

Jugtu- A review of an important Punjabi novel

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The Punjabi language has been in a malaise as far as Literature goes for the last fifty years. There have been the well documented problems caused by Partition and the politics of language. There has been the script issues with Gurmukhi favoured in India and internationally, whilst Shahmukhi has been dominant in Pakistan. The greatest problem has been a combination of semi-literate writers, and an audience limited in imagination and world experience. This has meant the same material been churned out, the same themes in different ways. The result has been the writer has not been able to make his work sophisticated or has been unskilled in doing so. The true hurdle has been an illiterate population, who read Punjabi but have been failed to be taught to appreciate international techniques and ideas by so called Punjabi teachers. It was always left to the Gurdwara to teach Punjabi, certainly in the west. This is unfair on the Temple, lazy attitude of the parent and as not allowed professional teachers to bring up Punjabi children to appreciate Literature properly. Now the Punjabi Government has finally decided to encourage the Language officially, perhaps open minded progressive types will help take it out of the malaise, and help make the reader in Punjab as sophisticated as those in Europe.

Writers have also pushed to get out of this malaise, and in this area the best progress has not been in India (I am unable to comment about Pakistan, as I can not read Shahmukhi), but Britain and Canada. One needs to give the Literature students all views, and so it is impetrative not just to focus on one's own views, which may be Sikh –Centric or otherwise. With this in mind one can confidently say that anyone in the west wanting to read Punjabi, who can not relate to the limited experience of the Punjabi produced novel, has now a novel written by a world wise writer.

Charles Dickens was clearly the English language's equivalent of Sadhu Binning. Both are heavily concerned with social ills in society, and both have written to remind us of these injustices. Both have created memorable characters. Yes Jugtu has a very socialist tint, but the language skill, characterisation and plot is so well constructed that it is reasonable to say this is the best Punjabi fiction written in decades. It's sheer story telling ability transcends any political viewpoint. Most importantly this is the first novel that is at once very Punjabi in its setting but offers students of Punjabi, a more familiar world; their world in the west. It is set in Indian Punjab, Canada and Britain.

There are many words that the casual western student would struggle with, but the way Binning has constructed his sentences, allows a student who speaks Punjabi well to ascertain what is being said. It helps expand the vocabulary. So is a better book to help teach Punjabi than most text books pedalled in the west. The real clincher for this to be a set text for reading (it is superior to Amrita Preteen's Pinjar) is that it is written in an easily digestible style, making free use of English words, as well as the Punjabi ones, that might no longer be used in a Hindi influenced Punjab, but are used by the parents in the west everyday in front of the kids for whom I recommend this as a reading text.

So what else makes this a good novel?

The story itself.

Jugtu is a con man, an anti-hero who can never be forgotten. He is so well created from the first page, he takes you entirely in. We follow him through his journey as a shameless child, who is quite proud when he is tarred and taken through the village. He has a sexual attraction to his aunt, who has many lovers, (possibly he is one of them) and is in fact the kind of deviant that Indians deny exist in our culture. He is constantly up to something, scheming and providing ill advice. This is the key to the whole novel.

Jugtu is very much like the British Television creation, Alf Garnet. Alf Garnet was always hated by the ethnic community for his racist views. The majority of white people saw him as a hero. Yet the writers intended him as a caricature, the joke being he was wrong. This seemed to pass all the viewers. The same danger can lie with Jugtu, as the story is told through the first person, with him always taking about his ill deeds like they are the correct thing to do. It should be clear to the intelligent reader that Binning is being sarcastic, as clearly Jugtu is despicable. His pleasure from his deviant acts, his attitude to women, castes and religion. His hatred of anyone who has a social conscience. In effect all that is negative about the Punjab is wrapped up Jugtu, who constantly sees these acts and views as positive aspects of the Punjabi culture.

He has no qualms about strangling his just born daughter, advising two brothers to kill their mother and later advising two others to murder their daughter just because she dated a Muslim boy. There are many such incidents like this, and you will have to read the book to fully be immersed in this despicable yet at the same time very likable character. You know he is so wrong, and yet you carry on reading. This is a strong testament to Binning's writing skill. One hopes he writes further novels in the future.

Jugtu excels at being a Police informant, where he shops many Left wing "Comrades". In truth he is the enemy of religion as well. His life corresponds to the time when the Naxolite movement was strong, and throughout the book any sense spoken by such characters is torn to pieces by Jugtu.

He truly is the worst type of Desi. He acts as a Pimp, a Hustler, oils the palm of corruption and goes to the west with no less intention than to abuse the hospitality of the host nation. Here he fleeces his own people, and helps them achieve as much as possible illegally. He even sells drugs, opens doss houses and tries to rape the daughter of a devout Sikh man who looks after him. He does not like the fact the western bought up girls are independent and not as easily abused as those in the Punjab. Where he has no compuncture to encourage someone to kill their own daughter for dating, he openly lies with the wife of a man who takes him in again in the UK. Thus he is always contradicting himself with hypocrisy when justifying his actions and those of the worst parts of the culture.

He truly believes in killing girls in the womb helps keeps the Punjabi culture strong, and see such atrocious acts as a benefit to Indian society. He is that man who instead of encouraging progress zealously puts his own people down. I can not tell you too

much more about the character without giving the plot away. Suffice to say that through Jugtu, Binning is able to question and deal with many of the ills of our society, and point them out to us via a detestable yet likeable Churl. It is like the effect Fagin or the Artful Dodger might have on the English reader. Or how the innocence of Scout in *To Kill A Mockingbird* reveals the true adult nature of what is going on around her. One has the same sense of dread the *Book Thief* creates, and the same anger as found in *Le Compte De Monte Cristo*. Probably the closest protagonist to Jugtu is in German Literature: Peter Saskund's *Grenouille*. The two are completely comparable. This is a character you love to hate, these are views which bring you shame and yet you know so many of your countrymen are Jugtus. That is the sad truth. Jugtu is the perfect tool to study what has gone wrong in Punjabi society over the last four decades. As such it is an important book to read.

The Third Punjab, that is the Videsh we live in, needs to develop its own Punjabi Literature. It is irrelevant if the Pindu in Punjab can not relate to it. That market is well catered for. New ideas and techniques are needed. Punjabi Literature needs to move on, even at the risk of alienating some readers. The point is our kids in the west will naturally read English, but if want them to learn Gurmukhi to read the gurbani, we need to give them a reason to express themselves in Punjabi. We need to give them material they can relate to or find genuinely engaging. This is the challenge. To that end Jugtu is a strong recommendation as a College text or Secondary school text.

For those who are humanitarians, or of a "Comrade" view it provided much mirth. For those who are more religious it puts a mirror up to hypocrisy and all that has become ill about the Punjabi Culture.

One can not call oneself a serious student of Punjabi Literature without reading this. It is the best Punjabi book I have read to date. It is the beginning of Western Punjabi Literature and definitely as important to Canadian Punjabi Literature as anything I have produced for British Punjabi Literature.

Do your students a favour. Give them this as a study of the "University of Life".

Jugtu is written by Sadhu Binning and is available from Chetna Parkashan, Ludhiana.