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## H.S. Gill's Ashes & Petals: An endeavour for humanity and love

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### Abstract

Ashes and Petals is a scintillating and romantic love story of Ajit Singh and Salma, transcending the boundaries of religion where we see the hero is from Sikh community and his beloved is a Muslim. The background of the story is set from the time of the partition of India. There had been many stories, movies, poems and other literary works written on this theme. There is no doubt that whenever any literary work is partition centric, it has poignant element at its centre, which touches the sentiments of readers. This work of fiction by H.S. Gill is an endeavour to break the boundaries of religion and highlight the paramount importance of human love and compassion which is above and across all the religion and false boundaries which are creation of man.

**Keywords:** Ashes and Petals, romantic love, Sikh community, Muslim, H.S. Gill

### Introduction

The opening of the novel is gloomy which is symbolic of its title's first part i.e. Ashes, which focuses on how the people suffered when migration on the mass level across the border took place. It reminds us of Kushwant Singh's famous work 'A Train to Pakistan'. H.S. Gill vividly portrays the elements of fear, agony, anger, sentiments and horror which aptly describes the title of his novel. To some extent Gill tries to describe the plight of the people where the gruesome picture of man turning into beast and they were so thirsty for blood of each other that they were ready to go to any extent to quench their animosity and vengeance in the name of religion. The height of the madness in the name of religion was such that it obliterated the bond of humanity which existed between them for ages. It is very heart rending when Gill describes that in order to save the honour of the girls and ladies, the family members killed them with their own hands.

Santa Singh killed her own granddaughter when he sensed that her honour was at stake. It is really poignant and heart moving when narrator describes:

"The agonizing cry of a young girl rent the air. 'Hai, hai, they are carrying me off. Hai Wahe guru, save me. Mother save me'. She cried out in panic. Santa Singh was startled. For the first time the full meaning of the scream hit him... yet in that fleeting moment the decision had been made and understood by both of them... Santa Singh raised his rifle to his shoulders, faced his granddaughter squarely for the last time, took careful aim so that the end would be instantaneous, and sobbing, 'Baljeeto forgive me... the shot made one deafening roar, as if of protest, and then accomplished its preordained task.'" (pg 8 & 9)

H.S. Gill has aptly selected the title of his work. As the story moves on, the initial days after the partition were filled with horror and hardships for the people. The Ash is strewn on both sides of the borders, due to the gruesome acts of the some people, politics, religion and what else to mention. It was the common folk who suffered most. The displaced, migrated folk were camped in very filthy conditions. Santa Singh along with his grandson Ajit, were taken straight to Lahorian-da-adda. They were settled near the Ganda-Nalla side. There they had a very hard time. Life was very difficult for them, not less than the hell. H.S. Gill has succeeded in delineating the hardships faced by the people after partition:

"There was a long line of tents running parallel to the dirty nalla. This was their new home. A family of eight to ten were given one 180 pounds tent for sleeping in and one small 40 pounder called a tentee as a bathroom... these camp latrines, being located next to the Ganda Nalla, made breathing difficult for the latest arrivals... it was always better to eat the evening meals before the sunset, that is, provided the food was dished out by then." (pg 14)

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There are many colours of life. If it has grey side to offer than there is also brighter, optimistic, beautiful side of it. As the time treads on, the ashes turn to petals for Santa Singh and his grandson Ajit Singh. Life becomes serene, comfortable and from Ashes it moves on to calmness.

The shifting of the element of love from Sobo, the first crush of Ajit to Salma is quite dramatic. It started spontaneously and abruptly when in middle of the story life took a new turn for Ajit Singh. He became second Lieutenant of the 10 Horse Regiment. Though, names of both the beloved of Ajit Singh starts with letter 'S'. The love feeling abruptly ended with Sobo in the same manner as it abruptly begins with Salma. Ajit Singh went to the house of Major Aslam whose sister is Salma. Gill has formed no concrete base for Ajit's visit to Major Aslam's house. Ajit had heard about her from his colleagues:

"All the boys in the regiment found her attractive but she wouldn't go out with anyone because it was not right to go out with boys before her marriage" (Pg 107)

He went there simply in order to give a message from the commandant but it was only an excuse. His real motive was to meet and see Salma and the reason which he had in his mind is to invite her to be his guest at the Diwali dinner dance at the officers' institute the following Saturday.

Aslam was crestfallen when he heard this as he was not expecting this from Ajit but even after this he hid his embarrassment and left the decision of going to Diwali dinner with Ajit to Salma only. Though Ajit did not muster the courage to openly say what he had on his mind but here the drink worked which we see in most cases. When he poured himself a large one and didn't add any soda and this gave him courage for what he had to say:

"Sir, I have never asked anyone before. In fact I don't even know how to dance. But if I have your permission sir, you know, sir, I actually wanted to take Salma for the Diwali dance. We could just sit and watch the others dance, if I have your permission, sir." (Pg 110)

The Petals of love are so much hovering in the air that the proposal of love was made by Ajit Singh in their very second meeting. When she went with him to the Diwali party:

"How do you know she really loves him? You are talking as if she has told you herself."

"Women can tell. Sixth sense."

"OK, soothsayer. Tell me. Do you love me?" (Pg 114)

True to the one part of title of the novel i.e. Ashes, put in the beginning before Petals which symbolises harmony, love, mutual understanding and humanity, the author points to suggest that always Ashes shroud the Petals. Though everyone knows that the love always conquers at the end, it is that supreme thing which should pervade over evilness and envy. But even then man doesn't want to recognise the fact and always turn his face the other side. This inner psyche which reflects the reality is reflected in the soliloquy of Major Aslam when the clouds of war lingering and Ajit went to meet him when he was given order by the CO to get the indigenously produced Browning from the RM. Aslam reflected on the grim side and the true nature of war:

"Tomorrow the war would come, and lay bare in its wake, cities, men, children, hopes, cultures, mosques, schools, gurdwaras, religion, understanding. Lay bare everything. Only the thin, veiled shroud of death would linger on, and the rotting bodies would be on the battlefield. Clinging to each other, friend and foe, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslims. Man and woman, girl and boy, dog and buffalo. All would be there together and even Allah's messengers wouldn't be able to recognize one from the other." (pg 151)

The soft, sweet feeling of the petals is romanticised by H.S. Gill in the true love feelings and rendezvous of Ajit and Salma. Salma is totally surprised to as she was not expecting Ajit when at the peak tension of the war Ajit went to her Bungalow. She doesn't believe Ajit was standing in front of her for a time being they both were lost and not a word was spoken between them. Only silence was between them and that silence was speaking everything:

"She pinched her side. No, it was not a dream, it was reality. She looked up into his eyes and saw the pain and hope in them. His gaze was steady and penetrating. She saw him entering her and tried to look away but his eyes held hers. The handsome face was now rugged and darker. The hands more gnarled and finger nails longer. The OC woollen jersey frayed all over, but now better fitting. She saw him and wanted to cry, but that also was forbidden her. Her lips were sealed." (pg 153)

Like so many war stories, this novel also portrays the real picture of war in minute details. The author has tried to delineate each and every detail of war as it is right taking place in front of our eyes. The code words, the unique language and nature of the army is presented in authentic and simple style. The words like Charlie, Alfa or Bravo, November Papa Mike, Roger over, Tiger November, code word Serpant and the names of the squadrons like 10 Horse, 36 Cavalry, 14 Lancers provides the feeling of awe and lends authenticity to the storyline.

The battle is not limited to the soldiers but rather it effects their nears and dears. This empathetic feeling is presented in the novel when the war was more than one month old and when at one evening both Aslam and Ajit were eating meals, the APC rolled in both received letters. They ate their meals without uttering a word and kept the letters for after dinner. These letters reveal the concern and anxiety of loved ones of not only Ajit and Aslam but universal to the loved ones of every soldier who is fighting at the front. The Bapu of Ajit wrote succinctly and his words shows the deep concern for his grandson. On the other hand Aslam's sister Salma writes in detail about the things back home waiting desperately for his safe return and pray to Allah for his safety and long life. This is an insightful description which highlights the dilemma and helplessness of the family members back home who are fighting a different type of mental battle.

The petals are bright, blooming and giving sweet smell when the boundaries of religion are faded, become irrelevant when love triumphs. When in the same letter Salma confessed her love towards Ajit. On contrary of becoming angry with his sister he accepts the reality and tells Ajit never to betray and let down her sister. This

contrast of anger and acceptance is beautifully presented by the narrator in very simple and plain manner:

“My sister loves you. And you her. Do not be afraid. You have my blessings. But please, I beg of you, never let her down. Then she will die.” And with that he got up and walked away, before Ajit could utter a word. (pg 170)

The narrator engrosses the readers with his spellbound curiosity towards the final battle, where Major Aslam sacrificed his life to save Ajit. This exemplary feat displayed by Ajit is really heroic where he does not care of his life and saved Ajit. When Aslam saw the tank in which Ajit was present was hit and both Ajit and the other accompanied soldier stumble out. Aslam ordered his driver to speed up in that direction in order to save Ajit. They reached there in time before the tank would blow up and managed to pull the boys into his tank. They barely managed it. But during his this brave accomplishment he was not able to save his life.

“The wounded loaded up, Aslam made for his tank. He had one leg on top and was just pulling himself up when the shell burst its deadly contents onto the battlefield. Death was instantaneous, and Aslam never knew what hit him.” (pg 176)

The Petals turns to Ashes when Salma was crestfallen in the name of religion. This rigid boundary which is created and well managed by society for ages never let Petals of love to bloom. The same story is repeated when in base hospital Bapu of Ajit Singh showed his aversion toward Salma as she is Musalmani. He even doesn't care to hear and accept the reality when told by Ajit that brother of Salma, Major Aslam was also a Musalman who saved his life:

“She is not one of us, is she? I do not understand you, Bapu,” I said she is not one of us. She is a Musalman isn't she? “Yes Bapu. She is a Musalman. But so was Major Aslam who died out there for my sake.” (pg 179)

The ending of the story reminds us of the beginning when again the same Hindu, Muslim or Sikh line of division on the name of religion keep apart or not let them live peacefully or in harmony without thinking of the ditch or abyss that separates them. Bapu is not ready to accept Salma and reminded Ajit of partition when Muslims killed his sister Baljeeto. Though asserted by Ajit, Bapu is not ready to accept that girl who he thinks belong to that community who is responsible for his misfortunes and violence. He is adamant and unmoved:

“She was there a few yards away from him, and not like the figure, billions of miles away in some far-off land. And though he had yearned to kiss and caress this mysterious, unattainable form, he loathed to even touch the unmistakable reality just steps away. He vividly saw before his eyes the bloody train, hurtling through the eerie night and covering the glistening lines and the wooden planks with blood... his own grandson, a witness to this unholy massacre, now standing in his path.” (pg 181)

This episode may have turned the Petals into Ashes for Captain Ajit Singh, he never thought that his Bapu would react in that manner in respect of Salma. When Bapu rejected Salma and went dejected from the base hospital. The following day both Ajit and Salma got married. It was a simple affair with only two witness present. With Salma on his side and Bapu in his mind there is predicament and dilemma inside Ajit. This could have hurt him and shattered him mentally as well physically. When he went back to front this must be lingering in his mind when he was fighting the decisive battle of his life and finally displaying his valour sacrificed his life for the nation. The lines describing his courageous feat are catchy and filled with emotions:

“The tank had been hit, but was it dead? Seconds later came the answer. Its gun pointing roughly in their direction, the dyeing gunner inside clenched his bloody fingers around the ebonite griop that housed the firing assembly, in what was obviously a sub-conscious gesture of farewell. The HE that emerged caught the RCL jeep full in the face and sent it swirling away, a thousand, twisted bits reaching for the sky. There could be no survivors... a short announcement on AIR the next afternoon that Captain Ajit Singh of a cavalry regiment had been awarded the Mahavir Chakra for distinguished gallantry and devotion beyond the call of duty. In doing so, Captain Ajit Singh had laid down his life for the motherland.” (pg 190 & 191)

The Ashes of Partition started in the beginning and with episode of Petals in the life of Bapu Risaldar Singh and his grandson Ajit the Ashes of gloom again dominated in the life of Bapu with Ajit gone but the true Petals are now on his side in the shape of Salma when both of them now present to receive the prestigious posthumous award awarded to Ajit Singh by the president of India in the Requiem. With tears in their eyes but the fate willed it. Bapu accepted Salma but now Ajit physically though no more with him but his presence can be felt everywhere.

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