

Punjabi Novel in English: 'Like they do in films'

Sikh love Muslim love Sikh

By Chaitanya Kalbag

IT is difficult to judge Indian writing in English, saturated as it often is with the smells, sights and sounds of the ethos it springs from. Punjabi writing in English is a case in point. It carries strong overtones of the earthiness and directness of the people of that region. But if the writing is originally in English, it usually suffers from the literalness of thinking in Punjabi and translating that into English: a predilection to mould phrases in an obviously vernacular frame and syntax, and not entirely grammatical. *Ashes and Petals* represents this class of writing eminently.

Another point to note about Indian writing in English is that it is advertised with a breathlessness that seems to presage something momentous every time a new book appears. True to type, the book under review is hailed, in the manner of a benevolent publisher anxious to stress that he is ever at the ready to give a newcomer a helping hand up, as the first work of a "major new talent to appear on the Indian literary scene."

The characters in this book, too, conform to the Brobdingnagian image of hard-working, passionate, courageous, and elemental people, buffeted by a cruel destiny, heading inexorably towards misfortune. There is a 'searing' beginning, a sudden interlude in which everyone grows older and wiser, then an abrupt leap into the action, some unrequited love, and finally the requital of that love, a blaze of glory, and sad to say, a clichéd anti-climax: brave Sikh soldier laying down his life for his motherland, his inconsolable widow walking with faltering steps up to the presidential rostrum on republic day to collect her husband's posthumous Maha Vir Chakra.

Another interesting point about Punjabi fiction is that it is very



Anup Ray

romanticised, permeated by the picture of the Punjabis as a swash-buckling and warlike race, and also overhung by their folk-memory of the partition and the suffering it brought. *Ashes and Petals* begins with a trainload of refugees from Lahore heading for Amritsar (or Ambarsar, as the Punjabis refer to it). Midway, it is stopped by a cleverly-doctored signal, attacked by a bloodthirsty Mussalman mob, and in desperation Risaldar Santa Singh kills his granddaughter Baljeeto, to save her from the rapists outside. An unnecessary sacrifice, as it turns out, for the train starts moving off just then. But the stage is now set for the story: the orphaned grandson Ajit, seven years old, goes with Santa to Aldinpur village; they settle in, Santa farming, while Ajit goes to school and has drummed into him some of the principles a good Sikh boy ought to live by.

One notices that the hero—here it is Ajit Singh—is always a trusting, likeable soul, occasionally led astray by errant friends. Ajit has a run-in with Santa when the farm-hand Bhajna Singh, who is a Ram-dasia and thus an "illegitimate son of a pig," teaches the lad to brew country liquor and the two are caught at it by the old man. Later, when Ajit goes to college in Amritsar, there is one more tempter: Mohinder the no-good, unintelligent truant who conducts Ajit to his first and disastrous encounter with a brothel.

Ajit Singh is also a virile and well-built young man and so before going off to college he has to fall in love with Sabo the schoolmaster's daughter. Now, one maxim to remember if you want to toss in romance into your story is: never make it roses, roses all the way. Sabo has been married off when she was a child to someone in Rasulpur, and when Ajit

proposes to her on a Baisakhi visit home she springs the news on him that she will be carted off to her husband's home the next day. Describing Ajit's sense of shock, author H. S. Gill slips easily into stilted wordage: "Ajit wanted to believe that he wasn't there. He wanted to believe that Sabo wasn't there, the well wasn't there, and that nothing was there and it was all a vacuum. He wanted to believe that he was in the hostel, day-dreaming and imagining the worst about himself and Sabo, like they do in the films... But the more he tried not to believe, the more he was led to believe."

Like they do in the films... What a key phrase! Like they do in the films, the jilted lover tosses up college and joins the army. And from this point onwards, until just before the end of the book, Gill sounds very sure of himself: obviously, it is an army man writing about the army, and he lavishes care and attention to detail. The recruitment of the umedwars is described with meticulous affection: the physical, which Ajit almost flunks because of sugar in his urine, and is rebuked by the head babu: "That is what happens when you chaps masturbate and fornicate when you are young and not yet out of your mother's womb."

Eventually Ajit gets into the army, through training manoeuvres, into prominence as an exemplary cadet and an excellent athlete: again, the idealistic strapping young man who'll do the fauj proud. Barrack life is also treated in detail, the ups and downs a newcomer faces. Passing-out parade over, Ajit and his friend Pawittar are posted to the crack 14 Lancers, a tank regiment. There is, in this portion of the book, a dulling tendency to go on and on about trivialities or side-stories that in no way help the writer in getting to the point: the martyrdom and virtual beatification of Ajit Singh.

Soon after passing out from training, Ajit helps quell a communal riot, and here Gill describes quite graphically the manner in which such conflagrations are incited. After being commissioned, second lieutenant Ajit Singh is posted to the 10 Horse, and again a detailed description of ranks and officers is provided. These pukka army passages may fascinate an army reader (and apparently the book has been selling well in canteen and station stores) but to a lay reader it may all be Greek. Later in the narrative there are two involved accounts of tank battles, and here too the soldier

may like them better than a civilian, although for the author the battles are also conveniently staged—major Aslam Khan, whose sister, Salma, Ajit falls in love with and later marries, dies in the first one, and Ajit himself is killed in the second battle.

It is in the Ajit-Salma romance that the author betrays his inability to avoid returning to the traditional partition-spawned distrust of Muslims among the Sikhs who suffered then, and yet tries to leaven his attitudes by bringing about Ajit's marriage to Salma. And very much like in a film, Ajit's grandfather Santa Singh stoutly opposes the match, reminding Ajit that they fled Pakistan, losing all their property, and that he had 'sacrificed' his granddaughter Baljeeto (which seems senseless in the light of the fact that nobody else in the compartment is 'sacrificed'), etc. But the fillum-syndrome has to be rammed through to its logical end, and so Ajit secretly marries Salma, goes off to battle and is killed, leaving Salma a pregnant widow. Need one describe the end at all? Could there be any ending but that Salma Singh receives her husband's posthumous award and that retired Risaldar Santa Singh tearfully accepts her as granddaughter-in-law? It is a sign of Indian fatalism and sentimentality that almost every promising novelist inevitably sinks into a fiery masala-steeped beginning, a potholed and bumpy body, and legitimises his ending with suffering, tear-jerking hyperbole, and faintly-pencilled 'hope' on the horizon. Good, one supposes, for our presupposition that every Indian possesses generous tear-ducts; so that pot-boiler storytellers can count on a damp handkerchief at the outset, and time for it to dry out en route to the finale where the handkerchief can hang sopping-wet again. N

Ashes and Petals by H. S. Gill; Vikas Rs 30 hardbound, Rs 7.50 paperback.

Poor Porn

By Madhu Jain

WHAT is a nice young (well, almost) woman like Uma Vasudev doing in a naughty little book like this? Ms Vasudev, a specialist on Mrs Gandhi and all her faces, should have stuck to

politics and politicians rather than the claustrophobic, narcissistic circle of Delhi's pseudo-emotional elite. The navel-gazing activities of Delhi's dilettante upper crust have descended a bit down the torso in this novel.

Jagat Sarin, her 'bed-easy' hero (a rather old 35), rambles on rather boringly in his narrative about his pursuit of women and love. The former fall under his gaze as easily as a field of sugarcane under a reaper. But the latter is elusive. And therein lies the rub of this tale of two women.

Jagat Sarin has a strange problem. His dilemma appears almost existential: he can't go to bed with the woman he loves because he has made the relationship beatifically platonic; and the women he desires and sleeps with, he does not love. Freud might have had something to say about this man for whom love



and sex are as incompatible as oil and water.

The convoluted tale has, of course, the usual triangle. Jagat at the apex never seems to do any work and oscillates from the couch of his inane sounding psychoanalyst to his two women. Priti, the "goddess-figure" whose sensuality has been frozen for the future, and Anasuya, sensuous in the immediate but in love with someone else. The two are certainly women in love. But in love with themselves.

The trouble with this novel is that the author has apparently tried to be serious. Earnest rather. She has tried to make a trite love story (curdled a bit in the jaded mould) into literature. The result is disastrous. The novel ends up as neither ...lost in the limbo between the platitudinous zones of Barbara Cartland gibberish and the erogenous zones of Henry Miller and company. The final letdown: it isn't even real porn.

But Henrietta Miller, our Ms Vasudev, certainly is not, even though there are touches of powder-blue porn in the 'love scenes', in Jagat's self-made inferno of 'loveless sex'. The four letter words (entirely gratuitous in the case of this book) are thrown in in an attempt to be daring.

Where the author trips up the worst is on her similes. "I felt, not Leela's breast in my mouth, but her nipple scattered in my mouth, like ash." Ms Vasudev's imagination, no doubt, has no bounds. Perhaps she is close to the eternal truth: everything in the end ends up as ash anyway.

Sometimes one feels that the author might have made a better screenwriter. Her writing clearly shows how the lines should be spoken: "and when I felt that even I was going to cross the limit to which I could rule my own taut ecstasy, she burst out in a great orgasmic cry—'Oh-h, God. I C C-ANT! I'm in l-love, you see,' and here she gasped in spurts to the acute rhythm of her release, 'in l-love w-with some-b-o-d-y else—'"

The narrative (interior monologue) of the protagonist rambles, he is an uneasy rider on the stream of consciousness. The stream in fact is muddy—murky even. At times, it reads like something out of *True Confessions*.

If the literary pretensions had been kept out, *The Song of Anasuya* would have been an enjoyable satire on Delhi's 'beautiful people' who flit from the Gymkhana to Connaught Circus, to Shamianaed music concerts and British Council parties. There are rare patches of humour and the author is quite mercilessly funny when she describes hypocritical upper class women who want to spend their virginity and keep it too.

Realising this, Jagat in his Rabelaisian quest, has the one trick which never fails with these women:

"I would not have achieved success had I not struck upon this method of pitting their conscience against an appeal to the benevolence of their essential femaleness. Conscience then had no chance, not against that... There were those who raised a terrible hue and cry afterwards. Oh, what have I done, what'll happen if I'm found out. I-I hope nothing has gone wrong, why did you make me do it—why, why, why!!!"

If the writing had been better, the book could have been quite