

Ajeet Cour: A Punjabi Writer

Since I've written a lot on Indian writers from Bengal (and lately, the [South](#)), I often get emails from people saying, "when are you going to write about Punjabi literature? And what about Sikh writers?" My response is pretty simple: a person needs to be inspired. Ethnic and religious loyalty ought to take a back seat to the quality of the writing, and the effect it has on you as an individual reader. If that means [Ian McEwan](#), [Philip Roth](#), or [Zadie Smith](#) get more of one's critical attention than [Amrita Pritam](#), so be it.

But I was recently invited to give a talk on Sikh writers at a small Sikh Studies conference at Hofstra University, so I started reading authors that I didn't know very well — and I was, in fact, quite impressed. So over the course of this summer I hope to profile some Punjabi writers, including some that are Sikh, starting with Ajeet Cour, Kartar Singh Duggal, and Khushwant Singh (who writes in English). Incidentally, many of these writers' works are accessible in North America and the UK, through sites like [Indiaclub.com](#) or [Amazon Marketplace sellers](#).

With Ajeet Cour, the place to start is her memoir, *Pebbles in a Tin Drum*, published in Hindi and Punjabi as "Khanabadosh" (which means "nomad" or "vagabond"). This isn't a conventional memoir so much as an arrangement of the key crises in Cour's life. It starts out of order — with her moving account of her adult daughter's death from a severe burn accident in France. But then Cour backs up, and tells the story of her family's move from Lahore to Delhi during the Partition; of her failed romance with her English teacher, Baldev (through whom she started on her path to the writing life); of her failed marriage and subsequent divorce; and finally, of her life as a single mother in Delhi

who struggled to support herself and her daughters while working as a writer in the 1970s and 80s. She also talks about her experiences as a Sikh woman in Delhi during the riots in 1984. And there are two chapters that I rather liked on the unlikely topic of her legal battles with her landlord — which dragged on for years and even went to the High Court. This experience gives Ajeet Cour a pronounced hostility for Indian government bureaucracy, which shows up in some of her short stories. For instance, in the collection *Dead End* there is a short story about a family that tries to get justice for their daughter, after she was raped and murdered by Indian soldiers during the troubles in Punjab. Instead of justice or sympathy, all they get is endless bureaucratic run-around. (A familiar tale for people who have suffered as a result of communal violence in recent years.)

Even though Cour's life has been pretty unconventional, she remains in many ways a traditional Punjabi Sikh woman. When her daughter is dying in a French hospital, for instance, she takes frequent recourse in prayer:

I had only been saying to God, 'Look I have not committed any sins all these years. . . . Bless my daughter and help her get well. She is going to be nineteen on the twenty-sixth of November. This is no age to go through such suffering. At this age she should enjoy herself. You know fully well how she has spent her childhood sharing her mother's poverty and how she had to face her father's temper and hatred. Things have just started getting a little better. It is only now that we can afford to relax in the evenings and listen to music and discuss books. Our greatest strength is that we have each other as friends. The friendship I enjoy with my two daughters has given warmth to my life and dispelled the pain from my existence.

The quality of the translation isn't great, but there's a kind of directness and sincerity here and elsewhere in Cour's writing that comes through anyway, and that I really admire. (There aren't very many prominent Indian writers of Cour's generation that are avowedly religious. Most are either silent on their religious beliefs or use their writings to emphasize the "backwardness" or even the danger of naïve religious belief.)

Another passage I admire from *Pebbles in a Tin Drum* is Cour's description of the room she was born in and lived in until they had to leave Lahore:

Some are born in gypsy families and others become gypsies through a conspiracy of circumstances.

Isn't it ironic that man remains totally ignorant about the two most significant events of his life, his birth and his death? The first takes place due to negligence and the second leads to the disappearance of its protagonist from the world. Dust into dust and air into air. You can go on searching eternally but you won't find those who have blended into earth and air. Poets are free to make the elements — the earth, the air and the sky — as romantic as they like but I assure you that these elements are not only deaf and dumb, they are also blind.

I was told about the first major incident of my life by my mother and grandmother long after it had taken place. Showing me a large, spacious bed they had said, 'You were born on this bed.' The bed was placed in a spacious, airy room in my grandmother's house in Lahore. A wide bed made of strong wood, it was supported by thick, round, carved legs which reminded me of the silver-encircled ankles

of Haryanvi women working along with their men in the fields.

And then a bit more on the tension between romance and the real world. As a young girl Cour was attracted to the windows in her house, which her family had covered in heavy curtains:

I feel all that has become a part of my constitution, my texture. Or maybe I have been created by a blend of all these things. You could even say that it was the conspiracy of that room which had blended with my blood the moment I was born. A poet would say that every object in that room was a symbol, a sign whose meaning was revealed layer by layer at a later stage.

However, I am not a poet, I am a storyteller. Of course I can say this much, that I have always longed to feel the open, free air and vast areas of empty space stretched around me. Unfortunately, every window that life threw open on the rippling breezes and blue skies where the balmy sun floated like will-o'-the-wisp was blocked by heavy bamboo curtains, denying me access to what I desperately wanted to reach.

In a sense this is a metaphor for her struggle (which I think is everyone's struggle) to experience the life in its ideal, beautiful form — in the broad daylight as it were. Most of the time we are stuck indoors with the light on partly cloudy, fussing with the curtains. (This is a domesticated version of [Plato's allegory of the cave](#) of course.)

There is more that could be said about *Pebbles in a Tin Drum* as well as the short stories of Cour's that I've been reading (in *Dead End and Other Stories*). But I've run on too

long already. So I'll just end with a quote from Cour's story "Returning Home," which features an adult woman's reminiscence of her childhood fascination with her mystical grandfather. It again gets into the theme of religion, though I think it does so from a somewhat secular perspective:

He recited the lyrical hymns from the Holy Book for hours. Whenever he was free-which he almost always was!-he climbed the stairs, humming, and went to the meditation room, and recited hymns from the Holy Book. While reciting, he closed his eyes and climbed down those invisible stairs which lead one to a very dark and very bright spot in the inner recesses of the soul. He spent long hours at that pitch-dark and brilliant, luminous spot in the inner core of his being. And his lips quivered with silent laughter.

I often saw him sitting like that, absolutely quiet. With the open pages of the Holy Book spread before him, his eyes closed, completely oblivious of his surroundings, a silent laughter spread across his face like sunshine, and his hands dancing gracefully.

This is one of the earliest memories of my childhood. Though we always feel that everything connected with those early days of our life were wrapped up in unknown mysteries and inexplicable magic, I honestly feel that my grandfather was a mystery, he was magic personified.

Any comments on Ajeet Cour — or other Punjabi writers you admire (including those who write in English)? I'm open to suggestions for writers to talk to about.

[Cross-posted on [Sepia Mutiny](#)]

POSTED BY AMARDEEP AT 2:46 PM

16 COMMENTS:

bess said...

"In a sense this is a metaphor for her struggle...to experience the life in its ideal, beautiful form — in the broad daylight as it were."

Enlightment or fundamental change seems always to start with the decision that a piece of sky isn't enough, not when all of it is available. And the phrase, "domesticated version of Plato's allegory..." is brilliant. Enjoying your writings.

3:48 PM

Ruchira Paul said...

I read "Pebbles.." many years ago and have forgotten much of the details.