

## Contemporary Parvasi (Diasporic) Punjabi Stories: Presentation and Dissemination of Migrant Consciousness

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### ABSTRACT

*The history of Punjab is stained by invaders, trauma of partition and agriculture crisis. All these factors to a great extent were responsible for the migration of the younger generation of Punjab to the foreign lands. The dream of a better life, better job opportunities and to create a new identity different from the shattered one in the native land becomes the reason behind their uprootedness from the cherished motherland. However, this migration and the dream of a new life are not without the cost, as an individual has to experience physical and mental traumas of various kinds. Therefore, diasporic Punjabi literature is laden with the theme of quest for identity, nostalgia, and sense of guilt for forsaking the native land and family. It can be apparently observed in the psyche of the Punjabi diasporic writers. These writers often turn to their homeland for a number of reasons such as continual search for their roots, to immortalize the history of motherland, sometimes to re-energize ones' aching soul and to relive old memories. This literature initiates the emergence of a new cultural synthesis also called hybridity which has its own unique identity as it reflects not only the homeland but also the foreign land. The psychology of the diasporic Punjabi writers is predominantly pervaded with the elements of nostalgia as they try to search themselves in the ambience of a new culture. Such literature is written in the backdrop of the cultural traits of their native land and an endeavour to adjust into the cultural space of the other land.*

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### Introduction

The term *Parvaas*(Diaspora<sup>i</sup>) is the Punjabi translation of the English word immigrant which means leaving your mother land for a foreign country. It is a combination of two words: *Par* and *Vas*. The former refers to the foreign/other and the latter refers to settlement. In this way, it refers to shifting to the other land far away from your mother land. In Punjabi literature, sometimes the term *Awaasa* Punjabi translation of the term immigrant is used instead of *parvaas*. Semantically, the terms *parvaas* and *avaas* are different whereas the *parvaas* refers to moving to a foreign land, *avaas* refers to permanently settling in the foreign country and simply being looked at as a foreigner by the natives. For instance, when a Punjabi leaves his country for America, he will be considered a *parvasi* by his fellow Punjabis. But after settling there, he will be considered as *anavaasi* by the Americans. Therefore, the term *parvas* is more appropriate to refer to Punjabis shifted abroad. Many critics have attempted to define the term: "The individuals who leave their native land for foreign countries in search of job and better economic opportunities are called *parvas*" (Singh, S.P. 3).

Therefore, a *parvasi*(diaspora<sup>ii</sup>) can be defined as a person who shifts to a foreign country for an uncertain time in search of livelihood. The dream of a better life, better job opportunities and to create a new identity different from the shattered one in the native land becomes the reason behind their uprootedness from the cherished motherland. The history

of the world reveals that emigration is not a recent phenomenon. The existence of Aryan, Shakk, Sythian civilizations in India attests to this fact. It also indicates towards immigration as very much characteristic of human behavior. They had come to India as invaders but settled permanently due to the rich culture and ecology of the country. Similarly, in 11<sup>th</sup> century India faced the attacks by Mughal and Arabs and in 16<sup>th</sup> century the Mughals established their empire in India. A large number of Muslim families who had come along with these invaders permanently settled in India. On the other hand, the history of Europe also highlights that immigration was a usual practice. After the French Revolution of 1789, the European France, Germany, Holland, and Portuguese ventured in search of raw materials or to sell the prepared goods. The enterprise of the West also engulfed India in its folds. The English, French and Portuguese came to India with an excuse of doing business but colonized it later. The Europeans also colonized America, Africa, Canada, Australia, New Zeland, Kambodia, Kochin, Malaya and China to name some of them.

In context of Punjabi diaspora the Punjabis immigrated to foreign lands, had to experience many hardships due to their nativity and due to the racist mentality of the foreign countries. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse some selected stories by diasporic Punjabi writers such as Jarnail Singh's "Do Taapoo" (Two Islands), Darshan Singh

Dheer's "ApneApneRaah" (Their Own Way), RaghbirDhand's "Kaya Kalap" (Metamorphosis), Sadhu Binig's "Liho Lathe" (Lost their Way or Lost), ParvejSandhu's "MutthiBharSupne" (A Handful of Dreams), and AmarjeetChandan's "Valaitiye" (Foreigners). These writers have poignantly presented the mental trauma, migrant consciousness, and social and cultural impact of migration. For this purpose, the paper focuses on the basic concerns of diaporic Punjabi short story tradition such as nostalgia, cultural tensions, economy, and racism etc. and in this way, foregrounds the harsh reality of Punjabi diaspora.

### Nostalgia

The term nostalgia is derived from two words *Nostos* and *Algia*. According to Merriam Webster dictionary the term refers to "a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition". In simple terms it is defined as a state of being homesick. But in context of diasporic literature the term attains the meaning beyond homesickness. As an individual remembering his native land might not be missing his home, or the places he visited; it on the other hand, refers to his sentimental yearning for the life that he had lived in the past because he is not able to identify and adjust himself in the culture of the host country. He feels isolated and alienated in the new culture which is alien to him as he cannot forget his roots; the place where he was born and brought up with. The cultural practices, ritual, and dogmas occupy his consciousness and he feels divided as his body is in another country but his mind lurks in the past. The materialistic comforts that he has attained are not sufficient to comfort his soul. He feels disconnected from his surroundings. Such people try to find some solace by sustaining their culture in the foreign land though these efforts are not fruitful most of the times. However, they are not able to get rid of their cultural values and their heart longs for their homes, cultures and families always.

RaghbirDhand's story "Jad"/ "Jarr" (Root) highlights the struggle and hardships faced by the Punjabi diaspora. One can observe the cultural tension in the dialogue between two characters about life abroad:

"Nandu, do you think, people in foreign countries also make *mari*<sup>1</sup> for their dead". "No, Sai Baba" I replied. "Sohow do they remember their dead?" he asked surprisingly again. "They put the dead in a coffin and put in up on the wheels, after that I don't know what happens? May be turns into ashes in the furnace." He remained silent for some times and then said, "It is absurd then, if that country is not your own, at least you should have your own *mari* over there. You you should be rooted somewhere." (DhandShan-e-Panjab 52-53)

Moreover, the Punjabis living in foreign lands are not able to disconnect with their mother land. It seems as if their bodies

are in host country but their soul is in the native land. Most of the Punjabis leave their home in search of work and livelihood. When the hands that had worked in the fields had to toil in the factories, then they realize the harsh reality of this new life. The physical and mental trauma of the Punjabi is poignantly depicted in Darshan Singh Dheer's story "ApneApneRaah" (Their Own Ways) through the character of Bhola Singh. He goes abroad in search of better life but is troubled with demands and expectations that the host country poses from Punjabi immigrants. He starts doubting his own decision to emigrate:

One day, while sitting and pondering over his decision, he thinks, why had he come here? For what purpose? To die? If he had to die why didn't he die in his own country? Dying out of starvation was much better than doing this work. (Dheer 24)

Similarly, Riaaj the protagonist of RaghbirDhand's story "Vaachhar" (The Rainfall) feels alienated and devastated because of indifferent attitude of the people of the host country. They do not feel for him, he is just a menial worker for them. Even he is not able to adjust and assimilate into the culture of the other country. "It's been two years since he has come to this country, but even now he wanders like a crazy cow" (DhandKaya Kalap 48). A critic Diwedi writes in this context, "Migration always implies change: the change involves the risk of losing one's identity. Whilst the migration recognize him/herself in his/her new image, the people around him/her do not accept his/her otherness. Therefore, s/he is compelled to face everyday life through a continuous oscillation between reality and dream" (Dwivedi 2). The protagonist of the story "Lacchmi" (Mother Goddess/Money) can also be discussed in this light. He belonged to class of land-owning community called "Lambardaar". When he has to serve other in the foreign country, he feels humiliated. He keeps telling stories of him being a Lambardaar (land-owner) in his own country, probably to seek some respect from the native residents; he is told by White to go back to his country and be the *Sardaar* (Master).

Bakhtaur Singh was shattered to core after reaching the foreign land. Nothing here, seems to him of his worth. He felt that as if his entire life and status turned upside down. He felt inferior to even those who were ruled by his elders for years. (DhandUs Paar 123)

### Racism

Another setback to the Punjabi immigrants is racism<sup>iii</sup>. In India, people are divided into castes, classes, ethnicity, and religious identities. But on the foreign land, they have to face racism due to which people belonging to places other than the West are looked down upon. They are humiliated for their skin colour, accent and native land. The Punjabi diasporic stories are psychological analysis of the suffering of mixed feeling of love and hate of the immigrants caused due to racial prejudice against the Punjabis in foreign lands.

<sup>1</sup>Mari is a small hut type structure made of bricks in the memory of people who die by the family members. They are remembered by lightening a diya (light) over there.

They adopt various strategies to survive in the unpleasant atmosphere of racism. They are humiliated in public and private and are called names. However, the pathetic condition of their families back home keeps them going and they remain determined to stay despite all the prejudices of the native people. The agony of pain of immigrants facing racism is portrayed by Raghubir Dhand in his stories "Dirty Colour", and "NaviKisam Da Naag" (The New Kind of Snake). He has also presented the conflict between blacks and whites in these stories. The story "Dirty Colour" foregrounds the hatred that the natives feel for the immigrants. When the protagonist of the story who is a bus conductor, comes forward to help a woman with a child, she snubs him in an arrogant tone: "Don't touch my daughter, you dirty colour" (Dhand *Kaya Kalap* 44).

The story "NaviKisam da Naag" (The New Kind of Snake) hints towards snake of racism. It bites an individual in such a manner that he does not realise at once, but it gives deepest wounds to him. The protagonist of the story, Mushtaqis a teacher. He falls in love with one of her students and she also reciprocates his love. One day, she does not come to the class and he decides to enquire about her well-being. When he goes to her house, her mother insults him for his dark complexion. The colour of his skin becomes the reason behind the hatred the students' mother has for him. She complains the authorities of the college and as a result of it, he is replaced by a White female tutor. In this way, the story highlights the discrimination that immigrants have to experience. It also indicates the children are not aware of caste, class, color, or religion but it is the society and social conditioning that makes them prejudiced towards other human beings. Similarly, the story "Kiran" depicts the racial prejudice faced by the Punjabi immigrants. The protagonist FazalIahi is admitted in the hospital. He becomes of the victim of racial discrimination as the doctors and nurses do not like him. He experience the mental trauma because even in the time of physical discomfort there is no one to speak him a few kind words. At one such moment in the story he confesses that no one talks to me properly here otherwise I would have been extremely affectionate towards them. It is difficult to survive in the environment of hate but Punjabis keep on tolerating everything for the sake of livelihood.

Sadhu Bining is one such writer who has depicted the problems faced by Punjabi immigrants in an evocative manner. The reason behind such authentic portrayal of trauma of being in the foreign land is that he himself has experienced discrimination at the hands of the Whites. In his stories such as "Jutti de Yaar", MeraSheesha (My Mirror) he represents the evil of racism and its impact on the psyche of immigrants. Besides, in the stories "Fauji Banta Singh," "Ashirvaad" (Blessings), Leeho Lathe (Lost their Way), Baraf da Geet (Song of Ice) indirectly bring out the theme of racism. The racism experienced by Punjabi immigrants is of two types: on

individual level and on institutional level. There are some discriminatory laws made for the immigrants such as Coloured workers are not allowed to enter Council resident. The young children of immigrants, who are born and brought up there, object and resist to such discrimination. They consider themselves as native of Canada where they are born. Such concerns are depicted in Binig's stories "Ashirvaad" (Blessings) and "JageeroLambad" (Jageero, the Village Head). In the story "JageeroLambad", the protagonist Jageero who belongs to the first generation of immigrants considers racial discrimination as birth-right of the natives. They do not protest against it. Jageero replies those who complaint of racism, "There is no racism! What kind of racism you are talking about? This is their own country, they can do whatever they want." Probably what makes him say so is the condition of his native country where lower class people are treated in the similar manner. Similarly, in "MeraSheesha" (My Mirror) Binig presents the harsh reality that Indian has to face when they go abroad. They realise the pain and agony of people whom they mistreated due to their lower caste or class. The discrimination meted out to them open their eyes to the issue of class struggle. One of the characters in "MeraSheesha" remembers how his mother used to hate lower caste people. He has now realised, he thinks, why Sibbo's son (a lower caste woman), used to dislike the way people treated them (Binig *Leeho Lathe* 55).

The story "Jutti de Yaar," highlights the impact of increased population of the immigrants on any country. The natives start looking at the immigrants as their competition. Even the state prefers the native while assigning white collar jobs. Sarvan, the protagonist of the story, is an M.A. and has applied for a job abroad. On interview a White person is selected over him. He vents out his anger at Whites when he has to do menial jobs with them. This hatred for colored people also leads attacks on them by Whites. In the story "Rooh da Jakham" (The Wounds of the Soul) the protagonist explains that the way White girls on the counter of pubs treat colored people is sign of racism. While taking the money from their hands, they will make it sure that they do not touch their skin. This discussion appropriately depicts the problem of racism and how it impacts the psyche of the Punjabi immigrants. That is why, it becomes the recurrent theme in the stories of diasporic Punjabi writers. The significance of such literature lies in spreading awareness about the problems of the immigrants and sensitizing readers about the guilt, humiliation, and trauma of working in a foreign land. An individual in such a situation not only experience mental and physical torture but also feels alienated from his surroundings.

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## End Notes

<sup>i</sup> 'Diaspora' is an ambiguous term. Many critics have tried to interpret it differently. Therefore, it has become contested term due to its loose use or overuse in the current postcolonial discourse. Originally, the term is said to be derived from dispersal of Jews from their historic homeland, however it has now entered a larger semantic domain and refers to any minority group identifying with a particular homeland. But formally, the term according to Collins dictionary, refers to "people who come from a particular nation, or whose ancestors came from it, but who now live in many different parts of the world".

<sup>ii</sup> The term was first used by Safran in the journal *Diaspora* which refers to predominantly with the experience of Jewish in exile and an expectation to return to the motherland, some critics label it as delimiting and exclusive as the semiotics of immigration have evolved over the years. On the other hand, the Indian novelist and anthropologist, Amitav Ghosh, argues that the Indian diaspora is not predisposed to an attachment to and desire for a literal or symbolic return to the homeland as understood by Safran, rather it is an attempt to recreate a distinct culture in the host land (For more, please read "The Diaspora in Indian Culture", *Public Culture*, 2.1, 1989)

<sup>iii</sup> When a particular race considers itself superior than others intellectual, biologically, culturally, or ethically it is called as practice of racism.