

# Ajeet Cour's *Khanabadosh* - A Family and Childhood Reminiscences: An Overview

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## **Abstract:**

Ajeet Cour, a Punjabi Sikh woman writer is one of the prominent literary personality in Punjabi literature. She has written in many genres of Punjabi literature, namely short-story, novelettes, memoir, autobiography, life-sketches and travelogue. As a creative writer, she has marked as a short story and non-fictional memoir writer. *Khanabadosh* is her prestigious autobiographical memoir which reveals her personal loss and gain, romance, migration from Pakistan, family, birth or birthplace or childhood nostalgia and so on. The way of narrating nostalgia of childhood is so vivid and microscopic that the reader is forced to visualize it.

**Keywords:** Memoir, autobiography, nostalgia, reminiscence

Ajeet Cour, a Punjabi Sikh woman writer, was born on 16 November 1935 in Lahore, Pakistan. She settled in India after partition. She had completed her education in Delhi and achieved the degree of M.A. in Economics and B.Ed. She took up journalism as a career and edited two directories of trade. By profession, she has been an economist and journalist but she seems to have been a writer by choice. She has written in many genres of Punjabi Literature, namely short-story, novelettes, memoir, autobiography, life-sketches and travelogue. As a creative writer, she has marked as a short story writer. She has published nine short-story collections, six novelettes, two memoirs and two autobiographical memoirs, a collection of personality sketches of creative people and a travelogue, besides her translations of popular English, American and Indian classics.

Ajeet Cour has achieved India's most prestigious *Sahitya Academy Award* for her famous memoir *Khanabadosh* (Nomad or Gypsy or Vagabond) originally published in Punjabi in 1986. Later this memoir was translated in English title *Pebbles in a Tin Drum* by Masooma Ali, Senior Lecturer in the English Department of Miranda House, University of Delhi. Ajeet has also written a second volume of memoir *Koorha Kabaara* (A Heap of Garbage) in 1997. Recently these two self-life writing is merged and published in an autobiography entitled *Weaving Water* by the two translators Masooma Ali and Meenu Monacha.

*Khanabadosh* is a typical memoir, almost all life stories start with the narrations of the author's birth or birthplace or childhood nostalgia. Instead, the story begins with the traumatic event happened in Ajeet's life. The story opens with the death of her younger daughter because of third-degree burn in France. She passionately loves her. After her death, she lost faith in life and wish to kill herself. She writes, "After Candy's death, I had a strong impulse to cast away the rag that life is. To fling it away, to burn it." (*Pebbles in a Tin Drum*, 1998 p.38). She was frustrated, collapsed and totally succumbed to life. Under the impression of trauma, she defines life,

"Life! Bits and pieces of old, useless, discarded scraps of cloth, shabby sewn together to form a rag. To form a multi-coloured, multi-patched quilt to wrap oneself in..... Of life that is nothing but the din of *pebbles in an empty tin drum*." (*Pebbles in a Tin Drum*, p.38).

Masooma Ali, the translator of *Khanabadosh*, selected the title of the book from this definition of life given by Ajeet Cour.

*Pebbles in a Tin Drum* is Ajeet Cour's compilation of bittersweet reminiscences. The translator Masooma Ali divided the original memoir into ten chapters, almost all chapters stand independently to each other. Within these chapters, she unfolded her life story as a mother, wife and beloved respectively. The first chapter One-Zero-One, as discussed above, reveals her bitter life memoirs. Her mute voice buzz when she reveals the clinical emptiness of the hospital and the pain of loneliness in the unknown country. The mother-daughter relationship is highlighted vividly.

The chapter entitled *Khanabadosh* (The Gypsy) portrays her family and birthplace in Lahore city. The way of narrating nostalgia of childhood is so vivid and microscopic that the reader is forced to visualize it. The story teller's imagination of Ajeet is reflected when her mother and grandmother showed her a large, spacious bed and said, "You were born on this bed." She sharply recounts the position and physical outlook of the bed.

"The bed was placed in the spacious, airy room in my grandmother's house in Lahore. A wide bed made of strong wood, it was supported by thick, round, carved legs which reminded me of the silver-encircled ankles of Haryanvi women working along with their men in the fields. At times the legs of the bed also looked like the arms of an Amazonian African pub owner who had donned chunky Mexican bracelets from her wrists to her elbows." (*Pebbles in a Tin Drum*, p. 40).

Ajeet Cour, originally is a storyteller, though we found poetic touch in her narration. She describes her grandmother's clothes made of gorgeous fabrics like gold-embroidered silk, satin, velvet, plush and brocade hide in a big trunk as a treasure. She recollects,

"I still remember a lovely, yellow silk fabric. Its memories still come visiting softly. It was really smooth, like a soft dough prepared with refined flour and butter. It was a shimmering satin fabric." (*Pebbles in a Tin Drum*, p. 45).

Gender distinction is also reflected in Ajeet Cour's childhood memories. She narrates the story of Muan who was living next door. She was a T.B. patient and looks extremely pale, thin and depressed. When she died, the curious child Ajit asked her father, "Darji, why didn't you give medicines to Muan?". Father answered sternly, "Children should not talk about such things. Go and read your books." The notorious child Ajeet heard the conversation of her parents, which reveals the pathetic condition of women of her time. The conversation of Darji and Beeji as follows:

"Dr. Raghubir Singh told me they had taken Muan to him for treatment last year." "The disease couldn't have advanced much at that time."

"No, it couldn't have. It is curable if detected early. There are drugs..."

"Why didn't they get her treated, then?"

"There is only one cure – injections. And are very expensive."

"But imagine....a young girl..."

"They probably did not want to spend so much money. It is a long drawn-out treatment."

"They would not mind spending money if one of their sons was ill. But for a girl..."

"They would have had to spend a lot of money if at all she married."

"They must have considered all that before deciding not to get her treated."

"Waheguru!" My mother sighed deeply. (*Pebbles in a Tin Drum*, p. 56).

The innocent child observed and listened the prevailing gender discrimination from childhood. The curious mind of the child takes this incident seriously and later it is reflected in her works. The strong feminist voice of Ajeet Cour is the result of the experiences she crossed in her life.

Ajeet Cour also recounts some minor incidents which infuse feminist instincts. Her grandmothers often said, "Girls do not eat Parathas." (*Pebbles in a Tin Drum*, p.51). Her mother Beeji furiously said, "She is a growing-up girl now. She should not be taken to the fairs anymore." (*Pebbles in a Tin Drum*, p.63). Her father Darji said, "It is not proper for nice girls to wear necklaces like this at a fair. Put it on when you get

home.” (*Pebbles in a Tin Drum*,p.62). When her younger brother Jasbir tore books, broke the nibs of the pens and toppled the ink-pot and she complained to Darji but he would not punish Jasbir because he is a boy.

The condition of women in the twentieth century in India was not good. Women defined, as the centre of culture but considered inferior to the male. She has been suppressed and oppressed in the male-dominated society. The contemporary Indian women writers have voiced their feelings through their sensibilities, their awareness about feminine problems. It is the male society, which compels her roles according to their convenience. She is forced to act as either a slave or a puppet. Ajeet Cour boldly faces all feminine problems in her life and she poignantly narrates her personal pathos in her memoir. Prof. Meena Sodhi has advocated women’s capacity of critical resistance in her critical work, *Indian Writing in English-The Autobiographical Mode*.

“However, we find whole women’s autobiographies who consider women’s culture, as a ‘sub-culture’, men’s culture being the main culture, with the women confirming mainly to it. A woman is taught to be selfless, submissive and is only a daughter, a wife or mother.” (Sodhi 84).

### **Conclusion:**

Khanabadosh a typical autobiographical memoir depicts a life beset by tragedies such as premature death of young daughter, an abusive marriage, an unsupportive family, as a single parent responsibility of two daughters, earn livelihood from writing work, yet it carries a message of courage, hope and happiness. This memoir reveals narrators real identity as a bold and brave woman who alone standing up against injustice and discrimination in every sphere of life.

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