

Immigration, The Pain And The Struggle Of Belonging To Forge A New Life

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Abstract

The relationship between poverty and migration is the subject of this research paper. Evidence suggests that migration reduces poverty by helping some people to get employment in foreign countries by utilizing their education and skills. It also reveals that poor migrants, who donate organs and borrow money at heavy rates of interest, spend it on the migration process. They struggle a lot in foreign countries to survive because they lack the education and skill to get employment. This article falls under the category of British and Postcolonial Literature. It focuses on topics that deal with real-life situations which reflect the current refugee crisis. Sunjeev Sahota and Monica Ali are the two writers whose families originally come from the Indian subcontinent. They have devoted intense efforts to casting light on the personal ordeals of migrants. They have pieced and rehandled the stories, by carefully reviewing the available sources of information. This article examines the texts, *The Year of Runways* by Sunjeev Sahota, which focus on illegal migrants and their struggle to adapt to native cultures and traditions. This paper sets out to explore the novels from a postcolonial perspective of migration.

Sunjeev Sahota is a leading figure in contemporary British literature. Despite the fact that he writes in a familiar style his novels address some of the most tenacious social and political issues of our time, from social dislocation in contemporary India to the hidden labour behind Sheffield takeaways to the radicalized generation responding to twenty-first-century British society. The stories are set in Northern England, but the themes of his two best-selling novels, as well as the author's lifestyle, are deeply global. Sahota divides his time between his Sheffield home, his Indian family, and an international diary of literary work. Last year, Sahota has become the first University Writer in Residence at Leeds Beckett University, participated in a British Council trip to promote contemporary British literature in Russia, and won the EU Prize for Literature during the immediate aftermath of Brexit.

Keywords: Poverty; migration; employment; culture; tradition.

Introduction

Caste Discrimination and Poverty cause Illegal Migration:

The Year of the Runways by Sunjeev Sahota is focused on Tochi, a Chamaar who struggles a lot to earn money to support his family. He immigrates to England illegally after the slaughter of his family by a group of Hindu nationalists;

Tochi is seventeen years old and has spent the last four years working in the Indian state of Punjab. He informs the household's owner that he must resign because his father is ill and has lost both his arms. He spends the day on the bus and the night at a hotel. He plays cards with a boy while waiting for the next bus, but his mother takes the boy away when Tochi reveals his entire name, exposing that he is a 'Chamaar'.

“The boy was sitting across the aisle from Tochi and they used their knees

for a table, but when the boy asked Tochi his name – ‘No, your full name’ – and Tochi told him, the boy’s mother made some excuse and switched places with her son.” (29)

People from the oppressed castes are not authorized to play: Tochi learns his lesson about keeping his name a secret. His silence is the most direct kind of resistance he can conjure in the face of oppression. He learns to be cautious once he becomes an auto-wallah, a three-wheeler taxi driver who shuttles rich upper-caste ladies from one rich enclave to the other. We can observe the subtle casteism inherent within these upper caste people in such conversations on the rikshaw, one of which is quoted below:

“Accha, I’m sorry. But it’s so hard to know what to say these days. I mean, are you even still

called chamars’? Legally? Am I allowed to say that?”

“You can call me what you like. I only want to drive you and get paid for it.”

“So what should I call you?”

Tochi said nothing. (51)

When the woman presses on the aspect of caste, Tochi responds with a brisk answer. This indicates his unwillingness to speak on the subject matter of caste, he dodges himself from the scrutiny of the woman by reiterating his sole job, driving her, and getting paid for it. When confronted with a direct and explicit question, his silence remains his only answer.

Tochi is obligated to refer to himself before the people of the dominating castes as a Chamaar; Sahota demonstrates that Tochi is practically powerless owing to persistent tendency of social discrimination. Sahota highlights the pervasive bias by including it at each step of Tochi’s job search. “Annihilation of Caste” a speech prepared by Dr. B.R Ambedkar, mentioned his views on how caste discrimination effects employment.

“By not permitting readjustment of occupations, Caste becomes a direct cause of much of the unemployment we see in the country.”(17)

Tochi internalizes his reactions and prevents himself from becoming overly angry as a result of the onslaught of discrimination he has faced. This is a coping mechanism; Tochi will be unable to find work if he reacts furiously to every injustice he encounters. When he sees the Maheshwar Sena threatening a caste purge, the idea that Bharat is for the pure of blood and blood will be shed to keep it pure threatened him. Three, four, five people were on the stage, dressed in saffron and passing between them a microphone boxed in an orange collar. Their words boomed – loud and fuzzed with static – through speakers tied to tree trunks all around. They spoke of the need to regain control, that their religion was becoming polluted, and the gods were being angered. The country, according to them, was increasingly infested by achhuts, churehs, chamaars, Dalits, Adivasis, backwards, scheduled– whatever new name they decided to try and hide behind. They needed to be put back in their place. Not given land and handouts and government positions. He follows his passenger’s instructions to depart rather than speak out against it,

“Anger flamed inside Tochi, and Radhika Madam was tapping his shoulder, urgently. ‘Please, let’s go. This is too awful.’ ” (58)

Tochi is duped into taking the job because he recognises his lack of power and credibility. Because his caste limits his ability to assert his identity, he makes no further attempt to complain. Tochi’s decision to immigrate marks a turning point in the conflict between perpetual suffering and independence. It’s also worth noting that Tochi’s motivations have shifted dramatically since the death of his entire family: separated from his family, he’s no longer financially or emotionally tied to the farm on which he grew up. Tochi, unlike many immigrants, does not need to immigrate in order to offer financial security for his family. As a result, he wants to leave his hometown and has no desire to return. Tochi recognises that he will be socially and physically isolated as long as he stays in Punjab. Furthermore, he lost his faith, which was his second link to his origin; Granthi, a religious leader, claimed that Tochi was not seen praying since his family died.

We find the character of Avtar Nijar in the novel to be in a similar predicament, bitten by financial struggles. He is the “youngest conductor employed by BUTA Travel” (102).

Before returning to his mother, Avtar pays a visit to his father, a silks salesman. Avtar wakes up, eats dinner with his family, and then sits on the balcony, gazing at the vista. Eventually, in the cement factory's bell tower, he meets his love, Randeep's sister Lakhpreet Sanghera, and the two get physically intimate.

"She arrived, nervous and beautiful. Her frock, red-blue with elasticated ribbing beneath her breasts, showed her collarbones, flaring out. Around her throat she'd tied a silk scarf. She wore these kinds of dresses more often these days. He wasn't sure how he felt about them but he didn't comment. She hung by his side until he circled an arm around her waist. She stalled and looked over her shoulder and then yielded" (112).

Tochi's social standing is diametrically opposed to that of Avtar's. He comes from a noble shareef family. This social standing is undeniably advantageous, but it also comes with a set of expectations. The restrictions with which his family are bound are actually a confinement of his spirit,

"Sex, as far as Avtar was concerned, was not something boys from respectable families got themselves involved in" (113).

The morning after receiving his pay, Avtar walks with his buddy and colleague Harbhajan, who has stolen a businessman's cell phone left at the marketplace. Avtar chastises Harbhajan for doing this sort of robbery saying, "He plucked the phone from Harbhajan's pocket. 'You could buy ten of these if you wanted.'" (115)

On the other side, Harbhajan is seen to be unconcerned. At home, Avtar's mother quizzes Navjoht on math problems. Over supper, Avtar tried to persuade his mother to let him work in another country. His mother says no, but adds that the Sangheras are moving to a new city the next day and informs that she is aware of Avtar and Lakhpreet's relationship. Avtar and Lakhpreet make a fearful promise to stay faithful to each other that night at the temple.

Thus, we see how not only caste but also visa hierarchies infiltrate the community of illegal immigrants locked up in the Sheffield apartment. The issuance of a visa, or the smuggling of a migrant from his country of origin to his country of destination, is solely driven by financial considerations. The novel

provides insight into the operation of illicit migrant smuggling. In the narrative, local lawyers become the arbiters of smuggling and human trafficking. As an example, Vakeelji provides Avtar with a variety of visa options.

"There are several visas you can opt for, he said, dully. Ultimately, it came down to the concept of risk and reward.

'And what I can afford,' Avtar said.

'Naturally.' The marriage route was usually the most expensive, but you could work legally and it more or less guaranteed full rights after one year. It could sometimes take some time to find the right girl. At the opposite end, holiday visas were cheaper, but you can't work and you have to come back. 'Many don't, of course. But then many don't find work either. So they starve in a shed at the bottom of some chacha's garden.' He could always get Avtar there illegally" (171)

The focus shifts to Randeep, whose father locks himself in the bathroom prior to the relocation. Randeep gets enraged by Lakhpreet's outfit from the terrifying rite she had just performed with Avtar. Here, the focus shifts back to Avtar, who is in an office with his boss Nirmal – Harbhajan's father – and has to cancel his trip to see Lakhpreet because he needs to work an extra shift that weekend. Harbhajan rides on a motorcycle after a heated argument with his father. That week, he is grumpy at work and sets alarm at an inconvenient time. He also invites Avtar to a party the following week. The gathering is in a bar. After leaving Avtar in the bar, Harbhajan goes upstairs to consume drugs. Avtar has a conversation with a woman who makes fun of him because of his conservative beliefs. Avtar eventually drags Harbhajan away and rides his motorcycle home with him. When Harbhajan returns home and confronts his father, he gets enraged. Nirmal says he drove Avtar home and that he

"did the right thing. Under the circumstances" (130).

At work, Sreenath, a fellow driver, complains on Harbahajan, who steals company funds to buy drugs. Avtar angrily confronts Harbhajan, but accepts his offer to drive to visit Lakhpreet. The boys drive for four hours to Lakhpreet's new home, and she eats lunch with Avtar, mentioning Avtar's possible move to America, while Harbhajan leaves to find drugs. Later,

Harbhajan proceeds to crash the car on the way home and injures his ankle, and upon return Nirmal tells Avtar that Harbhajan had bought the car with stolen funds. Avtar gets fired from his job; returning home, his mother tells him that his brother Navjhot had scored the top five percent on his examinations.

Randeep said that his family moved frequently due to his father's job postings. Lahkpreet questioned Randeep about the availability of jobs abroad, but could not attain an answer since she would not say she was asking on behalf of Avtar. Randeep went to university during the week and visited his family on weekends. At the university, he developed a crush on Jaytha, a girl living in his building. One weekend, Randeep's father – who had been suffering panic attacks and showing signs of dementia – went on a walk with Randeep, during which Randeep lied that he and Jaytha had been dating for a month. When they encountered a neighbour, Randeep's father became disoriented and grew violent; upon returning home, he screamed and threw a chair at the wall. At the end of the weekend, Randeep returned to college and watched television with Jaytha. The next morning, he received a call from his mother and returned home to meet his father's lawyer, who warned the family that his father's employer may not renew his contract if his erratic behaviour continued. Randeep found a job working in an insurance office during weekends, then added another job working at a night processing shift.

“‘I’ll sort it out, Mamma. I’ll work. Listen to me. I’ll work.’

He joined the processing shift, nine p.m. to five a.m. There were four of them and overnight they had to log the day's customer claim requests and vet them for ‘completedness’.”(154)

Randeep failed a test at school and the principal encouraged him to improve his performance, as he was being considered for National Institute of Technology (NIT), a prestigious engineering school. At his night job, Randeep called a customer named Michael in England and eventually befriended him, calling him frequently to see how he was doing. Returning home on a brief leave from school, Randeep handed his father, who attempted to strangle him. The next day, his father seemed to have

improved and the two played backgammon. Randeep ran an errand and returned to find the door locked. A neighbour opened the door with a crowbar and they found Randeep's father attempting to hang himself. Returning to college, Randeep received a call from Jaytha, and once she came to his room, he described the events of the weekend. The two began kissing but when Jaytha did not want to continue, Randeep pushed down her arms and ripped her clothes. However, her initial reaction was of sensuousness.

“He'd never felt this kind of drowning sensation before. It was his first kiss. His first anything, and suddenly the world seemed like a less difficult place. Maybe things would turn out all right. His father would get better and he'd go to NIT and Jaytha would be welcomed into his family”. (163)

As the events began to unfold in the room, his roommate, Abhijeet, entered the room and immediately told him to leave. The next morning, he was summoned to the student services office and expelled because Jaytha had lodged a sexual complaint against him. Randeep was allowed to continue attending school for a week so he could receive his paycheck, but was shoved down the stairs and sworn at by other students.

At the end of the week, a group of students bound his ankles and wrists and locked him in a classroom cabinet. When he pounded on the door, the teacher opened it and he fell out in front of the other students. Avtar and Lahkpreet consulted a lawyer about moving overseas, who advised Avtar to get a student visa. Avtar told his parents that he planned to move to London and they discouraged him. He visited Harbhajan, who had fallen deathly ill as a result of his drug abuse. The next section was set six months after Randeep was freed from the cabinet in the classroom. He had written a letter to Jaytha apologizing for his actions and had not told his family the reason for his expulsion. One day, Randeep came home to find his lawyer and a Sikh woman from London, willing to marry him so he could obtain his visa. They were married in a small ceremony in the temple, and she returned home. The lawyer produced wedding cards, a photo album and video from the wedding, and fake love letters, and told him that Avtar was also planning to move overseas and that the boys should travel together. The

next section shifts perspective to Avtar, who had an operation to remove his kidney for money to pay the visa fees. He also borrowed a large sum of money from a creditor known as 'Pocket Bhai,' and made a plan to pay the creditor back at an interest rate resulting in five times the original sum. At the end of the summer, Avtar and Randeep flew together to England; and while on the plane, they talked about Randeep's new wife. In England, the boys stayed with Randeep's aunt Massi and her children, Jimmy and Pehn. Their migration to England is one that of unscrupulous means, this serves as an indication of the kind of circumstances Indians had back in early days of independence.

Migrants' search for Opportunities.

In *Between Worlds*, Edward Said discusses how he was lured by intellectual refugees like Joseph Conrad, Theodore Adorno, Eric Auerbach, and others. Conrad is depicted as Said's alter ego with a significant difference among all of these intellectual exiles. Said finds comparisons between himself and Conrad, arguing that his preference for Conrad's works stems primarily from their shared affinity. Both were exiles who struggled with feelings of isolation, disorientation, and confusion. Said contends that, unlike Conrad, whose mobility was limited to the region of Europe, requiring him to travel from Poland to England, Said's mobility was far more distant, requiring him to travel from one world to another, entirely different and alienating. "Once again, I recognised that Conrad had been there before me—except that Conrad was a European who left his native Poland and became an Englishman, so the move for him was more or less within the same universe," Said explains the distinction. Conrad's "mobility" "within the same world".

We can deduce from the preceding paragraph that people who migrate from developed to developed countries have no problem adjusting to their new surroundings. However, those who migrate from underdeveloped and emerging countries to affluent countries encounter several cultural, political, and language challenges. The Year of the Runways occurs between the winter of 2003 and the autumn of 2004 when Theresa May's Home Office was making it more difficult for immigrants to enter the UK (Jones 2015).

Sahota's focus on the obstacles that immigrants experience indicates that they are an inevitable aspect of their new lives. Sahota's story allowed the reader to easily perceive the various problems that each character faced, as well as how their stories intertwine.

In an interview, Sahota shares his experiences which would later find space in his novel. With his wife and two young children, Sahota has recently moved into a new, red-brick house on one of Sheffield's leafy suburban hills, with a view over the city. Ecclesall Road, where much of the action of the book takes place, is just around the corner. "I knew there were houses in Sheffield full of 10, 12 or 15 young men; you hear stories," he says. One such example from the novel is Randeep who shares his home with eleven labourers, two of them are Avtar and Tochi. All these labourers confine themselves to a secret hideout in search of job opportunities. These labourers are in constant dislocation and lack a fixed social identity. In sufficing this idea Millington said "The migrant is a figure whose social position is mobile and does not have a fixed identity. A fixed social identity is a marker of privilege and power whereas a migrant is always identified with displacement and movement". (63)

In addition to the difficulties of immigrant life, Tochi faces another challenge: caste prejudices in the Indian community that have spread to England. Tochi's potential fiancée is Ruby. If he marries her, his Visa problem will be solved. He believes it will not happen. When Ruby's family learns of Tochi's caste, their marriage is called off.

"'He sounds angry,' she said. 'Maybe you should go.'

He stayed where he was. He'd see it through to the end.

It wasn't the father, though, it was Auntie who flung open the door and

charged towards him. 'Is he right? What are you?'

'I am a man,' Tochi said.

'Don't get clever. You a chamaar?'

Tochi stood up. 'I've told you what I am. Now give me what you owe

me.'

And this – this demand – seemed to enrage her further, and her eyes

widened horribly. 'You bhanchod cunt! You dirty beast! What do you think

you are?'"(326)

Tochi becomes enraged by caste discrimination and he abandons his pals when they get to know about his caste.

Sahota clearly makes an argument about the necessity and dangers of personal sacrifice through his consistent and thorough portrayal of the daily struggles that immigrants face. For the four main characters, success is synonymous with sacrifice, and opportunities can only be found at the expense of one's own life. The ongoing job search that the protagonists must endure throughout the novel is the clearest example of this theme—a substantial section of the text is devoted entirely to expressing the characters' emotional reactions to the never-ending search for work.

When jobs are few, the characters are forced to choose between keeping their friendships, loyalty and pursuing personal wealth. This decision erodes their moral compass, as proven by Tochi's behaviour. He got the job of Avatar by taking a low-paying job. The chat between the owner, Mallette, and Tochi is a fine example of moral erosion.

"‘I need work.'

'My name's Malkeet. Bhaji to shits like you.'

Tochi adjusted: 'I need work, bhaji.'

'Welcome to the world. Nothing here.'

'Wait. Please.'

Malkeet waited.

'I'll work for less than the one that's gone to London.'

He seemed amused by this. 'That takes guts.'"(330)

Avatar, who got nothing out of his migration. He had trouble paying off the debts he had inherited from Pocket Bhai, a vicious creditor. Pocket Bhai always drew a lot of attention. We

discussed one of the instances where Pocket Bhai's employees interacted with clients.

"Avatar handed the money over. 'It's all there. So tell your uncle not to

bother my family. Do you understand?'

Bal counted it, note by note. 'Good. It's just my share, then.'

'Arré, go fuck a cow. I can't pay extra every—',

He slapped Avatar. 'It's two o'clock in the bastard morning, I'm in the

arse-end of nowhere and you want to argue the fucking toss?'"(10)

Avatar was unable to pay off his debts because he lost his job due to Tochi's willingness to work for less money. He was attempting to renew his visa by taking exams in England. Dr. Cheema advised him to take the exam since even if he failed, his visa would be renewed. He received his exam results and failed.

Even Avatar and Randeep are willing to steal in order to survive. Avatar stole a chicken from the shop where he used to work and used it to feed himself and Randeep for three days. They then stole a crate of chickens and sold them to other employees. The unsold hens were stored in Randeep's chamber by Avatar. When the two boys were discovered stealing more chickens, Malhkeet did not demand his money but instead threatened to contact the cops if he caught them again.

Butler emphasizes the distinction between the two intersecting ideas of precariousness and precarity in *Frames of War* (2009); the former describes a broad ontological condition of fragility as an intrinsic aspect of being human: as she notices, "there is no thinking of life that is not precarious" (Butler 2016: 25). Precarity, on the other hand, denotes "that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death". In the novel, the three characters leave England because they are in a condition of precarity that leads them to poverty, starvation, and displacement.

In *The Year of the Runaways*, narrative framing can be identified with what Butler calls “the politics of moral responsiveness” (41) at the social failure to meet some or all of the basic conditions for survival: “shelter, work, food, medical care, legal status” (13). The boys also feel alienated not just from the world they live in, but from their homes and families. With each new experience, they are further removed from the worlds they had known. Avtar’s fight with Lahkpreet is representative of this – the boys are becoming bitter over the service they are forced to perform for their family, and demand respect for their sacrifices. Without a clear purpose for their struggles, it is difficult for them to maintain the motivation to fight for survival and employment. Finally serving no purpose, they return to their native land.

CONCLUSION

Another issue addressed only tangentially by migrant fiction writers is the precise depiction of the journey from homeland to new place, as well as the concept of return, which depicts the migrant character's feelings provoked by a visit to the old home.

While the personal tragedies or misfortunes that drive the characters of *The Year of the Runaways* into exile may elicit sympathy, the disadvantages that they discover upon arrival show that flight is not the only option. Sunjeev Sahota's stories are laced with invites to reconsider and recalculate the dangers of migration to one's life and well-being.

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