

Ajmer Rode

Writer and translator of 20 books comprising poetry, plays, prose and translation, Ajmer Rode has been awarded the Shiromani Sahitkaar Award by the Punjab Language Department. He is one of the leading NRI Punjabi poets and one of very few who are trying to create a niche for themselves in English poetry - a real hard task. But his poetry has already attracted a few critics of the language. Laurence Steven and Heather Arnett comment on poems in his book, *Poems at My Doorstep*: "In these family poems there is a simplicity and genuine emotion not often found in Canadian poetry."

But his simplicity in poems like *Mustard Flowers* and *Coffee in a Clear Glass Mug* also extends to smaller poems like *Heart of the Seed* that have power to expand, penetrate and radiate:

In the forest
I found the seed
that sprouted into the
entire forest.
In the seed I set forth
to reach the point
where growth of the seed
first began.
The instant I reached,
I spread over the entire forest.

Ajmer Rode can be quite dramatic and complex in poems like *Your Dream* and *Maharishi and the Baby*. His principal literary work, *Leela*, a 1000 page poetry book in Punjabi (co authored with Navtej Bharati) is testimony to the expanse and depth of his poetry. Dr. Susan McCaslin links his aphoristic poetry to ancient texts like Vedas and Upanishdas though his contemporary concerns are no small when he empathizes with disturbing issues like chronic *dalit* suffering:

When my mother's loose shirt
could no longer hide the universe
expanding round her belly button,
someone sneaked into her womb
felt my forehead
and stamped: achhoot, untouchable, outcaste.

'The principal role of literature is to capture and interact with the changing cultural consciousness and lend depth to it.' Poetry in his view is to recreate, not merely express, the personal experiences. And he is conscious of poetry's limited reach as opposed to drama that can tackle social problems and impress wider audiences. He has been writing plays mainly to address immediate social concerns but onwards he has other plans: 'I have not yet published my best plays; they touch deeper issues.'

After re-reading Kalidas and Sophocles he feels Indian literature still remains comparatively emotive, which incidentally explains why Punjabi prose lacks the logical character of Western prose. 'Though comparison with English literature is not always valid, modern Punjabi prose is more romantic; we are not given to think scientifically.' He thinks majority of Indian Punjabi writers, like their Canadian counterparts, fail to have deeper and reflective experience of the happenings around them. But his hopes, now, lie in youngsters who perceive things differently.

Ajmer Rode seems satisfied with the role he is playing as a writer, translator and promoter of the written world in Canada. In his late sixties, he has rather a youthful approach to writing, always ready to revise. *Nirlajj*, a full length Punjabi play saw three revisions, and several performances, before its recent publication. English play *Rebirth of Gandhi* already staged thrice in Canada is still in the revision mode.

A determined but unpretentious man, he is working on several projects including a new book length poetry manuscript in which he explores the grip of Caste system on Indian

psyche. The project already won him a Canada Council grant. We hope his poetic and intellectual capabilities help him weave his concerns and sensibilities into an authentic expression. The following lines from his manuscript in progress are reassuring:

“How choose
between the honey of a Vedic chant
and the agony of a goat
stabbed for divine sacrifice.”

Dr Attar Singh rightly termed his poetry as a turning point that expanded the scope of verse in Punjabi.