

# Hi(s) story of it: Narrativising Transformation in Gurcharan Das's *Larins Sahib*

Debayan Banerjee

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Gour Banga University, W.B.

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## ABSTRACT

*Gurcharan Das's historical play Larins Sahib (from Three English Plays), is written in the historical context of First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46) and its consequences. The play mainly revolves round Henry Lawrence (Larins in the Indianized version) who despite his 'imperial' identity, gradually sinks into the character of the dead 'native' Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Larins' dream of making Punjab strong and prosperous as the Maharaja desired, takes him away from his own self and he acts as 'Lion of Punjab' and ironically he prefers to be called 'Angrez Badshah'. However, this psychological transformation comes to a full circle as Larins imbibes both the virtues and the vices of the Maharaja. Consequently, his aggressive attitude not only contaminates his acceptability but also infects him with the imperialistic syndrome, a stance thoroughly abhorred and loathed by him. His gradual lapse into the identity of the Maharaja is traced from his use of garment, fascination with the Koh-i-noor, cherishment of 'absolute' power and obviously ingratitude to the friends like the Rani, Dalip Singh and Sher Singh. Notwithstanding, towards the end his 'calculated vicious act' utterly questions 'authenticity' of his role playing as it gets gradually clumsy by his self-centric megalomaniac attitude. This paper seeks to measure the dilemma of Larins', caught between the spell of an Indian king and the unavoidable duty of an imperial officer. It also attempts to address certain issues to see and show whether the psychological transformation is triggered by the imperialist attitude. In fine the present study aims to explore the very character of Larins from both historical perspective and psychological perception.*

**Keywords:** Psychology, History, Identity, Imperialism

Among the contemporary Indian dramatists who choose English as a medium for their literary articulation, Gurcharan Das, an Indian author and a public intellectual, is a conscious and competent artist who makes a perfect fusion of plan and execution with a rare and pithy expertise. In his *Three English Plays* (2001), Das strives to excavate the 'past' of India. All the plays find their roots in history, obviously, in different time and different place. In his sole novel, *The Fine Family* (1990), Das narrativises the excruciating pain and unbearable misfortune engendered by Partition (1947). The plays of the present volume are located in three different yet important junctures of Indian history. Notwithstanding, the plays bear a strong lineage with the political turmoil that historians argue have profound effect on the Indian history. This consciousness to history becomes viable and vibrant by Das's sincere commitment to literature. The intertwined albeit intriguing relationship between literature and history as well as debate regarding their respective superiority has occasioned a good number of fascinating critical dialogues. Human being with all its enthralling power and inescapable limitation is riveted in between these two, becomes a character to be analysed and evaluated in the socio-political and religious parameters. If John Tosh notes, "History is the living past of man. It is an attempt made by man through centuries to reconstruct, describe and interpret his own past" (Tosh 1), Ludmilla Jordanova sagaciously observes, "(L)iterature is seen not as a (passive) reflection of historical change, but as a significant (active) vehicle of it. Indeed, literary approaches are profoundly shaping the contemporary practice of history" (Jordanova 78). However the scope and span of literature is more inclusive and wide as it fuses interpretation with imagination. Literature with its commitment to history occasionally tends to chart an individual's trajectory in the context of history. This focus on individual lends literature an opportunity to reinvent and reconstruct the events, allows it to find the 'lost traces', enables it to re-enact the events from different perspectives with added imagination. Sometimes, therefore, history falls short of literature, singularly not for aesthetic reason, but for the latter's competence to transcend the authority of fact and figures. Das's insistence on character centric plot construction offers a bridge between an individual and the time he/she belongs to or rather moulded by. In his play *Mira*, Das presents Mira, the great Bhakti saint and devotee to Lord Krishna. As the legend goes, she was pathetically misunderstood and was accused and punished for being perfidious to her husband. However, Das graphically shows how this 'injustice' engenders rise of Bhakti movement, affects the interior of Rajput dynasty and finally makes it vulnerable to the lethal Mughal army. *9 Jakhoo Hill*, a drama capturing the psychological landscape and contouring the behavioral diagram of two families victimized by the

aftermath of Partition, is portrayed against the background of Indo –China war (1962). The play takes Ansuya, the female protagonist as subjugated yet unyielding soul to show how a new female identity slowly but prominently acquires a distinctive ‘place’ in the Indian culture.

But *Larins Sahib* is more connected to history as here; the historical characters are ‘invited’ (not invented) on stage to revisit history from a different perspective- a perspective which is significantly postcolonial. The play is Das’s debut venture and wins the prestigious Sultan Padamsee Award in 1968. It is set mostly in and around Lahore, and briefly in Calcutta, in the year 1846. It captures a very important time phase of British imperialism in India. After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, now the British envisages an opportunity to capture his vast territory which expands between the river Sutlej and the Himalayan mountain ranges of Ladakh, Karakoram, Hindukush and Sulaiman. Now Punjab lacks not only a great leader but a person true to the country. Punjab is torn apart by internal political rivalry regarding the ‘claim of the throne.’ Despite the self-less sacrifice of the Khalsa, Punjab is defeated. Das recollects the incident, “helped by the treachery of the Sikh courtiers and commanders, who betrayed their own army, the British grabbed a victory from the jaws of defeat at Sobraon, a costly battle in which the Sikhs lost 10,000 men and the British 2400” (Das 8). Thus the British for the first time officially invades Punjab and soon strategically concludes the process. J.S. Grewal beautifully sums this up, “On March 1849, Maharaja Dalip Singh held his court for the last time in his life to sign the document of the British. The ‘majestic fabric’, raised by Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a thing of the past” (Das 9). Essentially the victory cannot be registered without the internal sabotage. Keeping this history in mind Das graphically brings back the ‘past’ on stage, offering the spectator/ reader a sort of time travel to observe and acknowledge how strategically and successfully the British maneuvered their imperialist scheme with the assistance of powerful yet disloyal courtiers of the land. Notwithstanding the attempt to capture the conflict-ridden colonial past is not a unique phenomenon in postcolonial drama, as Bhatia notes, “engagement with history survives in post independence theatre, where the imperial discourses of history receive careful scrutiny by politically committed artists who repeatedly return to the colonial archive to excavate, employ, and restage historical events” (Bhatia as quoted by Moni 82).

When Das admits, “[R]eading the history of Punjab was for me also a search for identity” (Das 7), the play transcends the factual attachment to history and becomes a piece of emotional involvement. The necessity of restaging the past becomes eminent. Thus the play under discussion, along with its reference to colonialism offers a counter reading of colonial past not just from anti-colonial footing but from post modernist technique. The time of writing of the play cannot either be skipped as this reconstruction of history is obviously conditioned by patriotic zeal and maybe the award also promotes this. Interestingly Das amply shows the problems within Indian court politics that makes the advancement of imperialism inevitable. This denial to posit the British as antithetical to the Indians in the context of treachery and heinous act, gives the play a new dimension despite its ‘nationalistic’ postcolonial lineage. However, Larins’ role in this relationship between the English and the Indians is highly interestingly. Long before he is appointed as the Resident at Lahore, he is intimate to the Indians; as Elliot informs, “I believe he’s on first-name terms with most of the nobility of the Punjab. They swear by him, and the peasantry of the Ferozepur district think he’s some kind of savior” (Das 28). This observation is important as this suggests not only his association but the impact he has on the Indians. His closeness with them is strategically exploited by the British. They first loose the cord a bit but when they roll it back, they do it ruthlessly, relegating Larins ultimately, “the little cog in the wheel of the East India Company machine” (Naik as quoted by Moni 87). Surely Larins is an emotional character and lacks the deep knowledge of vicious politics of imperialism, despite his status as an agent of British imperialism. The initial disbelief in his caliber may be prompted Larins to perform something extraordinary, remarkably in nature and unforgettable in history. His association with the Indians thus can be interpreted as deliberate violation of imperialist tactics which once again signals to his self-absorbedness. Larins idealizes Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He dreams to make Punjab the perfect land as the Maharaja wished. He protests the Company’s policy to squeeze the land to the last. He hopes to provide the peasants better conditions. Gradually he sinks into the maharaja’s identity. In no time he adopts all the traits of a dictator with a boundless appetite for power. Although remains not oblivious of his professional duty: “...The memory of the British should rest in the peasant’s heart, in his timelessness” (Das 58).

However, his blind idealization affects his psychological orientation as he suffers from and becomes a victim of dissociative personality disorder (DID). His idealisation of the King if is triggered by his emotional attachment with the Indians, his ultimate ‘surrender’ to the imperialist strategy confirms inescapability of professional commitment. Finding this Sujatha Moni argues, “Lawrence’s imitation of Ranjit Singh represents the nativization of colonial authority, leading to the smooth establishment of British power in the

region" (Moni 5). However Kanu Priya perceives this transformation as more a matter of choice than compulsion, "more than anything it is his personal interest that reigns supreme in his mind" (Priya 8). I rather argue that this transformation is caused by both ambition and liability though personal interest gains a bit more weight. Larins's preference to the Maharaja becomes his predicament as it not only ruins his reputation but costs his mental peace. Interestingly this shift from being to becoming is predominantly power-centric. Larins, actually, is unable to deny his imperialist mindset. The discourse of imperialism has interpellated him long before his 'mimetic identification' (Moni 2) with the Maharaja. The transformation, therefore, prioritises power more than anything else. The play dramatically ends with leaving Larins a pitiful shadow of his former self. Larins' case shows what happens when a person fails to bridle his desire, goes beyond his capability and attempts to exceed his 'self'.

In her highly influencing essay "Living with DID", Carol Broad suggests, "Life as a multiple is never boring; we are all unique in our own special way, as is everyone with a dissociative disorder" (*Living with the Reality* 67). This statement uniquely associates dissociative identity disorder with our daily life where every individual has to adopt 'role(s)' or perform as 'other' to the self. Notwithstanding, when an individual becomes thoroughly engrossed with his/her borrowed 'identity', the problem occurs. This incapacity to reel back to the 'original identity' signals to disorder of psyche. The person gradually distances himself/ herself from the 'original identity' and fails to restore the same without psychiatric diagnosis. J.L.Ringrose in the context of giving a well shaped definition of DID, quotes American Psychiatric Association extensively:

Dissociative Identity Disorder (or Multiple Personality Disorder) is characterized by the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states that recurrently take control of the individual's behaviour, accompanied by an inability to recall important personal information that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness. It is a disorder characterized by identity fragmentation, rather than proliferation of separate personalities (Ringrose 3-4).

The Association also catalogues three kinds of dissociative disorders: a) dissociate identity disorder, b) dissociative amnesia, and c) depersonalisation/ derealisation disorder. Ringrose also mentions the Association's finding that DID damages an individual sense of "consciousness, memory, identity and perception" (Ringrose 3). This particular psychiatric disorder restrains one to behave normally, rather one becomes the person, and one begins to be identified with. Thus the structure of consciousness collapses, memory veers to a particular direction, and perception of reality is conditioned by the 'consciousness' of the person, one identifies with. Carol Broad explains this state thus, "We (the patient) recognised that we behaved and felt differently at different times; as various alters began to be more prominent in our life we suffered from identity confusion. We no longer knew who we really were" (*Living with the Reality* 71). Traditionally this symptom is regarded as an outcome of severe traumatic experience. Deliberate to shake off his/her traumatic past the person acquires a new identity as a shield, as a coping measure. However the probability of loss of balance and integrity depends not just on the nature of the event but on how the subject responds to it. From this angle, DID may be read as (in)voluntary escape from personality. Nevertheless, the patient can hardly detect the symptoms. Phil Mollon in his article "dark dimentions of multiple personality", like other in the same, field contends the 'strong bond' between disassociation and trauma, "Dissociation, in the sense of detachment, numbing, feelings of depersonalisation and derealisation, amnesia etc., are recognised as common features of trauma responses and of post-traumatic stress disorder" (*Attachment, Trauma and Multiplicity* 112). Interestingly, this dominant discourse regarding the 'factor(s)' of disassociation is discarded by other. For example Stephen Lynn et al introduce the sociocognitive model the challenge the 'convincing' posttraumatic model. They propose that, "...DID is a consequence of social learning and expectancies" (Lynn et al 49). The present model is more inclusive in approach as it promises to include the non-Western conditions of DID. As the concept of trauma, used in DID is purely Eurocentric, the non-Western context of DID remains largely unacknowledged and avoided. The present model attempts to fill in the gap. Therefore, the condition of Larins is going to be discussed in accordance with this model.

Approving that DID is not an exclusive phenomenon of the West and symptoms of DID varies across culture and contexts, Lynn et al observe, "DID symptoms also vary across cultures. For example, in India, the transition period as the individual shifts between alter personalities is typically preceded by sleep, a presentation that reflects common media portrayals of DID in that country" (Lynn et al 49). As individual's identity is firmly constructed and conditioned by socio-cultural factors, therefore, any disorder in identity can be traced back to 'working' of these factors. Though Das uses the historical events on and after 1846 as context, to analyse Larins's character, the reader must go beyond the given time. The readers are informed right from the beginning, Larins's long presence in India and his fondness for the 'native' custom and dress; as Currie informs, "...Mr. Lawrence is at least wearing his regimental colours. Normally, I am told, he finds native dress more comfortable" (Das 29). Dress not just covers body but confers a new identity. Dress is an

important component to detect identity transformation. Larins's liking suggests that he is already 'going native'. His 'choice' of native dress over uniform gives a proleptic hint to the transformation he is going to undergo. Later he dresses up with the Maharaja's garment. There the intention is not 'representation' but 'identification'. However, his identification with the Maharaja has started long ago. When the Governor-General, Henry Hardinge abuses the deceased king, Larins calmly protests, "[H]e was the greatest ruler Hindustan has known" (Das 31). When he is entrusted to secure the Company's interest as well as the British establishment in the Punjab region, he finds an opportunity to 'become' the man he idealises, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. His over a decade staying in that land makes him an ardent disciple of the Maharaja. Larins is captivated by the instances of bravery, valour, broad-heartedness and foresight the Maharaja had displayed. He finds his own race surprisingly 'inferior' and this stance along with his preference to the Indian rituals and dress can critically be argued as 'reverse mimicry.' In the end of Act 1, Sc1, Sher Singh says, "Ha, ha, Larins. You're still under his spell" (Das 37). The course of the play shows how gradually Larins skinks into the deep 'spell', forgetting his own identity and neglecting his 'duties'.

Larins is aware of the intrigue, hatched by Lal Singh, the Wazir and Tez Singh, the Commander-in-Chief of the Khalsa. Apparently he is 'instructed' to capitalize on this disloyalty, ensuring the company's permanent hold in the court politics, making the subsequent kings puppet in the Company's hand. But when the Rani requests his favour and friendship, "[T]hings are not well in the Darbar, Larins" (Das 53), he at once pays ear to the plea. Identification with the Maharaja provokes him to be dutiful and dedicated to the Rani. Importantly the Rani is overwhelmed to see his involvement with the Maharaja, "Larins, why are you so concerned with my late husband? I don't understand. You're suddenly so different when you talk of him. I noticed it before. Why?" (Das 54). She later presents him the Koh-i-noor as a sign of friendship. Howbeit possession of the jewel completes the transformation and Larins begins to behave, dress and converse like Ranjit Singh. He even follows the ritual of Darbar at his chamber. He presents himself as the savior of Punjab, the mortal incarnation of the dead king. Despite the Rani's request and Sher Singh's prohibition he shows off the jewel. The jewel is used by Das as an effective theatrical tool. It embellishes the Maharaja's crown. Larins's possession of it signals to his final transformation.

Paradoxically this zenith of transformation coincides with his downfall. Directed by Hardinge, he is compelled to be harsh both on Rani and her son, Dalip Singh, the rightful King of Punjab. He has to banish her to Sheikhpura. The Rani sarcastically says, "[P]ower's gone to your head. And you've forgotten your friends" (Das 90). He has to give the jewel to the Governor General who has promised it to the Queen. Even his committed friend Sher Singh leaves him, recognising the 'fall' in his character. Even though his friends leave him, Larins lives in the trance of the Maharaja. As he is now totally carried away, he fails to acknowledge the loss, he is about to bear with as well as live by. He still boosts himself, "[T]he new Lion is here. I am the Punjab" (Das 96). Shortly after, he is informed to be dismissed from his post.

The play ends with casual yet highly metaphorical words of Larins, "I'll take off the Lion's *chogah*. It's grown too hot for me" (Das 96, italics original). Maybe, now he is out of the captivating personality of the Maharaja. Larins ultimately returns to his original self. Despite his 'loyalty' to the Maharaja, he fails to be like him. The failure of Larins to handle the pressure of British imperialism, the internal court politics; and his two-faced 'dealing' with his friends, together label him as utterly untrustworthy, seamlessly selfish megalomaniac; quite contrary to the One Eyed Lion. Somewhere this 'failure' becomes the play's focal point. May be it is intentional by Das who attempts not just to restore the past but tries to rub off the 'myth of inferiority' stigmatized by the West on the Indian continent. The nationalist spirit of the play thus does not go past unnoticed. The psychological transformation of Larins, which demotes his reputation, transcends the rubric of psychology, and calls for socio-historical interpretation.

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