



Reading with the Runaways, or namesakes in diaspora on *Sunjeev Sahota's the year of the Runaways: A novel*

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ABSTRACT

Through a series of fragments, vignettes, and a montage, this essay explores the underlying crises of contemporary capitalism and the nation-state as presented in Sunjeev Sahota's 2015 novel *The Year of the Runaways*. The essay examines the novel's innovative Anglo-Punjabi diglossia as an index of social contradiction and political crisis in the wake of immigration and nationalist reaction in the U.K. It lays out as well the competing pressures that serve to catalyze the production of new diasporic subjectivities and the adoption of non-traditional social practices among Sahota's characters. Along the way, the essay delves into the significance of naming and its relationship to identity via the discourse of the name (nam) in Sikh scripture. The final fragments elaborate upon the opening of new possibilities of selfhood for Sahota's central characters. This opening is premised on, and yet reach beyond, abstract labor-power under capitalist regimes of accumulation and Indian caste and gender norms.

KEYWORDS

Punjabi diaspora; caste and Sikhism; Marxist cultural criticism; gender and religion; novel form

1. Distractions in diaspora

The diasporic is prone to distraction – with hopes of a homeland long burned away, his own scorched spirit seeks succor no longer in faraway things but in what is closest to hand, so long as it provides a glimmer of retreat from his own immediacy. Let it be what it may so long as it appears whenever a larger, more strenuous task looms. Just before one's waking hours are swallowed away by the quantifying machinery of production, just before a word is reduced to a thing, a distraction, if one is lucky, alights upon one's path and sends one as wayward as a dream. Rather than surrendering immediately to the labor at hand, the image on the cover a book pushed to the side of the desk takes my gaze into the beyond of a painting's frame. It is of Guru Gobind. *Bed Time Stories -1*: meant for your kid, somehow acquired by my mom, who just showed me the *kirpan* she now wears around her neck because her shoulder aches from a car crash she had with a guy on a Harley in '82. The image of Guru Gobind Singh on the cover partakes generally in the idiom that has defined his depiction on calendar art for nearly a century now: at a 45° angle, a manly beard and a resolute gaze looking up and to the right, sword in scabbard on left hip. In this version he has his usual regal demeanor, though he could be confused for a princely ruler of the colonial era for the style speaks so resolutely of an imperial impress at the level of technique and vision. The eyes though are slightly soft and

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convey milkiness. What they must be witnessing is definitely abstract – it is outside the frame of the painting – though not, as it were, offstage. The languorous undertones of this gaze reference a metaphysics perforated by the desires of the day dream. This resolute look, softened just enough by a clemency that remembers the pains of bone and flesh, is one of an array in this tradition that has sustained many a runaway in distant places. Justice lies just somewhere not so far off. The composition mobilizes aspiration for the distant in the minds of children as they fall into dream.

2. No glosses for the majority speakers

For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (Adorno 2005 [1951])

The language of *The Year of the Runaways* by Sunjeev Sahota builds its own makeshift *makaan* within the dingier, half boarded up zones of a deindustrialized England.¹ One may not yet quite call it a *ghar*. It is more homely (in the American sense) than a home, far more for the moment than for the generations. Whatever is on the walls can just as quickly be nailed up elsewhere. Because some of his own characters hardly know English, they bring inevitably their own terms for things. Each Punjabi, Hindi, or Urdu phrase in turn becomes a brick to keep away those who demand only the King's English. There is no need to accommodate them or their bigotry within the inner sphere that Sahota establishes with Indian words. A term like *pind* serves as cumbersome furniture to block the doorway from anyone who knows nothing of the tastes and colors of different regions of Punjab. The tables are turned against the majority of England's English speakers, should they take interest in the first place. They now will have to pick up some learning aides or be at the mercy of the minority community members if they wish knowledge. There is probably no dictionary in the local library or course at the local university for the languages of these bloody immigrants. Austerity forbids such inter-communal luxuries. The dominant community's normalized laziness in learning anything other than the language reified for them as their national tongue gets them nowhere within the confines Sahota has constructed. The risks of creating a livable, however provisional or perfunctory, linguistic environment by permitting the intrusion of the foreign term into English without a gloss are manifold. A linguistic house propped up partly by illegals, it establishes a policy not so much of exclusion vis à vis the majority community as admission without accommodation. Just like the foreigners in their midst, English monoglots will have to pick up whatever they can from fleeting contexts and occasional encounters. Code switching itself thus encodes politically explosive tears in the social fabric. There is a larger crisis of wide social proportions brewing up this linguistic mishmash. In the meantime, with the socio-political crises put in some abeyance and yet seeping into every choice of word and action, Sahota's language admits new life into the contemporary novel. As if supported by all of the words that make up their world – everything from various forms of scripture ('japji') to terms for caste distinction ('chamaar') to parts of Indian clothing ('dupatta') – new characters are formed for the novel in impure English. White natives merely flit in and out with their bureaucratic badges and clipboards, keeping tabs on foreign elements as if they could disease the body politic with their mere presence. Nigel Farage is uncomfortable in the presence of foreign words, and the threat is returned with

the severity of nativist law. Sahota's language cancels white nativist claims to universality and, to the extent possible, keeps them at arms length. Extending beyond their depths, Sahota's cleaved language turns the crisis of capital inward, revealing through the rough accents of the lower castes in a global work economy the illiberal norms that continue to sustain the system as a whole. Sahota's language is attentive to what is hiding in language. He knows its power not merely in giving life to new characters, but also indicating as yet unreified realities. He understands language's powers in naming, lying, deluding, seducing.

3. Alien turd

"In the centre of the greenish tub the hand-held shower lay in a perfect coil of chrome, like an alien turd." (4)

...

"She fetched from the drawer the map she'd picked up from the station and zoned in on her street. The surrounding areas didn't sound like places she wanted to visit: Rawmarsh, Pitsmoor, Crosspool. Burngreave. Killamarsh. They sounded so angry, these northern places, like they wanted to do you harm." (25)

...

"But we can't all go to the same place. The gora gets suspicious." (20)

"More kept on arriving and by midmorning there must have been at least thirty waiting in the car park. They were from all over Panjab: Phagwara, Patiala, Hoshiarpur. The first thing anyone asked was what pind you were from. *Which is your village? Who are your people?* Some had been here more than ten years. One or two less than a week." (387-388)

...

"A new job, boys. We're off to Leeds."

They all groaned, complaining about how late they'd be back.

"Hey, ease up, yeah? Or maybe I need to get me some freshies who actually want the work."

"Someone in the back closed his fist and made the wanker sign, a new thing that had been going round the house recently." (12)

...

"I used to think I only had to work harder. Longer." He shook his head. "Bhanchod liars." (234)

...

"It makes you only care for yourself.' Gurpreet spoke quietly. 'This life. It makes everything a competition. A fight. For work, for money. There's no peace. Ever. Just fighting for the next job. Fight fight fight. And it doesn't matter how much stronger than everyone else you are, there's always a fucking chammaar you have to share the work with, or a rich boy who can afford a wife.'" (235)

...

"Welcome to the world. Nothing here." (330)

...

"You should go home. Eleven years is a long time."

“Gurpreet laughed. ‘Forget any ideas about going home. You’ll still be here, still doing this, in eleven years’ time as well.’” (234)

...

“‘Why’s it your fault? Our own people are the worst at bleeding us dry.’” (361)

...

“Avtar asked if he’d still have his job when he came back from London.”

‘Why?’

‘Please promise me I’ll still have my job.’

‘Is someone coming for it?’

‘They might.’

‘Well, that’ll be for me to decide then, won’t it?’

‘I’ve worked hard for you. Can’t you promise me my job?’

Malkeet took his car keys from their apron pouch and de-alarmed the old estate; he left the Mini to his wife. ‘Do you think I’d have got anywhere in this country if I made promises like that?’ (317)

4. Name, namesakes, and the translation of silence

The origin of the power of language for Sahota lies in naming, and the name retains residues of the transcendent. So powerful and revealing is the doctrine of the name that it must remain shrouded in silence unless an exceptional case obtain. If there is any point at which the secularity of the novel as genre intersects with the religious discourses of the Sikh gurus, it is in the notion of the name. This link is only half-revealed, and perhaps only by happenstance, in the course of Sahota’s ever mobile narrative. The power of the name, thought to mediate the absolute potency of the Creator in the nirguna tradition encompassing Kabir and Nanak and the succeeding nine gurus of the *panth*, is generated by *The Year of the Runaways* as if inevitably from the innermost depths of its content: the Sikh community whose variegated lifeworld he wishes to track across the work regimes of late capitalism. The names that populate the novel have roots in the vernaculars of northern India, each nuanced by dialect, fraught with accent, and occasionally submerged under a voluminous silence. This is ultimately a collective Bildungsroman, for whatever development occurs in any one character will have a ricochet effect on the entire community, testing its limits and making for introspection or interrogation of the term ‘apneh’ (one’s own) over the course of the narrative. The names are ones to be found among any of the Punjabi enclaves overseas, inhabiting the most unexpected niches of the world economy, from trucking in California’s Central Valley (closer to the Sahota who pens these lines) or the construction sites of London and the Midlands (in the proximity of the author of *Runaways*). We have the central figures Randeep Sanghera, Narinder Kaur, Avtar Nijjar, and Tarlochan Kumar. Each is merely a nodal point of social relations on various scales of concretion and abstraction. Thus we are introduced in passing to Sukhjot, Gurpreet, and Ardashir, as well as Harbhajan, Navjhot, and Lakhpreet. The relations extend on occasion outwards to the various whites on the outer margins of the world of the runaways. They signal bureaucratic nets and contractors’ traps of the likes of the immigration officers Mr. David Mangold and Mrs. Katie V. Lombardi, Langra – or Limpy – John, and Vinny the Wanker. Yet the power of the name is tracked best by the trajectory Tarlochan

Kumar or Tochi carves across a variety of social geographies between rural Bihar and post-Industrial England. Sahota's sensitivity to the name is on full display throughout this gripping narration of desperate survival and overcoming. Tochi's name is no neutral matter, hailing as he does from a Dalit community hounded on all sides. Instead his various names (stemming from a Sanskrit epithet for Lord Shiva of the third eye) and the silences that occasionally surround them are tension-ridden: they reveal an agonism between the established social norms and structures, on the one hand, and the negating capacities of a critical subjectivity, on the other. He marks a negative space between the particularity of ascribed caste identity and the universality of social or abstract labor in which he perforce participates. Throughout the novel Tochi rides the ripple of difference along the edge of various communities, making them wonder in the end who and what is 'apneh' or one's own. The potential distances between name, word, signified, and referent are on ironic display in the very hellish town of Jannat, Urdu for 'heaven,' where we fully sense Tochi's incredible drive to escape his mounting plight and resilience to overcome any setbacks. This is a narrative of a double movement in which the oppressions of the past reappear in the present as if in an ever-recurring nightmare from which one cannot awaken: every step forward conjuring demons from an undying past. Along the way the question of his name comes up repeatedly. Straightforward responses have the potential to repel and cause retreat among caste conscious superiors. Thus, while returning to his natal Bihar by bus from rural Punjab where he had been working on a farm as a migrant laborer:

He played cards with a young boy sporting a sandalwood mark on his forehead. 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)

No playtime with low-castes permitted: Tochi learns his lesson to keep quiet about his name. His silence around it is the most immediate form of resistance he is able to muster. Once he manages to become an auto-wallah, a taxi driver of a three-wheeler, scuttling rich upper-caste ladies from rich enclave to rich enclave, he will know to remain reticent. He is now an 'autorider' as the title of his chapter puts it: skating back and forth between extremes of a critical interiority that negates his objective environment through struggle, on the one end, and the psychical dissolution under the slur that pegs him to the sharp particularity of an ascribed low-caste identity, on the other. Thus one of his elite woman passenger's:

“Accha, I'm sorry. But it's so hard to know what to say these days. I mean, are you even still called chamaars? 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)

With the looming threat of Hindutva politics, captured vividly through the barely fictional Maheshwar Sena's slogan of *Bharat is for the pure of blood and blood we will shed to keep it pure*, the question arises whether remaining silent or changing caste names will suffice for survival. For these Hindu fascists:

“The land was increasingly infested by acchuts, churehs, chamaars, Dalits, adivasis, backwards, scheduleds – 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.” (57)

After a pogrom kills off his family members, there is no question he will have to leave India. With these sporadic riots against Dalits on the rise, the power of the name bursts through the layers of the text in the Hindi of children’s schoolyards. He is advised by an old friend one evening:

“I think you should at least leave your licence at home. And anything else with your name on it.”
 “Mera naam he tho hai.”
 “Who he tho hai mera naam,” Kishen finished. A schoolyard phrase, about their names being all they owned.” (61)

Tochi will internalize his name as cherished treasure. Even the lure of identity through the guise of the surname will not succeed in tempting it from him. After flying out of India on a one-way ticket, then crossing ‘into Austria, or maybe France,’ and finally ferrying into England with contraband goods, Tochi ends up in the back of a restaurant in Southall. While washing dishes, a waiter peaks through the door, hoping for Jatt Sikh brethren:

“I’m Munna. What’s your name?”
 “Tarlochan.”
 “Tarlochan Singh Sandhu?”
 “No.” (88)

5. Economic crisis, immigrant labor, and social abstraction

‘So you’re paying my rent this month, ha?’ The middleman asks Tochi immediately after he disembarks from his plane under the cover of night in the middle of who knows which country. Tochi gives no answer. Many of those he will encounter will equate him, the embodiment of mobile labor power, with some advantage or other to themselves. Tochi equals rent this month, savings from labor costs next, non-accountability for work conditions the following. Sahota’s achievement in this respect is never to sentimentalize the plight of the immigrant laborers he tracks in *Runaways*. Instead he merely follows the contradictory logics of the system in which they, willy-nilly, find themselves. The author cares less about applying feel-good endings as a salve for bourgeois guilt than knitting together the disparate worlds mediated by the money that traps them. One senses that it is primarily for their sake he writes, reflecting back unto them the social alienation distilled in the money-form. It is to be expected that a novel that remains so close to the hard materiality of everyday life would bring up money at every turn. What we see is not so much what wonders people can do with it (as in the bourgeois heroics of the venture capitalist) as what destruction it can do to people (as in nullify the potentialities of proletarian solidarity). Someone out there is willing to do it no matter what it is for a little more, or just to survive for that matter. The moral economy of late capitalism is that of the scab: but given their desperation, who can blame them? They have already fallen into a social abyss from which they are attempting escape, Sisyphus-like. With nothing left to support them,

the illegal immigrant is disliked for reflecting back to the legal citizens driven to drudgery their own helplessness. The 'illegal' reveals the fiction of the social contract with the national bourgeoisie, who in any case flaunt their willingness to do away with the minimum wage, health care, and other vestiges of a safety net. How could money's corrosive effects on the moral element not reveal the fragility of the relationships forged from material necessity in times of widespread economic and political crisis? The social contradictions Sahota's narrative is able to translate are manifold. One centers on the developed countries' vampiric need for cheap illegal labor to stave off the effects of crisis, on the one hand, and the resulting fissuring of the nation and the liberal principles upon which it is putatively founded, on the other. Immigration officials attempt to manage this dilemma. Demagogic politicians instrumentalize it. These pressures weigh down on the world of the runaways, pushing it underground, and shaping the lived contradictions within it. They always have one foot in the wider sociality and universality of the commodity-form, for their working hours form a part of the labor time necessary for social reproduction, while the other foot remains within the concrete oppressiveness and particularity of race-, caste – and gender-based work regimes. At its most ironic moments *Runaways* poignantly poses the question: is any of this suffering, so systematic and on such a wide social scale, really necessary? Does one really have to reproduce on an hourly basis the fundamental social relationship that keeps the working classes at the behest of capital? If drudgery can technically be done away with and social misery mitigated, what kinds of social logics, whether traditional or modern, concrete or abstract, perpetuate them? The runaways are caught up in contradictory logics to the extent that they are trapped by money and yet potentially liberated through its abstractions. They are all selling the use-value of their labor-power for the exchange-value of money in order to purchase use-values necessary for survival (commodity-money-commodity). It is for this reason that the runaways' aspiration of someday becoming the bosses rings tragic – as life-sucking false dream. Not only do they and their fellow proletarians as a mass generate surplus-value in the workplace, they then realize it with the purchase of the commodities they produce in the marketplace. The money for which they perpetually struggle lures them with the power of purchase and simultaneously buys and puts to work their labor power. As Marx wrote: 'capital is money, capital is commodities. In truth, however, value is here the subject of a process in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it changes its own magnitude (Marx 1990 [1867]).' Just as money is the abstraction of the exchange dimension of commodities, being the symbolization of the universal exchangeability of all commodities for one another, so is labor-power as the means for the self-valorization of capital rendered abstract. It matters little whether it issues from legal or illegal auspices. Moishe Postone elucidates this fundamental point:

“Viewed from the perspective of the society as a whole, the concrete labor of the individual is particular and is part of a qualitatively heterogeneous *whole*; as abstract labor, however, it is an individuated *moment* of a qualitatively homogeneous, general social mediation constituting *a social totality*. This duality of the concrete and the abstract characterizes the capitalist social formation.” (Postone 1996)

This duality characterizes as well the riven life worlds of our runaways. To the extent that they operate in the rawness of an abstract money-mediated economy through which social reproduction takes place, they depart from the rigid confines of their tradition-laden work conditions. The experience of particularizing oppression sits oddly alongside their implicit understanding that they are part of something much wider, larger, and potentially liberating, what Marx called the ‘collective worker.’² Yet in the parlance of the novel, they are all ‘faujis,’ fighting it out independently but uniformly. As self-acknowledged ‘soldiers’ they profess to a lack of the ‘power-protected inwardness’ afforded to their bourgeois counterparts.³ The connection with military operation indexes as well an implicit understanding of concerted universal action as labor power. Indistinguishable from each other as this very power, they are rendered abstract, and as such participate directly in an impersonal world of commodity-exchange. They thus end up at odds with the concrete social relations that force them into particular roles. By the end, Tochi, for instance, ‘was earning good money and had his own place. He answered to no one.’ (343) Distant now are the days of eating others’ leftovers. Likewise, when Narinder Kaur gets a job, she is able to renegotiate the terms of her gendered existence.

6. Subject to the edge

The novel brilliantly literalizes the metaphor of liminal subjectivity with the geographical location of Kanyakumari, the southern-most edge of the subcontinent, where the identity of an entire civilization fades, as it were, into the ocean. It is here on the edge of their former selves and at the cusp of future possibilities that Tochi and Narinder nearly encounter each other. How did they get there? To answer this question one must return to the universal dimension of one’s practical everyday life world tied to the commodification of labor power. Though enmeshed in the most ordinary of things, the experience of being embedded within the secular force of value production has far reaching consequences. The quasi-universality of this social logic cuts against and corrodes the legitimacy of particularized forms of oppression. Indeed, this is an old story now: the old religiously grounded chains of being extending vertically from the earth to the heavens withered and crumbled with the rise of the secularity and self-instantiating logic of the capitalist market. ‘All that is solid melts into air,’ as Marx observed (Marx 2012 [1848]). Older traditions were put to the task of having to account for themselves and their obsolescent practices. Those that were unable to meet the challenge of answering to the dilemmas of modernity faced the possibility of losing their flock. Such is the situation of Narinder, the girl borne by God, whose own mind ultimately gives birth to destabilizing questions regarding herself and her faith. These questions arise from contradictions that the novel as ironic form par excellence is perfectly equipped to track with detached equanimity. Indeed, it is primarily through Narinder’s efforts to live according to the code bequeathed by the gurus that she is forced to confront the limits of her faith. (Tochi, on the other hand, is never once seen praying and is only in the sacrosanct space of the gurdwara by coincidence or necessity.) While colliding against the forces of gender-based power and disempowerment within her community, she simultaneously finds herself on an uncharted path of self-discovery. The problem of theodicy remains irksome for being so underdeveloped – how could God be pleased with

the early death of her mother, for instance – and yet she is pressured to accept unsatisfying answers in every case. Behind the prevaricating of her male superiors lies a politics of gender that slowly but surely leaves her dissatisfied. For the honor of the family name women in this tradition are meant to subordinate their own agency to that of their male counterparts:

“There was a poster in the gurdwara. About teaching Panjabi to some of the children after school. Do you think I might ask about it?

‘I don’t think so, beiti. Do you need money?’

‘No, Baba.’

‘And in one or two years you’ll be married – these are things you can discuss with your husband.’” (269)

The threat of violence hovers over her when her elder brother yanks her back by the elbow when she seems to be going astray: ‘Your duty is to uphold our name. Mine is to protect it.’ (282) So long has she been inculcated in the gendered economy of shame that sustains the family, clan, congregation, and community that ‘Narinder always assumed any animal in pain was female.’ (264) Eventually, the pain perpetuated by the hypocrisy and mendaciousness of her male superiors becomes unbearable. Rather than a singular breaking point, what she experiences instead is a slow erosion of the religious aura that once engulfed and comforted her. ‘Waheguru’, the formula for evoking the power of the gurus’ revelation as well as their sounds of scripture no longer bear any radiance:

Waheguru is my ship and He will bear me safely across. . . . Not tonight. She repeated the words again and again but there came no halo, and there came no ship. There was only a frightening and oceanic darkness. (436)

7. Identifications in the negative

The relationship that forms but remains unconsummated between Tochi and Narinder is remarkable for how it is grounded in a new interplay of recognition. Both encounter each other at a moment when they are fully in opposition to the identities that have been imposed upon them. For him it is significant that she cares little about his untouchable background. For her it is reassuring that he gives no support to the codes of honor that have engaged her for so long. Neither makes any goal of assimilating to the dominant community’s norms, as if that were possible or desirable in the first place. It is difficult to see where except in some non-place, some no man’s land between the zones of non-identification, they could ever evolve through their mutual recognition. That place is figured as Kanyakumari, which borders on the non-place of the ocean. Tochi had first heard of it from the travel agent who arranged his itinerary to the West. The agent’s description of coastal town as the end of the country and the only place where three oceans meet leave an impression:

He thought again of that place called Kanyakumari. The place of ends and oceans. It seemed amazing to him that there could be an end to India, one you could point to and identify and work towards. That things needn’t go on as they are forever. (76)

Later he mentions it to Narinder in passing:

“Kanyakumari,” he said.
 She turned round.
 “Where I’d go if I could go anywhere.”
 “I don’t know it.”
 “It’s at the end of India. Nothing but sea from there.”
 “It sounds very beautiful.”
 “I wouldn’t know.”
 She tilted her head to the side. “Why there?”
 “Because it’s the end and there can be no more false dreams.”
 “Only real ones? Then are they still dreams?”
 “I’m leaving,” he said.
 “To go there? she asked, lightly mocking.
 “I’m leaving here.” (477-478)

This conversation, at once so casual, lifted by whimsy and yet laden with philosophical weight, gets to the core of the novel’s concerns. Not only does it give critical appraisal of the dreams that drive the system, or rather make up the infrastructure of the system, it also suggests what it might mean to dream truly. The true dream demands the correct life, and ironically, it is Narinder who embodies this despite her sardonic questioning. After delivering the ashes of her father to their ancestral land

She changed her flights and flew to Thiruvananthapuram and from there took a coach to Kanyakumari. She remembered Tochi mentioning the place and came because she wanted to, and because she could. (496)

We do not know where this course of freedom will take her. The novel leaves us only with whispers as a play is about to begin and the lights are dimming in a theater in Kanyakumari.

Notes

1. Sahota (2015). All further citations of this work will be given parenthetically.
2. Marx *Capital* 444, passim.
3. For an analysis of this phrase from Thomas Mann, see Lukács (1964).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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