

In Translation: Poems From the Malwa Region of Punjab

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Malwa is the southeastern region of modern Punjab and constitutes a major part of it. The word Malwa is supposed to be a distorted form of Mallava, the name of an ancient tribe, which unsuccessfully challenged Alexander. It is separated from other regions of Punjab by river Sutlej. The region occupies an important position in the Sikh history because of its association with Guru Angad and Guru Gobind Singh. But for along the river Sutlej, the landscape of Malwa is marked with semi-arid land, slow growing trees and thorny bushes.

Besides economic challenges and hardships, the region of Malwa in Punjab is also known for legends, heroes and number of writers. The writer Gurdial Singh, Punjab's only Jnanpith Award winner belongs to this region. Balwant Gargi, Ajmer Singh Aulakh, Gurbhachan Singh, Sujit Pattar, Ram Sarup Ankhi, Santram Udaasi are a few to mention among many. In their writings, they have given voice to the concerns of the poor, the low caste, Dalits and farmers in the wake of the changing socio-economic conditions of Punjab. The four poets, whose select poetical works have been translated here, belong to different areas of the region of Malwa. Their writings highlight the concerns of the next generation of Punjabi writers.

Paul Kaur, a senior poet, and Neetu Arora, a young poet are two important women poets in Punjabi poetry; while Anil Aadam and Gagandeep Sharma are two important male poets to reckon with from Punjab. Their poetry also shows the myriad forms of contemporary Punjabi poetry. In their works, angst, anger and philosophical reflections in Punjabi poetry, across identities, can be heard.

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PAUL KAUR (1956-)

Born at Kalomajra, near Banur in district Patiala, Paul Kaur is one of the strongest feminist voices in contemporary Punjabi poetry. Besides commenting on patriarchal structures in her poetry, she reflects on fundamental questions of life like a philosopher with a gendered perspective. She has authored several books of poetry; has published a work on non-fiction and one work of criticism. A recipient of several awards, she has published widely in the field of Punjabi poetry. From the credo of the personal is political and Paul Kaur became overtly a political poet in the later years of her career. She taught Punjabi language and literature at S.A. Jain College, Ambala and is currently settled there. The Government of Punjab has conferred her with Shiromini Punjabi Kavi Samman. Her poetry has been prescribed in courses taught at Panjab University, Punjabi University, Kurukshetra University and Jammu University. Kaur was conferred upon with *Bhai Santokh Singh Puruskar* for her contribution to Punjabi poetry.

NEETU ARORA (1978-)

Neetu Arora is a young feminist Punjabi poet born at the village Bhullar located in district Muktsar. She reimagines the ordinary, everyday happenings, domestic space and reinvents them from her perspective. Her poetry is marked with angst of a woman in the contemporary Punjabi society. She is currently teaching at Punjabi University College, Bathinda. Arora's doctoral thesis was on "Resistance in Punjabi Poetry". She has published in Punjabi two volumes of poetry, *Sawalan De Sanmukh* and *Main Ithe Kithe*. Arora has also translated her poems into Hindi titled *Khaali Haathon Mein Kavita*. She has also translated Sapna Chamdia's *Ek Aurat Ki Diary* into Punjabi and published a critical work. Her poetry is marked with strong voice of resistance against the patriarchal structure.

ANIL AADAM (1974-)

Anil Adam is a Firozpur based young Punjabi poet. He has published two anthologies of poetry and translated one book of Punjabi poetry into Hindi. He also writes children's literature. Adam touches upon issues of immediate concern in his poetry and reflects on the questions of human existence in contemporary times. He has been awarded by Punjabi Academy, Ludhiana for his contribution to Punjabi language and poetry. Some of his poems have been prescribed in the course curriculum of the Punjab School Education Board.

GAGANDEEP SHARMA (1980-)

Gagandeep Sharma is a young and promising Punjabi poet. He was born at Rampur in district Ludhiana, which is known as the Mecca of Punjabi literature. This village has given more than twenty writers and poets to Punjabi literature. Gagandeep has published two works of poetry and has also published short stories in leading Punjabi journals and magazines. Punjabi Sahit Sabha, Ludhiana awarded Gagandeep with Prof. Kulwant Jagraon Memorial Award and Sahitya Akademy, Delhi awarded him with *Yuva Puruskar* for his writings in the Punjabi language.

PAUL KAUR¹ (1956-)*Now Ends Are Open*

There were so many knots
In different parts of my body
There were knots
In my head, in my neck and in my forehead
In my wrists and in my ankles.

From one dot to another
There is but a line –
Limited, confined
Or it starts from one point
And traversing through –
A triangle, square, or rectangle
Comes back and meets its starting point...

Fearing I may scatter
I was tying more knots
While opening them
I ended up tightening them more!
Slowly and gradually
I got tied with them.

I never knew that the Judgment Day
Was my constant companion
From one point to another!
Finally came the Final Day
With huge gigantic effort
With my teeth and with my nails
Pulling them hard, cutting them with force
I executed them
While trying to find freedom of them.

Whatever was kept safe inside
Finally spread out on the floor
Everything was thrown open in a vacuum
Whatever I was given as my share –
Neither a vessel, nor a trunk
Neither a shield, nor a gun!

Inside
Everything is inside
Even what seems to exist outside –
Whatever is spread outside
Exists inside
In a compressed condensed form

The cloak is open
The hair is open
Winds have taken everything to their guard!

I take full steps now
My destinations are within the reach of my strides
The ends of the knots have opened
And have become my wings!

TRANSLATED FROM PUNJABI BY VIVEK SACHDEVA

Kaafir- the Rebel

Testing its wings
Disregarding and ignoring the cage
When a bird takes its flight
The cage owner's heart
Sinks.

They keep the cage secretly with them
Wearing a garb they sit with the bait
When the bird falls for it
They give the wings of the bird
Their own colour
And put the bird in the cage.

In case the bait fails to tempt
The bird in its high flight

¹ Paul Kaur is a Punjabi poet based in Ambala, Haryana.

Then caged birds
 Craving for flight
 Hit their beaks against the cage ferociously
 Till they bleed –
 Look fiercely at the winds
 Make a huge
 Hue and cry.

They love all those signs
 For which they disgorge poison
 And when they do not find them
 Whenever they look into the mirror
 They smash it.

We are safe in a crowd
 For when we come out of it
 Crowd fulfills its duty
 Sometimes by hurling stones and
 Sometimes, Shibli joins the crowd
 By throwing a flower.

Those who breathe freely
 And take their own path
 Always meet the same fate.
 You are hurled stones
 You get wounds from flowers
 You carry your own cross on your shoulders
 And are also called
Kaafir- the Rebel.

TRANSLATED FROM PUNJABI BY VIVEK SACHDEVA

NEETU ARORA² (1978-)

When the Poets Fail to Grow

When the poets of a language
 Fail to grow
 And end up being pygmies
 People in that society
 Forsake plucking stars from the sky
 Moon ceases to be their *Chanda Mama*
 And children,
 Making the sun their football,
 Do not play with it
 In the sweltering streets.

When the poets of a language
 Fail to grow

And end up being pygmies
 Their people
 Dance on their own requiems
 Applaud the death of art in cinema halls
 Eating popcorns and drinking Pepsi
 Go back to their houses

When the poets of a language
 Fail to grow
 And end up being pygmies
 Stories there
 Are sold in the market
 People clap
 When history is made a joke
 Heroes and villains
 Everything changes
 And living human beings
 Become ghosts.

When the poets of a language
 Fail to grow
 And end up being pygmies
 The rulers become fearless
 And God serves them rulers
 People shut not only their doors
 But they also seal their lips.

When the poets of a language
 Fail to grow
 And end up being pygmies
 Courage also remains dwarf there
 Reality and imagination
 Even men and women
 Fail to grow.

When the poets of a language
 Fail to grow
 And end up being pygmies
 There
 Women go mad.

TRANSLATED FROM PUNJABI BY VIVEK SACHDEVA

WE- who sleep not

Our grandma
 Does not lie to us
 She just does not know
 That the tale never ends
 With the death of
 The King and the Queen.
 It goes on.

² Neetu Arora is based in Bathinda, Punjab.

Now
 Even if this story is told
 On a perfect still quiet night
 We will not simply agree with it
 We will question
 We will ask our grandma
 Why did the story end
 With the King's death?
 We will ask
 Who ascended the throne?
 We will ask
 What happened to the crown?

We will ask
 Why did people
 Listening to such false incomplete stories
 Fall asleep?

We will ask
 How did the king
 Control the telling of his tale?
 Why was grandma's own story
 Dumb?
 How come the courtyard
 Where the tale lived and thrived
 Was not found in the tale?
 How come
 Those tellers and listeners of the tale
 Who shared it and made the tale flourish
 Remained absent from the tale?

We will ask
 And break the belief
 That children
 While listening to stories
 Fall asleep.

TRANSLATED FROM PUNJABI BY VIVEK SACHDEVA

ANIL AADAM³ (1974-)

Appeal

Before
 Even our tears are declared absconders
 And are murdered in a fake encounter
 Let us sit together and think, my dear comrade.

We live in a world
 Where but to heave a sigh

Is like shouting a slogan of anarchy
 What to speak of bread
 Even dreaming about bread is
 A rebellion
 And to sleep on your empty stomach
 Silently, without making a fuss
 Is the central clause of the Constitution.

We live in such a world
 Where we love secretly
 As if it were
 A clandestine winery
 Dreams are like our illegitimate children
 Who must be aborted
 If we want to live

Who will in this world
 Indulge into the loving business of hearts
 In this world
 You cannot marry off your darling daughter
 Even if you sell your kidneys
 Where brides are burnt alive
 Women cannot celebrate *Tiyaan*⁴

Who should I speak to
 If I wish to talk about
 Compassion that dwells in human heart
 In this world
 Rape scene is the best scene in a film

Every moment
 A bullet is going
 Deeper into my head
 Here
 Every moment
 Is a trial
 Every moment
 Is an encounter

Before
 Even our tears are declared absconders
 And are murdered in a fake encounter
 Let us sit together and think, my dear comrade.

TRANSLATED FROM PUNJABI BY VIVEK SACHDEVA

We have not Fallen Yet

I agree
 That the victory flag that hoists

³ Anil Aadam is a Punjabi poet. He is based in Ferozepur, Punjab.

⁴ *Tiyaan* is a festival celebrated by married women in the month of Saavan.

From a high position
Is not ours

But the colour of my blood
Is far deeper
Than its bright colours

What if
We could not win
This is no less achievement
That we haven't lost.

TRANSLATED FROM PUNJABI BY VIVEK SACHDEVA

GAGANDEEP SHARMA⁵ (1980-)

We Are Never Alone

When we walk
We never walk alone
There is a lot more
That walks besides us
Something fleeting, yet enduring
Something ephemeral, yet eternal
Like our laughters and sorrows
Momentary, yet constant.

When we fly
Like a bird
With us also fly
Our kith and kin
Friends and dear ones
Making
Our wings their flights
Our words their voice
They also
Laugh, smile and cackle
With us
Celebrating in every victory of ours.

When we fall
We don't fall alone
With us also falls
Our family, our village and our community
They stand with us
When the world may betray and cuss,
Sadness on our faces smothers
Smiles on so many other faces
The world which was shaping up
Shatters

⁵ Gagan Sharma is a Punjabi poet. Presently, he is based in New Delhi.

A deep silence strikes all around.

When the life becomes an epic struggle
And we fight
It is not only our feet
That march vigorously,
With us
Marches Fights
Something else too
With our feet also stride
Other familiar feet
So many hopes,
When we pick up swords
Guarding deep emotions
Holding shields in our hands
When from all sides we are attacked.

We never live alone
Our share of life,
With us also breathe
Our circumstances,
In our hearts also beat
Unwanted yet loveable emotions,,
The melodious sound of giggling children
Also lives along,
And in the warmth of her *Phulkari*
The woman also embraces
All joys and sorrows alike.

When we die
We don't die alone
With us also die
Our dreams, and their untold stories,
The running train of the family
Derails
Wrinkles on the faces of our fathers and mothers
Deepen
Toys from the hands of small children
Are forsaken.

However alone a man may be
We are never alone.

TRANSLATED FROM PUNJABI BY VIVEK SACHDEVA

A Gardener, A Sage and A Poet

Leaves falling from the tree
Are spreading all around
Dry yellow leaves
Are falling from the tree
Gasping gardener
Gathers leaves scattered around him

He makes a pile
Then drops it in a crater
Panting gardener –
Short of breath –
Starts gathering leaves again
Scattered around him

A sage smiles
With his eyes closed
While sitting in meditation
The wind is gathering pace
The scent of falling leaves
Leaves gathering gardener's footsteps
Everything is happening
Near the sage
Smiling while sitting in meditation

Leaves fall
The gardener gathers the leaves
The sage is lost in deep meditation
At times
A poet finds his poem like this too.

TRANSLATED FROM PUNJABI BY VIVEK SACHDEVA

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