



EXPLORING THE LABYRINTH OF THE MIND IN ROOP DHILLON'S PUNJABI NOVELLA *HAUL*

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Roop Dhillon's Punjabi novella *Haul* (meaning-a state of terror), published in 2023, presents an intriguing endeavour in the realm of psychological thrillers. Born and raised in the United Kingdom, Roop Dhillon is making notable contributions to the field of Punjabi literature. Despite being a second-generation Punjabi emigrant educated entirely in English and originally planning to write in that language, he eventually learnt the *Gurmukhi* script on his own and chose to write in Punjabi. His decision to write in Punjabi is admirable; it evokes thoughts of Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiongo, who, after years of writing in English, chose to write in his native language, Gikuyu. Since then, Dhillon's writing has flourished. He has written several novels in Punjabi, each reflecting Punjabi sensibility in a fresh way. He has also experimented with techniques such as magic realism, science fiction, and psychological thrillers—genres commonly seen in English literature but still relatively unexplored in Punjabi.

In the one hundred and four pages of this novella, *Haul*, Roop Dhillon masterfully crafts the intrigue and tension that lie at the heart of any psychological thriller. Although the narrative unfolds outside of Punjab, Roop Dhillon masterfully showcases the Punjabi essence of the characters through their dialogues. Dhillon demonstrates his storytelling prowess by crafting a narrative that captivates the reader from the first page to the last. The novel's strength stems from the author's exceptional ability to keep readers wondering without resorting to clichés or excessive horror elements.

The novel is written in a fluid, engaging first-person voice that makes it a pleasure to read. The story is told by an unnamed narrator who provides exquisitely precise insights about his family, which includes his wife Kuknoos and their children Ravi, Kulwant, Raj, Kiran, and Ricky. His light-hearted remark that all the boys in the household have names beginning with R and all the girls' names begin with K alludes to the author's identity, Roop Dhillon. The narrative approach is particularly striking: the author deftly integrates himself into the story, blurring the line between creator and narrator. This self-referential gesture not only improves the reading experience but also demonstrates Dhillon's mastery of metafiction. His careful observations of gestures, moods, home routines, and interpersonal tensions show that he is acutely aware of the emotional dimension of ordinary life. Dhillon creates a story that feels intimate, authentic, and brilliantly managed by paying attention to detail and using the narrator's confiding tone, showcasing his ability to weave personal insight with literary beauty.

Set against the eerie backdrop of a remote holiday cottage in Devon, UK, the novel draws readers into a world where fear, hallucination, and reality blend into one chilling narrative. Upon arriving at the cottage for their holiday with his family, the narrator feels an immediate sense of unease due to the strange animal paintings adorning the walls. These unusual and unsettling images, paired with other haunting signs, foster an ambience of impending doom. As the novel progresses, the plot delves deeper into the psychic worlds of both the narrator and the audience, blurring the distinction between external happenings and internal fears. The reader not only observes terror but also experiences it alongside the protagonist. Suspense is introduced early through subtle disturbances—a stray cat entering the cottage, the sudden shift in the narrator's confidence, and the violent paintings that capture his attention. The comfortable holiday setting slowly transforms into a site of psychological danger, reflecting a common thriller technique where ordinary spaces become sources of dread.

In the initial pages of the novel, Roop Dhillon presents the narrator as a keen observer—even a critic—of the superstitious mindset that, in his opinion, stubbornly persists within the Punjabi psyche. With an almost pompous mindset,



Cover Page



he remarks that individuals who have migrated abroad are a step ahead of those who reside in the East, having shed old irrationalities and adopted a more enlightened perspective. His words imply an ideological hierarchy: the West as the land of reason and the East as a country shrouded in inherited anxieties and customs.

However, the irony, whether intentional or not, quickly becomes evident. As the story progresses, the narrator finds himself caught in the superstitions he once ridiculed. When a cat enters their cottage in Devon—an ordinary occurrence for many, but for the narrator, it marks the moment their luck begins to change. From the minute the cat crosses the threshold, he begins to interpret every catastrophe, every unexpected turn of events, as proof of the cat's malevolent influence. What was once rejected as a backward notion is now a real truth in his own mind: the cat has brought him bad luck.

The narrative clearly indicates that he does not reach this conclusion casually. His doubts grow even more pronounced as he gazes at the paintings on the cottage walls. They contained fierce creatures that were devouring one another, rather than reflecting something to be admired or gazed upon in wonder. They were unknowingly bringing negative thoughts to the mind, and the narrator even considers them inappropriate for the children to see. His interpretations of those show a strong superstitious tendency, contradicting his previous claims of being more rational. However, beyond mere superstition, his act of taking down the pictures from the walls reflected his role as a caring father who prioritised his children's well-being. Among the numerous disturbing paintings on the walls, one in particular grabbed his attention and refused to let go. It featured a red male fox with fiery, blazing fur gripping a hen's lifeless neck in its teeth. From the fox's jaws, small rivulets of blood flowed. The brutality of the scene troubled him profoundly; it appeared as though the painting itself radiated a silent threat.

But this was just the beginning. More pieces were scattered about the cottage, each soaked in its own brand of violence—predators in mid-attack, animals in the midst of their struggle, situations where fur, feather, and blood mingled into one terrifying story. The walls seemed to resonate with the animal's final cries, their agony immortalised in frozen, ruthless strokes of paint. The images not only disturbed the narrator but also transformed the whole atmosphere of the cottage. What was intended to be a quiet haven slowly transformed into an eerie space, a location where danger was not hidden in the shadows but rather in the very creations designed to decorate the home. The vivid imagery flooded his mind, intensifying his fears and deepening his sense of unease. Each picture became a silent warning that something was wrong—a gentle but persistent hint that chaos and misery were descending on them. The artwork acts like a character in the novel: a silent yet powerful force that determines the mood, hints at trouble, and reflects the narrator's growing superstition and anxiety. In another room, he came across a statue of a werewolf, which only intensified the psychological terror he was already experiencing. He tried to cover it as he had done with other disturbing objects but soon found himself wondering how many more things he could possibly hide. Though he attempted to calm his thoughts, it was evident that doubt, anxiety, and fear were steadily taking root in his mind. These unsettling details quietly prepared the reader for the darker events yet to come.

The narrator of the novel presents a fascinating contradiction: he mocks superstition while being ensnared by it, a migrant who insists he has moved beyond the boundaries of the East yet is pursued by the very fears he has created. This twist not only deepens his character but also highlights the novel's wider message about how fear and belief can seep into even the most confident minds.

The plot reaches its darkest point when three of the narrator's five children mysteriously disappear during a fire, and their bodies are never found. Dhillon portrays this tragic turn with emotional accuracy, capturing the mother's petrified state and the father's guilt-ridden lapse into doubt and fear. The tragedy is not only physical but also psychological and Dhillon portrays it with intense emotions and precision.

Told through the eyes of a father trying to unveil the mystery behind the disappearance of his three children while battling with the psychological turmoil in the form of nightmares, the story seamlessly captures the psychological turmoil



Cover Page



of a man caught between nightmares and reality. The nightmares experienced by him on the very first night when they entered the cottage were a kind of warning to go away from that ominous place, but his inability to decode those signs resulted in the tragedy that happened with his family. The narrator's confusion—his inability to distinguish dream from truth—mirrors the reader's own growing disorientation. This blurred boundary keeps the suspense alive, making every page feel unpredictable and essential.

Despite his persistent efforts to uncover the truth, the narrator ultimately remains unable to resolve the mystery. When he revisited the site and spoke with a few local residents, he learnt about several strange and tragic incidents that had occurred there—most of which involved children. This discovery added to his growing sense of unease. The novel concludes on an open-ended note. In the final scene, he sees his children standing on the road with their bodies burnt, and at the same moment, the image of the werewolf appears before him. This terrifying vision further strengthens the theme of blurred boundaries between imagination and reality. The readers are left wondering whether any of it truly happened or whether it was all a product of the narrator's disturbed mind.

Despite the novel's many strengths, it does have a few minor shortcomings. Readers may notice occasional spelling errors and the influence of British-style Punjabi, which might feel unfamiliar to those used to more traditional dialects. However, these issues can easily be overlooked once one learns that the author is self-taught in Punjabi and is doing his best to express himself in the language. The author could have further developed certain incidents. For instance, the narrator and his wife receive a landline call at Devon Cottage, where a strange voice claims to know all their sins and insists on speaking to them about God. **While the scene successfully creates suspense and mystery, it also suggests a deeper, more symbolic meaning—yet this underlying idea is not explored as fully as it could have been.**

Overall, *Haul* stands out as a unique and memorable novel. It leaves a strong impression on the reader and, perhaps unintentionally, also raises an important thought: before choosing a place for a holiday, it is wise to know its history well so that the stay turns out to be a pleasant one rather than a frightening experience.