

## Dreams amidst Violence: A Thematic Study of Amandeep Sandhu's novel *Roll of Honour*

Manjinder Dhaliwal

Assistant Professor in English, R.S.D. College, Ferozepur City (India)

The twentieth century carried a major turning point in the history of India by endorsing Independence from the British colonial rule. The Partition of India on August 15, 1947, brought upheavals in the social and political fabric of the country and geographical division of the great nation-India. The country was divided into two nations vis-a-vis India and Pakistan thereby, paralyzing the economy of each. The geographical location of Punjab prior to 1947 on the map has contributed immensely to the creation of history. Almost all invaders entered India from this area of low lying passes in the northwestern Himalayas. It was a gateway for invaders who passed through these passes leading them into Punjab (such as the Greeks, Mughals, etc.). With every invasion, people of Punjab became tougher, ready to face the wrath of invaders. It was owing to this strong nature of the people that Punjab was given the moniker of 'Sword Arm of India.'

The twentieth century saw a plethora of colossal historical events at the national level beginning with the Partition of Bengal in 1905, the First World War 1914-18, the Civil Disobedience or the Salt Satyagraha in 1930, Independence of India-Partition of India or the First Indo-Pak war 1947, Second Indo-Pak war 1965, Third Indo-Pak War 1971, State of Emergency in 1975, Operation Blue Star; Assassination of the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Riots of 1984, Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in 1991, Demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 apart from others. These incidents have immense importance in relation to each other and had an impact upon each other. Out of these events, there were five major events that shook Punjab of its foundations. These events were Komagata Maru Incident - 1914, Partition of India - 1947, Operation Blue Star - 1984, Assassination of the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Riots of 1984, and Air-India Flight Bombing - 1985. The tinges of these events can easily be traced in History and Literature of Punjab of the post-partition era.

Novelists Shauna Singh Baldwin in *What the Body Remembers*, Anita Rau Badami in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, Vikram Kapoor in his two novels *Time is a Fire* and *The Assassinations: Novel of 1984*; and Jaspreet Singh in *Helium* have illustrated the aftermath of these events in lives of individuals of Punjab living at home or in foreign parts. Among these writers is Amandeep Sandhu, who has debuted with his novel *Sepia Leaves* (2008) and he appeared again with equally staggering novel *Roll of Honour* (2012). Both of his novels are a literary map of his personal experiences. The paper in hand is a study of his second novel *Roll of Honour*, set in a fictional town *Jassabad* in a Military School, where main character Appu shares his experience during two years of studying as a cadet. Events painted in the novel are his interaction with fellow

students and teachers at hostel and school. The novelist has used flashback technique to bring out his theme.

The eminence of this novel lies in its familiarity with the narrative structure and thematic concern of W.B. Yeats's poem *The Second Coming* (1921). This poem was written after the First World War and under foreshadow of the Second World War. *The Second Coming* (sometimes called the Second Advent or the Parousia) is Christian and Islamic belief regarding the future (or past) return of Jesus Christ after his incarnation and ascension to heaven about two thousand years ago. The idea is based on messianic prophecies found in the canonical gospels and is part of most Christian eschatologies. The poem was written in 1919 in the aftermath of the First World War and the beginning of the Irish War of Independence that followed the Easter Rising, at a time before the British Government decided to send in the Black and Tans to Ireland. Yeats used the phrase "the second birth" instead of "the Second Coming" in his first drafts. *The Second Coming* is narrated by a speaker who is observing the world around him with horror. The first line is just a complex way of saying that something is happening in this world. Something is churning and awakening; some new existence is rising out of the current haze of life that we all live in, expanding it and enlarging the scope of what life is and altering how the world works on a fundamental level. By the end of the poem, the speaker is sure that something even worse is coming. Some nightmare—some "rough beast"—is rising, approaching the earth at a rapid pace. He doesn't know what this creature is, but he can sense its approach—and it is the ominous core of "The Second Coming," that mysterious tide of evil and mystery approaching the world in the form of a modernity full of violence, war, and the loss of traditional meaning and values.

*Roll of Honour* is based on the same theme of ambivalence and violence. The narrative is in first person point of view. The frame narrative of the novel is a process of writing a book on two major events in the history of Punjab. These two events are The Operation Blue and The Assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. While exploring the events, he ponders over to look for the reason behind these events, because he thinks that these events have changed the course of his life and life of the people around him. The sense of alienation of narrator, while living in Bangalore which is far away from his hometown, forces him to search for his identity of being a member of the Sikh community. He immediately shifts to Delhi, where he starts jotting down the past events to figure out the truth behind those events. He meets many people during this search. While living in Delhi, the Narrator Appu also nostalgic about his school days and especially about the days spent with his friends. He is looking forward to contacting them. During

this, one of them named A-1 promised him to meet in Amritsar. The exact use of Punjabi slangs and nicknames is what takes its reader closer to the reality that novelist aims to depict. The language is simple and fluid to discuss the documentary details related to the main concern of the novelist.

While depicting the main theme of the practice of violence, the plot paints the transformation from innocence to cruelty. During this sequence, it emphasizes the sense of optimism while encountering an extreme form of violence. It pictures the state of irresoluteness of the protagonist who is between his community and call of duty. His state of mind is illustrated when he meets his father's friends after killing of Joga. He mentions, "The army was rounding up young boys, they said, insinuating that I had erred by studying at military school. Until recently, Baba's friends had seen me as someone who would keep alive the tradition of honor and loyalty to the nation that I had inherited by being in a Sikh family. Now they were treating me as a traitor to my own community"(19).The portion dealing with exploring historical events basically focuses on its impact on the lives of the individual. For this purpose, an evident landscape of bloodshed is painted very deftly. When the narrator goes to Delhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, he explains the scene with minute detail of a homicide in the streets of Delhi.

The main setting of the novel is the military school of *Jassabad*, and the actions take place after Operation Bluestar and the assassination of Indira Gandhi. After the havoc of partition, Punjab was going to fulfill its dreams of prosperity and progress. The rise of Khalistan movement demanding special status for Punjab eclipsed its future plans. It shunned the economy of Punjab and social life of thousands of natives. Enumerable youngsters were killed and lost in the haze of violence. The main purpose of the novelist is the depiction of violence, shattered dreams and a journey from expectation to bleakness while going through the particular time period of that movement. In the novel under discussion, the focus is on the emotional conflict of an individual. 'Roll of Honour' of the title is the dream of every cadet studying in school, especially of the protagonist. All of them joined the school to get admission in NDA to join the military and serve their country. Representing all cadets, Appu clearly mentions:

When I was a small boy, I often dozed on my Nanaji's lap, while he recited bedtime stories of tanks and horses on the Burma front in the Second World War.

..... He had retired a Subedar, a non-commissioned officer. I wanted to start my career as a commissioned officer- a second lieutenant. I dreamt of seeing India's ice-cold mountains and burning hot deserts and fighting the nation's enemies on the borders (12).

But the course of the two above mentioned events altered their future vision. Appu lost his dream of getting the award of school perfect and to see his name on Roll of Honour board, due to the conflict of their group with senior students. Some hard-core Sikh students Balraj, Akhad, and Latlen joined KFC a militant group. Later they wanted their names to be shortlisted

in Roll of Honour list of Khalistan. Once Akhad said, "Who wants to join the military that broke our temple? Killed our people" (37)? In the last chapters, they urged to plan a vengeful attack on the school where the governor of Punjab was on a visit.

In the first chapter naming *In the Widening Gyre*, the presages of upcoming vagueness in lives of characters have been illustrated very impeccably and precisely by the novelist. The first scene at school is the first admittance of narrator in the school on the first day of the new session. All other details of the building of the school and the landscape inside and outside boundary walls support to sustain the atmosphere of certain solemnity and restraint. These particulars make the reader feel the toughness that its characters as students are going to experience in the further course of the novel. Near the anteroom the narrator saw cadet Balraj- the school perfect, heading the parade during the daily drill. Commanding the whole group, he was instructing them to be more tough and disciplined. The drill was one of those practices that made the narrator question his own presence at that place. He also felt his inability to leave the school. He knew that his parents couldn't pay back the government scholarship money on which he had completed his study up to XI class. So he tried his best to fit in. Next horrible thing that had always haunted the students was the practice of *Ragranamed* corporal punishment on which school had balanced itself to ensure discipline. The school staff always used it as a tool to knelt students in front of every order they wanted to implement. Later it was used to exploit them and to hush up their basic demands. The next thing that had added chaos to his life is the presence of Balraj. Balraj-the passed out cadet had joined KFC- a militant group. He was on run and was hiding in hostel illegally. Being a senior and in-charge of class at the hostel, it was the narrator's responsibility to whether allow him or report the matter to the warden. The killing of his friend Joga by police had always haunted him. Amidst this dilemma, he continued his last year in military school. He assumed:

I could not become a chooza by turning for advice to the teachers or principal who had betrayed me by not making me the school perfect and had blacklisted Balraj.

They had thrown him out of the school without a character certificate, blocked his chances of admission to the NDA or to a government college. If they learned that he was at school, they could hand him over to the police and turn him into another Joga. Should I harbor him and, thus, secretly defy them for not making me the school perfect(36)?

The next chapter is marked as rising of chaos at two levels. The first level was among senior and junior students and simultaneously second was between students and school authority. The timing of this act is parallel to The Operation Bluestar. The procession is after getting the news of the attack. The news of attack filled their minds with great terror. There were also a few Hindu students among Sikh students in school. This news enhanced the terror of strict rules and mutual conflict with senior, they were already facing in school. It added commotion to the atmosphere of insecurity. As the change in

rules had already made them uncomfortable and their conflict with senior students had spoiled their reputation and their affiliation as senior students with their teachers. Amidst this again they discussed their future perspective in the classroom. Their teacher Mr. Varma told them about different options of career they could pursue rather than NDA. Then Lalten, one of the fellow students express the ambiguity of their situation; using Punjabi slang, he said: "...optimism. Everything has crashed around us, but these bastards..... They live in their trenches. They will never admit it" (47). The atmosphere around them had completely led them to an aura of vagueness. After getting the news of Sikh demanding a separate state, they were left with big questions. As the narrator mention their state of mind, "Getting Balraj's import, A-1 asked if the Sikhs would prevent the Hindus from living in Amritsar. Like the Hindus and Sikhs together chased away the Muslims during the partition of India in 1947. "Will there be another partition" (50)? The terror of the narrator was more than everybody else around him. In his diary entry, he mentions, "What a wrong! Can anyone explain? The school doesn't. No teacher talks to us about it. Lalten is right: shoes in a temple! Why was the Golden Temple destroyed? Why did Joga have to die? I feel so naked, alone. Trying to pacify a ghost in my head" (56).

The next chapter *Things Fall Apart* is marked as the rising of tension between senior students and junior students to the peak. Its rose so high that it took a brutal turn in with many cadets got badly injured. Appu narrates the whole situation to his Baba. Behind it was the Parents day meeting conflict when Lalten got the issue with senior students. The outcome was the fight outside T.V room in the evening. When Baba said to him that he was now in the senior most class. Narrator replies, "I don't feel senior most. We feel we have no powers. We fell lost, Baba" (77). The violence among them took the bitter turn. Both groups started their quest to hurt each other mentally as well as physically. Senior students choose sodomy to take revenge from junior by bringing them disgrace. The narrator explained the lecture of Ms. Passey to explain the dilemma in which she taught them a poem related to the act of violence and call of education.

In chapter *Mere Anarchy*, the Incident of the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi turned the situation to the wickedest. Some students after being fed up with the treatment of school and internal conflict at the hostel decided to join a militant group. Lalten while having a conversation with Balraj asked him, "Balraj, give me some contacts to KCF. I don't want to waste time in this stupid school" (85). The Chapter *Blood Dimmed Tide* is an illustration of the actual depiction of Amritsar after Operation Blue Star and Delhi after the 1984 riots. At Amritsar, he was received by A-1 (a fellow student) and his *Darji*. *Darji* took them through the streets of Amritsar and discussed Sikh historical facts related to Harminder sahib with them. Then he went to Delhi to experience the picture after riots. Back in Patiala, he met his uncle, who was the father of his friend *Joga* and also a close friend of Baba. Being a victim of Khalistani movement his uncle shared with him the ground reality of Khalistani movement and its Origin. These two visits left a permanent impression on the narrator's mind. Though he had come to know the truth, yet things were not clear in front of his eyes. It seemed to him that his quest was not over yet.

Most of his friends had decided what they were going to do in near future, but he was still trapped in his questions.

In response to the decision of school authority in which they denied them an equal status that they deserve as being the senior most class, a whole class declared a hunger strike. In order to mend their ways, teachers punished them with *Ragra* so hard that they were unable to stand on their feet in the end. That was the peek point of torture that broke them. After that A-1 gave up his study and went back to his home in Amritsar. Lalten and Akhad had already made their mind to join a militant group, they went with Balraj. As militant groups were already tracing cadets to be part of their mission. The narrator remarks:

In the *Ragras* at the hands of the senior, there was an element of self-respect and competition, which prevented the cadets from crying. There was a sense of not giving in to the torture and a sense of pending revenge in the faraway future that emboldened the cadets. However, here we had no escape; no fantasy and no hope that could help us tide over our misfortune. We cried less from pain and more from the sense of helplessness (158).

The involvement in Old Boy's meet on New Year's Day was an eye-opening experience for young cadets. The officers from defense services, district magistrates, foreign envoys, senior police officers, and successful executives visited their old houses; showed their families the house Rolls of Honour. The officers who were not with their families spend some time with cadets at the hostel. They shared their old hostel stories. But the reality of the outside world that they shared with them shook their passionate dreams. Narrator wrote that experience in his diary, he mentioned:

I realized with time that we are all potential chameleons, changing our color according to where we belong, who pays us, what keeps us safe. But that day I understood that when these people couldn't be careful about my plants, I could n't trust them with my life or with my nation's borders (179).

The act of plantation of Ashoka Sapling is used as a symbol of hopefulness towards the future. The last course of the novel is the revelation of the reality that cadet faced, but didn't assume so. They were completely hopeless because things were not as imagined. Lalten mentioned, "We know that this school is not right, neither this nation is right" (194). He was justifying his joining militant group and skipping NDA. Narrator remained alone in last. His habit of dairywriting made him villain in front of his friends because he wrote all his views about their secrets and also criticized them. At last, he came to know about Akhad, Lalten, and Balraj, that they have become militant. When he chased him to the field behind their hostel, he came to know about their plan of making arrangement to kill the governor of Punjab. When Balraj found him, he tried to kill him. It's his gun pointed on his forehead that excited his soul to search for reality, because once it was he who saved him and hid him in a hostel room. After the end of the final examination, he takes a look of the college and reminded himself how things

had changed gradually. He mentions:

... It was time for Dinner Night... we entered anteroom door through which Chhola had come in a few months back to tell us about the change in rules. That single announcement has caused such an upheaval in our lives. I looked at the Roll of Honour and wondered if I would ever amount to pay anything that would put my name on in white letters on brown boards(224).

The novel ends in his conversation with A-1 reminding old days at his home. Sitting there they reminded every single day that contributed to their fate. They lamented the death of their fellow student Balraj. Their discussion gives clues about how things could have been changed. At last, the narrator, standing on balcony reminds the lessons life has taught to him. Hence portraying the picture of violence, the novel focuses its impact on individuals, their emotions and how their lives take shapes amidst violence.

### Works Cited

1. Sandhu, Amandeep. *Role of Honour*. Rupa Publications, 2012.
2. Tania, Bansal. "Negotiations between History and Fiction New Historicist Readings of Shauna Singh Baldwins What the Body Remembers and Anita Rau Badamis Can You Hear the Nightbird Call." *Shodhganga@INFLIBNET: Negotiations between History and Fiction New Historicist Readings of Shauna Singh Baldwins What the Body Remembers and Anita Rau Badamis Can You Hear the Nightbird Call*, Bathinda, hdl.handle.net/10603/193125.
3. "Second Coming." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 22 Sept. 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second\_Coming.
4. "The Second Coming (Poem)." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 14 Oct. 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\_Second\_Coming\_(poem).