

Review Article

Reflections on Sant Singh Sekhon's Writings

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Tejwant Singh Gill, ed., *Sant Singh Sekhon: Selected Writings*, (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2005). 578 pp. (hb). Rs. 300 ISBN 81 260 1999 9.

At a time, when literary canons are in the process of revision and reconstruction, the volume under review draws attention to Sant Singh Sekhon, one of the tallest figures on the twentieth century Punjabi literary scene. He, along with Kartar Singh Duggal, Surinder Singh Narula, Gurbaksh Singh, Mohan Singh and Amrita Pritam, marked the transition from the pre-partition to the post-partition literature. A bit later writers like Narender Pal Singh, Prabhjot Kaur, and Mohinder Singh Sarna appeared on the scene.

The contribution of each of these writers lies in a different field whether it is in genre, language or regional differences. Sekhon's writings reveal a rural ruggedness combined with a deep sense of commitment to the soil and an understanding of the ordinary man's struggle for survival. A teacher by profession and a Marxist by conviction, Sekhon's oscillation between idealism and realism is a persistent reflection in his writing.

The present volume projects a rich balance of these two facets of Sekhon's thinking. It also contains sections from his poetry, fiction, prose and criticism. There are excerpts from his longer fiction, and also included are eight one-act plays. Sekhon's historical plays, however, are absent.

The value of the present volume needs to be placed in perspective both in the context of Punjabi literature and that of the national scenario. Born in 1908, Sekhon is a contemporary of writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. He was writing during the same period and for a while was a co-traveler of the later Premchand. Such horizontal placements are an essential part of literary evaluations. These writers were open to similar ideological influences and responded to similar social problems across the length and breadth of the country. Like Premchand and Anand, Sekhon was influenced by the Progressive Writers' Movement and was a Marxist both in conviction and practice to the extent of participating in active politics and even contesting elections. Tejwant Singh Gill's 'Introduction,' despite a couple of hyperbolic references, is a carefully written piece and of immense value particularly for the non-Punjabi reader. The 'Introduction' provides not merely the biographical details but also carries on a critical commentary on the social history of the period. The

divergent religious attitudes of his parents—his father’s relatively liberal leanings and his mother’s following Sikh beliefs systematized during the late nineteenth century—form a necessary background to Sekhon’s writing.

I must confess that when I picked up the volume, it was with the intention of sampling Sekhon’s work, especially the way language affected him. Few of this generation would know that he also wrote in English, especially in his early years. Secondly, I intended to test how I related to the quality of the translations by Gill. But once I began reading, the ideas, the socio-political analysis, the perceptive readings of Sikh history engrossed me and I kept on reading to discover Sekhon the writer who was an actor in the history of our times, a fearless actor with a secular mind and the courage to break conventions, a person willing to pay the price of being a rebel and, above all, a son of the soil.

The work is divided into eight sections: poetry, short stories, excerpts from novels, autobiography, articles, literary criticism and translations (by Sekhon from Punjabi into English). Genre divisions do make sense but the division into articles and literary criticism has overlapping concerns. Most of the articles specially ones like the ‘Specificity of Literature,’ ‘Impact of the October Revolution and Socialist Ideology on Punjabi Literature,’ ‘The Writer and the State,’ ‘The Jat in the Theatre,’ ‘A Note on the Short Story,’ all have either a theoretical or an ideological base. In the section ‘Literary Criticism,’ the piece on ‘*Qissas* and Romances’ falls into the category of genre criticism. Sekhon’s essays are extremely informative and reflect a deep scholarship. They trace historical roots of forms and genres and project their contemporary social reception. Early *kathas* were narratives either of love or of war. The word *qissa*, an Arabic term, came with the Muslims. Punjabi is a language, which is even today, written in two scripts, Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi. Open to two different traditions of languages and prosody, it has had the advantage of absorbing these influences to enrich its poetry. The romance narratives of Shirin-Farihad and Laila-Majnu are based on imported themes.

Again in the essay ‘Specificity of Literature’ he seeks to define the folk tale, identify its mythical content and explore the purpose of literature as it goes beyond ‘recreation and catharsis’ to help develop the human mind. In his attempt to hone the differences between religious/scriptural writing and literary/folk writing, Sekhon arrives at some very fine distinctions. Religious literature projects ideals, which are ‘unreal in the essential sense of the world’. This kind of writing he labels as para-literary whereas folklore is classified as pre-literary. When cultural influences intermingle hybrid forms are likely to emerge. There appears to be a great deal of applicability in these observations. For recently when I began a search for the reflections of partition politics and events in folk songs, I couldn’t find any piece, perhaps because mainstream literature has appropriated this function of reflecting contemporary political happenings.. This essay covers a great deal of historical and cultural ground and initiates a dialogic process between history and aesthetics.

One may have some reservation on the grounds of the division of the various sections, but that does not in any way detract from the value of the articles

themselves. It is amazing to realize the range of Sekhon's understanding of literature, his move from discipline to discipline, his reading of western writers and his deep rooting in the history of Punjab, its traditions and Sikh culture. Gill's detailed introduction does prepare us for all this but not fully, at least not in the manner in which Sekhon took up the various challenges that life brought him—the challenge of unemployment, socio-political persecution and consequent marginalization, the fear of failure and failure itself (in the elections that he contested), and the challenge of genre development. He took up the task of writing his autobiography on the request of J.S. Grewal, at that time the Vice-Chancellor of Guru Nanak Dev University. The idea was to write an autobiography without the indulgence of confession and without the luxury of ego-exaltation, a candid autobiography, which would not allow memory to be partially selective.

Sekhon, like many others of his generation, Faiz, Bachan and Firaq, was a teacher of English but chose to write in his mother-tongue. This bilingualism was an asset of that generation, one which we have lost somewhere on the way to our present fragmentation. For Sekhon, Punjabi was not the language of his emotions alone; it was also the language of his intellectual conceptualization. Thus the division is not one (English) as the language of intellect and the other (Punjabi) as that of his emotions instead it is a coming together of the two in both languages. This intellectual grounding in English is reflected through constant references to western critics, schools of criticism and movements.

His early poetry in English is not really great or original. The transference of culture to an alien language does not work all the way. But these poems reflect his awareness and parallelism to world events especially a poem composed in 1939 'Spanish Militia Man to His Wife.' But the moment we come to his short stories, a new world opens out. Each story takes up either a residual memory or an incident and builds upon it. 'Pemi's children' 'Kesu Flowers' and 'The Final Farewell' record sensitive moments and hold the reader's interest. At places one begins to feel that the idiom of the Punjabi original has been translated even in its syntactical order as for instance 'Rains were on since the last several days... The previous week was cloudy all through and the drizzle had continued unabated.' These are translations are not fully felicitous, giving rise to the problem of how to deal with the conflict between readability and fidelity. Transference is also damaging at times. 'Kesu Flowers' is not a patch on 'The Flowers of Kesu' which has its own poetic rhythm. But such lapses are very few. For the greater part, Gill has managed to carry the original across to the English translation with all its original appeal. The story 'The Ploughman' opens with the line 'Like a rhythmic twig, Sahibo had grown into an eighteen-year old maiden' (93) which beautifully captures the emotion of the original. Sekhon's own essay on 'The Art of Translation' raises some issues related to the difficulty of translation but they are not worked out in sufficient detail. Sekhon's own translations however have a wide range, right from the scriptural to the very contemporary, from Guru Nanak's compositions to Shiv Batalvi's *Lunha*.

The two sections, 'Articles' and 'Literary Criticism,' are the most rewarding. Sekhon is not obsessed with the weight of western opinions, he is not overawed by the standpoints of his predecessors; instead he works his way free of essentialisms and cultural positions to provide a fresh insight into history, literature and aesthetics. His discussion of Punjabi history, of the resistance movement of the Sikhs, and of the short-sightedness of their leaders are all refreshing in their candor.

The Sahitya Akademi publication is very moderately priced and within the reach of literature lovers. It is well brought out, though typographical errors have slipped through the press, Gill deserves high praise for all his work. This volume in English is valuable on many counts. The two most important ones are that it pays homage to a great writer, who has remained on the margins, and also because it reveals the importance of Punjabi literature. In the context of globalization, it is all the more important that regional cultures be made accessible lest they go underground. This volume contributes towards the making of a critical discourse across languages, worked through Indian pasts, cultures and epistemologies. As such, this volume is in itself, a validation of the act of translation.