

# 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 KAUR<sup>1</sup> (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

<sup>1</sup> 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 ARORA<sup>2</sup> (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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 AADAM<sup>3</sup> (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

<sup>3</sup> Anil Aadam is a Punjabi poet. He is based in Ferozepur, Punjab.

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*<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>4</sup> *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 SHARMA<sup>5</sup> (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

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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