



## Realistic Attributes of Punjabi Society: A Critique of Ajmer Singh

### Aulakh's Plays



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#### **Abstract**

This paper deals with Punjabi Playwright Ajmer Singh Aulakh's plays which illustrate the realistic features of the Punjabi society. Most of his plays are concerned with the period of Green Revolution and present contemporary social context in which the constant increase in expenditure and decrease in the income resources give rise to many complex socio-economic problems. Aulakh has passionately portrayed the stress of human minds through the centuries. The main subject of his plays is lack of land and poor status of farmers. Aulakh possesses a deep insight about rural life and has a good hold of rural language especially Malwai.

**Key Words:** *Aulakh, Economic, Green Revolution, Land, Realistic, Social.*

#### **Introduction**

The socio-cultural context plays a very important role in the construction of a literary text and also in its consumption. Serious and socially conscious Punjabi playwright Ajmer Singh Aulakh takes not only his thematic concerns but also the minor details of his plays from the society around them. In this sense, Aulakh's plays fall into the category of what can be called 'realistic writing'. 'Realistic' literature, in particular, is concerned with portraying the



contemporary reality. Realism is a very complex word, “. . . not only because of the intricacy of the disputes in art and philosophy to which its predominant uses refer, but also because the two words on which it seems to depend, real and reality, have a very complicated linguistic history” (Williams 257). A realistic text is a broad reflection of social, political and cultural aspects of the society. As a major critical approach to literature, realism sees a literary work as a reflection of society and its culture.

Ajmer Singh Aulakh is one of the prominent playwrights in Punjabi literature who has made a bold attempt to portray the deplorable economic conditions of small farmers of Punjab. He is gifted with a literary bent of mind and excellent command over the day to day language. His spontaneity and efficient use of literary devices make his plays highly readable. Aulakh's plays have a special significance in the history of realistic Punjabi theatre. Some of his plays like *Sat Begane*, *Bagane Bohar di Chhan*, *Ik Ramayan Hor* etc. are based on the social life of the Punjabi people and make a link between economic deprivation and issues of socially unacceptable relationships.

There is no aspect in the life of a farmer which has not been dealt with by the writer; whether the deterioration of lower class farmers due to the suppressions of upper class or the problems relating to marriage due to financial constraints or the problem of casteism or inter caste marriages. While speaking about Aulakh's plays, Balwinder Chahal states:

The theme of Aulakh's plays is the economic situation of lower class farmers of Malwa region. Most of his famous plays like *Begane Bohar di Chaan*, *Tudi Walla Kotha*, *Ik Ramayan Hor* and *Behkada Roh* depict the deteriorating situation of farmers. The position of most of the landless farmers in Punjab especially Malwa is declining day by day. \*(17)

So one can say that Ajmer Singh Aulakh is a realistic playwright of small farmers. These farmers are suffering economic setbacks in their daily life. They are not capable of fulfilling



even their ordinary desires. Sometimes, under the burden of economic compulsions, moral values come under strain. In the play *Sat Begane*, Jaikur has to enter in the illicit relationship with her brother-in-law, so as to prevent him from marriage and to stop the further division of land. It is a distinct characteristic of the play to depict such hard and harsh realities of life. Most of his plays present contemporary social context in which the constant increase in expenditure and decrease in the income resources give rise to many complex socio-economic problems. Satish Kumar Verma observes:

Aulakh was born in a lower class agriculturist family. Due to the adversities of the feudalistic system and his hard childhood experience, most of his characters derive their identity from lower agriculturist strata. The main subject of his plays is the lack of land and poor status of farmers. Ajmer Singh Aulakh while clarifying the reasons points out that due to his upbringing in a lower class farming family, the problem of lack of land repeatedly nag him.\*(236)

While dealing with incidents of Malwa region as the subjects of his plays, he has frequently employed *Malwai* dialect of Punjabi language. In the article *Ajmer Singh Aulakh Da Natak: Nikke Surjan Di Larai* Ravinder Singh says that Ajmer Singh Aulakh presents the problems of a farmer's life with a progressive and realistic outlook \*(1). For a long time, he has been dealing with the portrayal of the problems of farmer's life in the realistic method. T.R. Vinod supports the same opinion about Aulakh in the following words:

Aulakh is basically a playwright of tragedies of small farmers. The major part of Punjab's population is small farmers . . . Due to the joint cultivation of the land as a part of the ancestral property of the family; the economic crisis of the lower class farmers is getting worse day by day. Decline in the economic basis of farmers is the reality of social development which has been vividly represented with its cultural layers in his plays.\* (qtd. in Brar 43)



Unable to find a suitable partner in their own caste or class, some people try to buy their brides from poor people. Similarly, it happens that in a big family, parents can afford to marry only one son, and the rest of the brothers remain unmarried. This results in lot of individual and familial issues. Ajmer Singh Aulakh displays these types of problems in the play *Sat Begane* and also in his short play *Ik Ramayan Hor*. In this context, Giani Gurdit Singh illustrates:

Due to economic constraints and falling ratio of girls in the villages of Punjab, it has become a social custom now that if one son of a Jat gets married, it is considered that all of his sons are married.\* (33-36)

The protagonist of the play *Sat Begane* Bachna falls in love with a girl from lower caste of the same village and marries her. This alliance is against the conventions of the society. Intercaste marriage and marriage within the village is not accepted by rural Punjabi community, and this violation of social norms ruins the future of the family.

With the passage of time, it appears that people have forgotten their wrongdoing and Bachna and Jaikur start living their life in the village like a normal couple. They become parents of four sons. In the beginning of the play, all these four sons are of marriageable age. They face problems in finding a suitable match for themselves due to the inter caste marriage of their father with the girl from a lower caste. In the preface of *Sat Begane*, Raghbir Singh writes:

In a feudalistic society, the background, social status and financial status of families are evaluated by each side for the purpose of marriage. There would not be any match for the sons of Jaikur in such a society. If she gets a match for her sons, it would not be a suitable match but it would be a mismatch born out of greed for money or inability to find a match.\* (Aulakh, Sat 10)



Ajmer Singh Aulakh tries to bring about social change through his plays. His plays try to depict the emotional turmoil happening inside individuals trapped in an unjust system. He possesses a deep insight about rural life and has a good hold of rural language especially *Malwai*, therefore, he is able to lay bare the life of small farmers. Aulakh here also attempts to present the economic, social and psychological crisis. "The poor state of affairs of ordinary labour class farmers under present regime has been depicted artistically by him through his plays"\* (Kahlon 28).

The modern farmer faces a critical situation in the present capitalist model of the economy. The benefits of green revolution have been availed by big and influential landlords only, because use of new techniques of agriculture requires capital investment and unable to do so, farmers borrow money, but return of agricultural inputs for small farmers is very less, so they are trapped in a circle of debt. They have no other option except to sell their land. Farmers who are emotionally attached to their lands find it traumatic to part with their land. Aulakh's another play *Nikke Surjan di Larai* is a portrayal of such problems. A day to day increase in loan affects the farmers with many adversities and adds to their mental depression. The outcome of this depression is that sometimes the farmers start following the wrong path and incline towards committing suicide.

In Punjabi society, the land is the basis of the livelihood because agriculture is the main occupation. Ownership of the land is one of the parameters for determining the social status of people in rural areas. With decreasing land holding, reputation and social standing of the family also decreases and this results in the number of new problems. Due to less land holdings, the earnings of lower class farmers are also low, and they find it difficult to sustain their families in such a low income.

Fertile land is the guarantee for the better present and future of the family. So, the land has a very special and important place in the life of a farmer. He leaves no stone unturned to



take care of his landholdings. In pursuance of this aim, he does not even restrain himself from sharing his wife with his brothers. For example, in his play *Ik Ramayan Hor*, the character of Ram gives an indication of approval to his brother Lachha for establishing the illicit relationship with his own wife, Seeto. Aulakh has also portrayed different pictures of the women through his plays and made rural life the basic theme of his writings. To prevent division of the land after marriage, the custom of marrying only one son is also in vogue in some parts of the region. The rest of the unmarried sons always desire for the companionship of a woman. Aulakh has highlighted this problem in *Sat Begane* as well as in other plays also.

*Sat Begane* focuses on the domestic turmoil arising out of financial strain in the family of lower class farmers. Since land is the basis of livelihood for a farmer, so the loss of the land is a big emotional, psychological and economic set-back, and Aulakh presents this theme repeatedly in his plays. Raghbir Singh also observes in the preface of the play *Sat Begane*.

The whole play deals with the social, cultural and economic problems of lower class farmers which influenced their emotions and led them to dissatisfaction. The focus might be on a tragedy of the family, yet this play portrays a tragic picture of lower class labour of the whole village.\* (9)

The person is violating such a social custom, usage or ritual has to suffer the wrath of the society. In the play *Sat Begane*, Bachna violates the social rules in a dual manner. Firstly, there is no custom of inter-caste marriages in Punjabi community. Secondly, one cannot marry the girl from his own village, it is strictly prohibited. Bachna infringes this social custom in the passion of young age, but he suffers terrible consequences of this violation at the later stages of his life. Due to this act, his younger brother Bhangna remains unmarried. Even his sons could not get married due to his inter-caste and same-village marriage presents this theme repeatedly in his plays. The entire life of an individual is framed by the customs and rituals and one can go ahead in life only by adhering to these



customs. Casteism and poor financial position combine to worsen the problem because social evils have more effect on economically weaker sections of the society.

In Punjabi society, marriage is usually arranged by parents after careful scrutiny of concerned families and their histories. As society considers inter-caste marriage as a violation of social rules, so parents refrain from such alliances and it becomes difficult for children born out of this type of relationships to get any suitable matrimonial alliance.

This study unfolds many layers which are inter-related with each other. Moral- immoral relations are formed out of the economic burdens. Aulakh presents the effects of the economic change on the relationships in a family, society and culture. He also presents the social, economic and psychological pressures being faced by small farmers in a realistic manner. Ajmer Singh Aulakh has emerged as a strong and refined writer of small scale farmers. His writings are almost free from romanticism and idealism. His plays and writings are graced with the realities of life because his main objective is not only to present the harsh realities of life but also to give a new direction for the emancipation of the community.

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\*All translation is mine (author)