed and the whole Punjab army will be behind me. The Angrez will be thrown out of the Punjab or I shall die... I shall rally every son and father. We shall kick out the Angrez. And we shall save our land. Farewell, Larins Sahib, we shall meet on the battlefield again" (Das 103). Lawrence who has never imagined even in his distant dream that one day he will be held guilty and looked down upon as a criminal, now gathers up the last remains of courage and dignity to come out of his sinking spirits and upholds his 'Neolionism' and says, "But I still have the Punjab... Angrez I am the Punjab" (Das 86).

"Something demonic [in him] is urging on to [his] destruction" (Das 98). The last nail in Lawrence's the coffin comes in the shape of a message from the Governor-General of India from Calcutta sent via a herald. Beguiled as a Lion, "intoxicated" (Das 98) Lawrence commands Edwardes to read the

letter aloud which reads as : “My dear Lawrence, I regret to inform you that the court of Directors of the company are persuaded that the Government of India no longer requires your services in the Punjab. Mr. Currie will temporarily assume the charge at Lahore until a suitable successor is appointed. He will prepare grounds for the formal annexation of the Punjab. You are requested to proceed to Calcutta at the earliest” (Das 104). Lawrence realizes that his heydays are over now. Like a toothless tiger, he makes the farewell speech: “you’d better go now Edwardes. I’ll take off the Lion’s *chogah*. It’s grown too hot for me” (Das 104). Now Lawrence’s humiliation is complete. His flaws are much under cover. Therefore his moral death, his speech and his actions are worth speculating upon. Lawrence does not deserve clemency because the royalty, the noble and the Punjabis gave him respect, love, status and in return he betrayed the natives. He tries to sail in two boats, and ultimately drowns. Iyengar rightly observes when Lawrence puts off the *chogah*, “there is the inevitable nemesis and his dreams of glory crash about him with his sudden withdrawal from Punjab” (734).

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