

Representing Refugees: Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways*

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Today's widening gap between rich and poor across the globe has led to a massive growth in 'border subjects'— people positioned at the edges of society due to economic deprivation, exile, lack of opportunity and other forms of vulnerability. This is seen at its most extreme in the refugee crisis in Europe, as hordes of exiles from Syria, WHERE ELSE? and elsewhere in the Middle east, and the global south, from underperforming parts of Africa flood into Europe via Turkey and the Mediterranean. There has been high profile media exposure, with memorable images of leaking unseaworthy crafts sinking, emergency rescue operations, children drowning, human trafficking and people smugglers, etc... and there has been mixed public reaction including polarisation of the political sphere. Alongside affective responses and humanitarian sympathies there is the more demotic, populist reaction to such a massive influx, with rising xenophobia in many European nations, Australia and US, mobilising right wing parties like UKIP in the UK, Marie Le Pen's Front National in France, Golden Dawn in Greece, and the Freedom Party in the Netherlands; the refugee crisis has contributed to the radical turnaround in global politics that is occurring across the West right now, with the surge in populist pressure groups leading to Brexit in the UK and Donald Trump's ban on migrants to the USA from 7 Muslim countries.

This paper focuses on the telling of stories, by, of and about refugees, asylum seekers and illegal immigrants (I use these terms interchangeably) against the background of the heightened perceptions of and divided public opinion about such marginal and mobile figures. I cannot hope to make any direct connections between literature and the

social problem but will consider what literary imaginary can add to the forms of recognition and frames of understanding by which western societies are receiving refugees. My main reference to is *The Year of the Runaways* by Sunjeev Sahota, about Indian illegal migrants in England. This novel was short listed for the 2015 Booker – suggests to me that fictions about refugees are able to be read in terms of an emerging literary form and aesthetics (like other survival narratives, such as slum narratives, prison narratives, lost children stories) as well as in relation to current discontent and global uncertainty.

Sahota's novel about the lives of several illegal immigrants includes multiple shifts of time (the actions occurs over a year) and space (moving between the UK and India). This complexity contrasts to the kind of narrative that refugees tell of themselves; i.e. to interlocutors, often through translators or interpreters, in order to apply for asylum- to confirm that they have been suffering persecution, and that their lives are at risk in their countries of birth/origin. Such narratives of dispossession show that refugees as disenfranchised subjects have limited self-representation and this can be traced back to earlier fictions about the old diasporas, which as Vijay Mishra shows (*Literature of the Diaspora*, 2), are a consequence of early modern and classic capitalist movements and uprootings.] In the short story by a Sri Lankan writer, S. Panneerselvam called 'The Motherland', the narrator, a senior bureaucrat, hears the voice of a drunken vagabond – once a plantation worker -- crying out 'will no one hear my story?', An Indian Tamil, he belongs to a small community that worked and lived the hills of Ceylon and were repatriated to the different regions of India after Independence due to an official agreement between the two governments; suffering marginalisation in both countries and belonging in neither, the Indian Tamils are virtually stateless. The drunk, claiming India- where he was

born- as his motherland, laments his homelessness and alienation due to being ousted from both countries:

We were frightened to speak our mother tongue [...] we were humiliated as *kallathonies* (illegal immigrants) [...] and stateless people. We were looked down on as Indian Tamils. We didn't even have the right to vote. Wherever I went I was branded as a refugee

The vagabond's disordered state of mind can be read as a symbol of statelessness, of how it erodes linguistic and cognitive resources and fractures memory. His speech which ends in his death, is a performance of dispossession and frustrated longing for the motherland. In this ahistorical and fable-like story, a stereotype of suffering illustrates the political situation from the individual point of view, inviting an interpretation that causally links mental disorder and individual collapse to the social context.

In today's world of globally connected diasporas, such static victim images of disempowerment, when they occur, are framed by more ethical considerations we now have of migration, such as the right to life, expectations of improving one's lot, the representation of a more complex subjectivity, a degree of self agency and so on. Sahota's portraits of three illegal Indian migrants and a British Sikh woman show the multiple metropolitan sites and border crossings characteristic of the new diasporas of late capitalism (by contrast to the old diasporas). His characters are resourceful, resilient and motivated, acting as 'pioneers' for their families: they have taken the risk, found the finance and completed the journey to where they have to start again. In the UK, as part of an undercover subculture, dominated by indigence and desperate for employment, they are neither heroes or victims but survivors, adapting to their limited circumstances, readjusting their expectations, trying not to abandon hope.

Tarlochan/Tochi: Chamaar from Bihar whose family have been murdered, smuggled in via Turkey

Avtar: sells kidney to buy student visa, migrates to earn enough to marry fiancée Lakhpreet (Randeep's sister)

Randeep: father has breakdown, leaves university, has a 'visa marriage' to Narinder so he gain full citizenship and bring family into UK

Narinder: British Sikh, religious, spiritual yearning to help someone in need, 'married' to Randeep

The novel moves back and forth in time and space representing their present lives in the UK against the background of their problematic past in India in which they suffered from caste essentialisms, family problems of poverty, ill health, lack of opportunity. But at times the question is raised as whether they are really any better off in the place they have come to than they were in their homeland:

Reading about these cases of hardship -- each in its own way different -- can, I suggest, be framed by new ways of thinking about refugees and their border lives in relation to poverty and notably the arguments presented by the new poverty studies associated with the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, in which poverty is no longer identified with class (cf 19th century Victorian novel and the early 20th century American novel) . Instead, in keeping with reconfigurations of the socioeconomic causes of poverty under globalisation, poverty is linked to social capability understood, "not only as material deprivation but also as an encompassing socio cultural exclusion and a lack of agency, opportunities and access to knowledge, tradition, rights and capabilities "(Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum in Korte and Zipp). This dimension of poverty is visible in Sahota's novel and in other literary depictions of illegal migrants poor subjects from third world

countries in first world countries are trapped in a system of economic exploitation – e.g. Bhiju the son of the cook in Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* who works out without a green card for a black market restaurant in New York, so moving poverty away from its association with third world deprivation and mismanagement .

But more relevant to my reading of Sahota's novel is the recent turn to precarity, by which I mean the heightened vulnerability of many social groups, due to economic uncertainty, austerity, insecurity of unemployment, frailty of life due to health, unreliability of sustenance. As Simon During says, when suggesting we use a literary sensibility to describe a global process: 'relatively geographically and culturally stable relations of domination and subordination [associated with 60s and 70s] are being replaced by relatively unstable and dispersed conditions of deprivation and uncertainty' . Like the reconfiguring of poverty, precarity has been theorised in terms of social and political failures in the social/global system, so moving focus even further away from individual; Judith Butler conceptualises it as "that politically induced notion in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death" (26). Such a reframing of precarity in social terms for Judith Butler in *Frames of War*, encourages considering the human-ness more as a cultural category, and carries with it a different appreciation of life. As she says - - life is precarious: it has to be apprehended as a life but precariousness is an aspect of what is apprehended in what is living'. (2010 PAGE) Perceiving our own precariousness also affects our ideas of responsibilities towards others- especially as the divisions between abandonment and support or caring and violence become more unstable. This question mark about relationships with the other, in parallel with the resurgence of affect that appears in novels written after 9/11, is prominent in recent fiction (eg by J.M. Coetzee,

Kazuo Ishiguro, Philip Roth) and with ideas of social and personal fragility and vulnerability, have already opened up imaginative territory for writing about marginal /border subjects such as refugees. It is in these contexts that I position my analysis of Sahota's *Year of the Runaways*.

This novel's dark shadowy world -- a perpetual zone of temporary, illegal occupation in the bleak environs of Sheffield, a northern town in the UK -- is marked by minimal employment, violence, exploitation and the unrelenting grind of hard work for little pay, acceptable to the refugees because of their illegality/reduced choices. Each struggles with financial commitments and they all search for and take on extra jobs, as well as working on the construction site, to meet them. Avtar must regularly repay the money lenders whose loan with an extortionate rate of interest enabled him to come to England on a fake student visa; Randeep must keep up the monthly payments on Narinder's flat where she lives as his 'bride' and appear with her when the immigration officials come round to check, as well as sending money home to his family. Living below the radar of officialdom, they work hard to be accepted by their employers. Yet they remain trapped in their own caste essentialisms: when an Indian (Hindu) couple whom Tochi works for find out he is a Chamaar ('scheduled'), they turn on him in rage, for they had expected him to marry a widowed relative. They also turn against each other; Tochi steals Avtar's second job; in return Avtar, when his debtors finally come after him threatening to kill his family in India, breaks into Tochi's room and steals all his savings to pay them off.

The novel shows the precariousness of co-protective relations (especially between Avtar and Randeep) in these marginal survival conditions when the only social resource that offers support is the Sikh temple, the Gurdwara, the community centre of religious

practice. Indigence, lack of financial opportunity and the constant risk of being exposed, forces them to act out of character – to become ruthless and selfish. There is scepticism about the accepted values of love, devotion, and loyalty, and kinship dependency:

'He [Gurpreet, a co-worker who shares their flat] said it's not work that makes us leave home and come here. It's love. Love for our families'. Randeep turned to Avtar, 'Do you think that's true'?

'I think he's a sentimental creep. We come here for the same reason that our people do anything. Duty. We're doing our duty. And it's shit.' (PAGE)

Precarity relates to the differential distribution of resources playing out into the political struggle between wealthy and marginal groups; but Sahota challenges economic injustice through the issue of precarious security in relation to the diaspora categories of home and belonging. As state of psychological vulnerability, precarity in these cases extends to the more affluent elites in the diaspora community, and the novel overturns wealth/money as the overriding marker of value at the same time dissolving distinctions between class, and generation. This appears in the search for certainty outside the workplace, detached from his occupational identity, on the part of Dr Cheema, the General Secretary of the International Society (of which IndSoc is a part) of the College of North West London (who befriends Avtar and helps him find a job). Dr Cheema, beset by feelings of alienation, struggles to feel at home in the diaspora. Here Sahota exposes the contradictions between the haves and have nots when played out against the problem of not belonging in the new land. A prosperous, middle class, Indian migrant, Dr Cheema sees the material lack and want of working class illegal migrant as a symbol of his own spiritual losses – his dispossession from and nostalgia for the homeland. Meeting Avtar makes him aware of his alienation: 'They don't understand. We don't belong here, It's not our home. You helped me realise that. People like you'. ((317) Through a process of what

has been called mutual subjection, he and Avtar seemingly exchange their positions of authority [DURING].

Dr Cheema's condition, however crudely represented, illustrates that no Indian migrant is exempt from the umbilical cord that connects them to the homeland and so undercuts the desire to make a life in England. Family attachments and the value of loved ones underpin the shared hope of a future marked by family unity (Randeep and Avtar). The issue of return never goes away.. It is rehearsed from the very beginning as their enterprise is questioned for its folly by those for whom migration has become problematic, and who feel dehumanised by long term separation from all they know and hold dear. One worker tells Tochi what he should do:

p. 89. [Ardashir:] 'How long are you staying here?'

[Tochi:] 'Until I've earned enough.'

'Then you're a fool' ...

'Take my advice and go back now. Before there's nothing to go back for and you're stuck here'.

It was the most he'd ever said to Tochi. Perhaps it was this Christmas spirit everyone went on about. 'Thirty-three years. Didn't do my papas rites, my biji's. Wife and children started new lives. For what? So I can sit here in this hell. No future but death, Just a body needing to be clothed and fed. Go back, you understand'.

Whereas the lives of the three men are constrained in terms of financial, economic and personal insecurity, Sahota introduces the other side to heightened physical, personal vulnerability and fragility, in the figure of the pious middle class, British Sikh, Narinder. Narinder's life decision –to break from her arranged marriage to a safe, middle class Indian boy, and to run away from her family in Sheffield, to help out Randeep so that he can get a marriage visa-- illustrates the increased mobilisation and new motivation that precarity triggers (and which can be seen in the political impetus that led to Brexit – the voice of defiance in many youth in the UK today who feel excluded from the political and

economic mainstream and felt they had nothing to lose) . Idealistic, Narinder wants to do good in the world; but she also seems paradoxically to be valorising precarity by taking this risk and entertaining the illusion of personal freedom. Although she undertakes voluntary suffering in this subjection to an ideal, -- that is, risk, upheaval and loneliness -- she slowly benefits by her independence, makes friends with other women, gets a job and learns how to manage her life. Yet psychologically, because of her family background and religious upbringing, her choices remain even more severely constrained than the men's. When Randeep disappears for a time, Tochi makes an overture to her ; but she turns him down because of the image of her father's desperate desire to have her look after him

QUOTE

CONCLUSION: What literary/social imaginary does this novel shape from its topic illegal asylum seekers, and the broadened understanding of poverty and precarity? Sahota shows the reshaping of the lives and subjectivities of his characters in relation to their socio economic constraints, - unemployment, exploitation, ill health, illegality - by maintaining intimacy with them through minimal narrative intervention, interior representations of their thoughts, and linguistic hybridity. With a smattering of Hindi alongside English they sound like new arrivals into an Anglophone culture speaking in different voices and languages according to the audience and occasion. The novel's concerns with precarity and the mechanisms of survival are also projected in its construction: the division into four seasons -- marking transitions in climate and weather -- provides a temporal framework against which expectations are measured: the one year required for the duration of the marriage visa- after which Randeep can apply for citizenship

and then bring his family over. The epilogue set ten years later brings the reader up to date with all of them.

Yet although they gain some foothold in the new country, this is not a social realist novel (in the sense of characters being identified in class terms) for we see a microcosm of a diaspora community- not its direct encounter with British society. Class divisions break down, as do those between rich and poor and so do the expectations of gender in this society in which the determining factors of lack, need and Indian family values lead to various crises. Fundamental structures of belonging come to the fore undermining the ideals of wealth and romance: the ties of homeland (in the case of Dr Cheema) and that of family (in the case of Narinder who is forced to stay within a patriarchal structure as a carer for her father until his death). The social mobility of the classic realist novel is disrupted by other longings, and values of place as insecurities caused by displacement come to dominate. These confusing reversals and disruptions of the usual social pattern invite critique: Avtar's penury means that homeland nostalgia seems a self-indulgent luxury: 'What decadence this belonging rubbish was, what time the rich must have if they could sit round and weave great worries out of such threadbare things' (316)

Bourdieu argues that fictionalisations of sociological conditions offer multiple perspectives that correspond to the multiplicity of coexisting, directly competing points of view (Korte and Regard intro 2). The contradictions and hardships in the lives of the characters in the *The Year of the Runaways*, brings all the conflicting perspectives about migration before our eyes – as well as soliciting readerly empathy for them. The shortlisting of the novel for the 2015 Booker suggests that it was recognised as breaking new ground and that its dark subject matter is paradoxically a fitting fictionalisation of harsh new socio political realities in the second decade of the new millennium in Britain.

