

“New Identities”, “Old Institutions” in Diasporic Literature with special reference to Swaran Chandan’s ‘*Nave Rishte*’

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Abstract: All over the world scholars have tried to study different aspects of the Punjabi Diaspora. This paper is an attempt to explore the issue of identities. It does not only mean the name or caste but the overall identity which includes different aspects and multiple personalities. This is a major issue as everyday an individual has to negotiate multiple identities and forget his own basic identity. The title suggests all this clearly how new identities manipulate old institutions. For this study, Swaran Chandan’s novel ‘Nave Rishte’ is taken up. This novel is a story of two families which belong to different castes. One family of Gurjeet Singh belongs to Jatt Sikh caste whereas the family of Preetu belongs to a lower caste, i.e. Majhabi Sikh. This paper deals with various ups and downs in their relationships and their settlement in a foreign country, England.

Key words: identity, jatt, majhbi, valait, language etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is very well known that scholars from all over the world have tried to study various aspects of the Punjabi Diaspora such as the socio-economic backgrounds of the Punjabi migrants, the cultural patterns of the Punjabi diaspora in the host countries and their linkages with the motherland. Only recently the Punjabi diaspora has gained the recognition as part of the study of International diaspora by academicians. Besides, the studies done by social scientists and historians on the Punjabi diaspora have also reviewed the socio-cultural as well as psychological needs and of insight of the Punjabis abroad.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Diaspora is not a recent or modern concept rather a perennial term. The term *diaspora* comes from an ancient Greek word meaning "to scatter about." And that's exactly what the people of a diaspora do — they scatter from their homeland to places across the globe, spreading their culture as they go. The Bible refers to the Diaspora of Jews exiled from Israel by the Babylonians. But the word is now also used more generally to describe any large migration of refugees, language, or culture (Vocabulary.com). The word Diaspora traces its origin to the Greek times when it was used to describe the Greek colonisation of the Asia Minor and the Mediterranean (Hear, 1998: 5-6). It has been etymologically derived from the Greek term ‘diasperien’ where ‘dia’ meant ‘across’ and ‘sperien’ stood for ‘to sow or scatter seeds’ (Braziel and Mannur, 2003:1). Sheffer is of the view that diaspora started when men started leaving their homelands in search of food or work. Later on these men started settling permanently at those places yet mentioned links with co-ethnics back home (Sheffer, 2003: 33-35). However there is lack of concrete historical or documentary logic for the same.

Diaspora is also called migration which has two forms- forced migration and voluntary migration, or in broad terms between labour or economic migrants and refugees or forced migrants. This discrimination is found in the migration policies and the analysis of migration. The literature written by such people is called the ‘diasporic literature’. This literature tries to explore the experiences of the people living on a foreign land missing their identities, language, their country, feeling of homesickness etc. Migrants also discuss the problems in their native countries or the reasons behind their migration. Major reason of focusing on the identity issue is that the migrant people usually feel rootlessness and nostalgic when they try to become members of a new group, a new country. Since most migrants are obliged to become bicultural and bilingual in order to be accepted on the foreign land, the main theme taken up in migrant literature is that of acculturation, integration and identity formation. This is a major issue as everyday an individual has to negotiate multiple identities and forget his actual identity.

III. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

One such text “Nave Rishte” by a Punjabi diasporic writer, Swaran Chandan is taken up for the present study. Swaran Chandan himself went to UK and wrote a number of short stories, novels, novellas, poems, etc. based on his experiences and observations. The selected text is about two families who migrated to England because of economic hardships. One family belongs to the upper caste, i.e. Jatt Sikh and the other belongs to a lower caste, i.e. Majhabi Sikh.

This paper will focus on how things change for all of them. How the same things, same thoughts and the meaning of same institutions change after being migrated. This includes their identities, their vision, their language, the impact of foreign country on the next generation etc. The issue of identity, actually, is very central to the diasporic literature. Amartya Sen (2005, 2006) has argued that the question of identity is important not only for the native population, but also for the diaspora. He is of the view that, “A sense of identity can be a source not only of pride and joy, but also of strength and confidence... and yet identity can also kill and kill with abandon. A strong and exclusive sense of belonging to one group can in many cases carry with it the perception of distance and divergence from other groups” (Sen, 2006: 1-2). From this it can be interpreted that for diaspora, identity is all the more important as it has twin roles to perform-forming a new identity and safeguarding the inherited or indigenous one. Individuals may possess more than one cultural identity as a result of their geographical and social mobility and their desire of belonging to a particular community.

Identity in literature may refer to the author's adoption of a new culture and language as a means of expression following a migration from his country of origin to another one. As a result the genre of "migrant literature" has developed which explores the issues of migration, exile and formation of new identity in immigrants. Identity here does not only mean the name or caste of a person rather it is used as a broader term which includes race, caste, class, ethnic, social and cultural background. Nayar opines that, “Diasporic literature explores identities forged in the crucible of multiple cultures, cities and races rather than just ‘home’ and ‘alien land’. Indeed Identity is not simply a matter of race. Identities are constructed through multiple specificities: race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual preference, language, myth, history” (Nayar, 2008:201). The diasporic people are not sure of their real identities. What they think of themselves, they are not and what they are unable to think of, they are. When they leave their own country in search of money or any other reason, they just feel that as they have landed onto a foreign land, they belong to the country. But when they are treated like “others” there, they are unable to conceive the real state of their belongingness and sometimes they feel that they do not belong to any country. When they consider the idea of going back to their own country from which they have migrated, they are unable to do so as they feel alienated there also. Thus they are always in a dilemma of belongingness and feel that they have lost their identities.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The same thing happens in the selected text. In the opening chapter, some people are waiting at the airport for their friends or kins, who are coming from Punjab, India. In order to kill time, they start talking about the climatic and other differences between India and England. One of the youngsters is asking questions to a middle aged man who is speaking everything logically and nobody seems to oppose him. The youngster asks the middle-aged if they are the citizens of a very big country, why have they come to a foreign land. Here he explains the real reason of their migration. He says that they have come there only to win bread. Their country is big as far as area is concerned but unable to provide them food. He says,

*“Sada mulk sirf khetarfaal da i vada ya. Jitho tayin roti da sabandh ae,
eh bahut chhota mulk ae.”* (Chandan, 1991:13)

The discussion leads to the last question before the plane arrives. The same young man asks him, which is their real country; they are no more Indians and nor they could be complete foreigners after spending four-five years in a foreign country. He says,

“taya fer apna desh kehra hou-na apan Indian reh gaye te na hi angrez ban sake” (Chandan, 1991: 14)

Thus they are somehow aware of their identification and their belongingness. The old man further explains that their new generations will follow the customs and culture and will be the part of this society; then there will not be any question of going back. And even if they try to go back to their own country, they will not be able to adjust there. And only this would be the end of this situation.

When the plane lands, Gurjeet Singh is in search of Preetu, who is there to receive him but he could not find him. Then Preetu comes in front of him and taunts that Gurjeet is blinded with the glare of the foreign land.

But the real reason behind this is that Preetu is a cut-surd now who was a turbaned guy earlier. Gurjeet comments,

“Balle oye Preetu-tu tan kanjra angrez ban gya ithe aa k...” (Chandan, 1991: 15)

Gurjeet is speaking at a high pitch but Preetu forbids him and asks him to be civilised as nobody speaks so loudly in this country. Moreover, here people consider talking loudly as being uncivilised. He says,

“...aivein raula payi janae jangliyan aangu-is desh vich hauli hauli gallan karidian-gore mara mande ae uchi bolan nu” (Chandan, 1991:16)

Thus he wants to make Gurjeet learn and adopt the manners of the country. At Preetu's place, Gurjeet is served non-veg, eggs and whisky. At this he comments that as they can have such delicious things in their meal, why they would remember their own country. Because, belonging to a labour class, they could not even have their daily meal to the full in their own country.

In chapter 4, when Preetu is thinking about his past, when he boarded the plane for England, he could feel everything different, different from his own place; different types of food in packets, smiling beautiful airhostesses about whom he had heard only in his fairy tales, everything was of different culture and nothing of his own; he felt as if he has lost his self.

“us di apni hond hi gwach gayi lagdi c” (Chandan, 1991:38)

Then he thinks about his early days in England, he had nothing to do. He could not find any work and after three weeks, he was very depressed. He was thinking of three things, first is that he was free and lonely, secondly he was thinking of his wife and two sons and thirdly the biggest hurdle in front of him was of a different civilisation, which he calls, *“begani sabhyta” (Chandan, 1991:39)*. But he realises that it is a foreign land where everyone is bound only economically. He says,

“par eh tan vlait c- vlait jithe sare rishte sirf garz naal badhe hoye san- valait jitho de saare rishte aarthak san, manukhi rishte nahi.” (Chandan, 1991:40)

He also calls this world a living hell, i.e. *“jeonda nark” (Chandan, 1991:40)*. Thus it can be seen that even after being aware of each and everything and the loss of identity which is felt every now and then, Preetu doesn't leave the place and keeps on struggling only for money. After sometime, he is able to call his wife and kids there and he is satisfied. The first thing he does is that he cuts off the hair of his sons. He tells his wife Veero that in this foreign country they are looked down upon because of their turbans and this is the reason why he cut off his own hair also. He had to listen to a lot many abuses and when he cut off his hair, he got his job immediately and that too there from where he was shooed off a lot many times. There were two barriers in his getting a job, one were his hair and another his language. He could not converse in English but by the time Veero comes there, he has learnt the basic words. Though he is unable to speak the proper accent but he can speak.

He has also found some work for Gurjeet in his factory and has taught him what to say at the gate, as Gurjeet, like him, doesn't know how to speak English. Then Gurjeet also feels that though he doesn't feel any difficulty working there as he used to work a lot at home but the difference is that there he was his own master and could do what and when he wanted but here he is a servant of someone else and has to work accordingly. Preetu asks him to think of him as a labourer and not of anything else as on a foreign land, they are all equal. Otherwise Preetu belongs to a lower caste whereas Gurjeet belongs to an upper caste. Both of them have been intimate friends since childhood and while talking they keep on remembering their own country. In a public discussion Gurjeet says that there is no difference on the basis of caste, as the major difference is that of money. He says,

“jaat joot na ki fark painda ea- paihe di jaat sab ton uchi hundi ae” (Chandan, 1991:63)

After sometime, Gurjeet also has called his wife Gurbal Kaur and his little daughter Banty. But when Preetu invites them for dinner, she refuses to eat at Preetu's place considering him of lower caste. Gurjeet tries hard to convince her that Preetu has done a lot for him and has taken care of everything he needed, Gurbal is not convinced. And once when Preetu has dinner at their place, she asks him to wash his plates as he used to do at his native place. He feels very bad and even Gurjeet is very annoyed at this and angrily even breaks off all the plates. But this same Gurjeet who fights with his wife for his friend changes when he learns that his daughter and Preetu's son are having an affair. He at once is reminded of their lower caste. This shows that people have double standards in their lives. (This issue will be taken up later in the paper.)

After the birth of her son, Satnam, Gurbal Kaur feels lonely and misses her native place and her relatives. At this time when Preetu and his wife Veero come to congratulate her, she realises that at this foreign land where nobody from their family can come to see and bless their son, only Preetu and Veero are there whom they can call their own. She says,

“beh ja Veero chah pi k jayo- apne akhan nu ithe tusi hi o nah hun” (Chandan, 1991:73)

Nobody was expecting this from Gurpal. And when once she feels that she is unable to bear the loneliness she takes her both kids to Veero's place as there were only foreigners living near her place who don't even like to see them, i.e. the Indians. Then she feels relieved after meeting someone who could understand her feelings, her thoughts and especially her language. This also shows loss of identity on a foreign land and sense of belongingness to someone who belongs to the same native place. Here all the barriers of caste or creed are ended up. Necessity makes one understand the value of even the most hated person.

Then the story starts after ten years. Now all the kids are young. Preetu's elder son Karma, who is Karem now, is studying in University and Gurjeet's daughter Banty, now called Bunty by her mates as there is no '□' sound in English Phonetics so they call him with '□' sound which is easier for them, are very friendly. Both have studied together in the same school, both were intelligent and the best thing is they are far from the caste, creed barriers. They are not bothered about the limitations of what India is, what the culture of India is, what is religion or what is being of a lower or higher caste etc. What they know only is that they are human beings who love each other and want to get married. While discussing the American immigrants, Pakenham is also of the view that "The shift to English was accompanied by another change that took place in second generation immigrant families. While first generation immigrants still tended to think of themselves as Irish, English, Italian or German, their children and grandchildren clearly considered themselves American" (Pakenham, 2005:66). The same is true of Karma and Banty who are unable to understand what a Majhabi means and what a Jatt stands for. The new generation is challenging the old one and their walls have started breaking in front of them like sand walls (Chandan, 1991:88). The gap between both the generations was increasing day by day.

Karem and Bunty are standing at this new way of their lives. They don't believe in the old fashioned and hollow customs rather it is a revolt. But they can't even revolt like English girls and boys. Actually everything has changed in ten years. Now there is no way of feeling lonely or bored as there are a lot many things which have changed, like they can go out anytime and watch Indian movies, have Indian food, listen to Indian music and make a lot of noise while drinking and dancing in pubs and bars. As if everything has been Indianised. Now the same Gurpal Kaur asks her husband to sell their home and shift to somewhere else as she feels that where they live is a crowded place and a lot many Indians have shifted there. She says,

*"apne lok hi bade ho gye ae. ...gaddi park karn nu v than nhi milda...
ithe tan naal di road ale gurdware chon v swere swere enian vajan aundiyan
byi banda aitwar bhora saun v nhi sakda"* (Chandan, 1991: 95)

This is same Gurpal who felt lonely as there was no Indian around at that time. Now she is irritated because of Indians only. When she asks Gurjeet to ask from kids, they also say the same thing. Banty says,"

*"yes papa, mummy is right-asi itho meel ku pran ja k makaan lai layiye,
jithe gore rehnde hon- ithe tan sare Indian hi disde aa."* (Chandan, 1991: 95)

It has also been seen that when Banty and Satnam talk to each other, they use English only and slangs too. When Preetu joins the job of a bus driver, he comes to know about the affair of Banty and Karma. He has always been proud of Karma because of his interest in studies though he is worried about his younger son Ghunna, who is of a loafer types and is not interested in family matters or studies or anything else. He only enjoys his life by roaming about. But after knowing about the affair, he feels very depressed, angry and annoyed at Karma also. He bumbles about all this and abuses Karma. He at once is reminded of his caste and Banty's caste. He says, as if talking to Karma,

*"Kanjara dea putta, j tune ho jeha kara karna hi c te kite hor mar lainda.
Eh tun ki karta. Main Gurjeet nu ki muh vakhaun.
Nale oh jatt, ahin majhbi..."* (Chandan, 1991: 106)

After finishing his duty, he at once comes to his home. Banty also comes there after him and asks him to talk to her father. He says how can he talk to Gurjeet about all this and tells her that her mother Gurpal Kaur even wanted him to wash his plates. When Veero comes, she is also told everything and Banty leaves their home crying and requesting them not to say anything to Karem. At this Veero admits that they are uprooted in this foreign country.

"Valait tan sanu jarhon putti jandi ae" (Chandan, 1991: 112)

On asking about all this, Karma admits that he and Banty are in love with each other and want to get married. But when Preetu asks him if they have discussed about their castes before falling in love, Karma, who has been brought up in this free society, is unable to understand the importance of caste in their love. He has forgotten everything which he felt at their native place. He is fully engulfed in the foreign culture.

Preetu tries to convince him saying that he has suffered a lot in the hands of Jatts and they will never consider him their equal. He says,

“ahan jattan ton chamm luhayi ae, tun nhi janda- eh tenu apne brobar nhi mith sakde bhaven tu mehlan da malak ban ja. Koi moya hoya jatt v majhbi de munde nu saak de k razi nhi- Gurjeet tan hale jeonda ya” (Chandan, 1991: 117)

Karma replies that law is with them and Gurjeet cannot do anything even if doesn't like it. Thus Karma gives him a blunt reply of not stepping back. He is just finished with this incident that his younger son Ghunna returns, Preetu asks him where he was and why can't he be at his own home, Ghunna asks him to stop this nonsense. After being slapped by Preetu, Ghunna calls him *“bastard”* (Chandan, 1991: 119). Then Preetu feels as if this bastard word is not said by his son but by this *“valait”* (foreign country). In India no son can call his father a bastard. But this is a foreign land, free society, freedom of speech, freedom of sex, freedom of death, freedom of life, freedom to abuse and freedom to beguile (Chandan, 1991:119).

Preetu is so upset that he couldn't even go for his job. The next day, Preetu tells Gurjeet about Karma and Banty affair. On hearing this, Gurjeet becomes red with anger and doesn't talk to Preetu. He straight away comes to his home and asks Banty,

“tainu yarian lauun nu majhbi hi labhe sige ?” (Chandan, 1991: 125)

This shows the double standards of Gurjeet. He is the same man who used to fight with his wife saying that Preetu is his friend and claimed that he doesn't believe in the caste system. He is now unable to tolerate his daughter's affair with Preetu Majhbi's son. He beats her so brutally that their neighbours call police and he is taken to jail and Banty to hospital.

Banty has a foreign friend Margaret. When she is beaten up second time and locked in a room, she comes to her and Margaret helps her. She asks her why her parents can't let her marry a university going educated guy. Banty replies,

“Because they believe that he belongs to a lower caste” (Chandan, 1991: 134)

Margaret now understands the real reason behind all this and comments,

“That is very strange- I can't understand one thing- on one hand your people are fighting against racial discrimination by white people in England, and on the other, they are discriminating their own kind- it is ridiculous, isn't it?” (Chandan, 1991: 134)

She hasn't said anything which is not true. Our own people discriminate against each other. They want to have all the rights but they are not ready to give any right to the lower caste people. And in the country where everyone is equal in the eyes of law, where they live together, they eat together but they are not ready to accept each other. The affair of Karma and Banty is not acceptable in the eyes of a high caste Gurjeet at the same time, even Preetu can't support them. He abuses his own son rather than convincing his so called friend. Thus even friendship on a foreign land is only the need of the hour which is clear from the behaviour of Guralp Kaur especially.

Margaret helps Banty and Karma and they get married. But Banty always misses her family. One day when she is unable to resist her feelings, she goes to her home to meet her parents but the door is locked and she goes to her brother's school. He there tells her what their parents talked about Banty. He says,

“ahnde sige- oh sade layi margi te asin ohde layi.” (Chandan, 1991: 147)

But he as a brother misses her a lot. He is born and brought up in a foreign land and doesn't understand what caste is and what is fair or unfair according to their culture.

V. CONCLUSION

In the end, it can be concluded that people living the lives of diaspora have double standards. They have multiple faces and they themselves don't know what their real face is. They have new identities with the period of time but they believe in old institutions inwardly. They are changed only outwardly and this change also reflects through their language. They shift to English words and English language with the passage of time but they speak Punjabi at their homes. They want their kids to follow Punjabi culture and do not like Punjabi people living next to them. Nayar (2008, 191) has rightly pointed out that the theme of identity in a diasporic writing is not merely an exercise in exploring the multiplicities of location and subjecthoods, rather it is a larger political issue of global justice, cultural rights, self determination, and cosmopolitanism. The above discussed issues amply hint at the fact that diasporic writers are certainly addressing the issues related to the community as well as the International scenario and exploring the discourse of dialogue for the process of resettlement.

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