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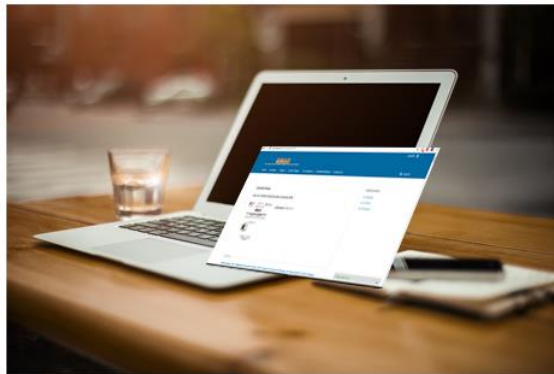
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Faultlines at Blurred Border between fictionality and Reality of
Punjabi Diaspora: Some reflections on Punjab, Punjabi language and Punjabi culture

Abstract- The present paper strives to interrogate the fictionality of attempts by the Punjabi expatriates for the overseas maintenance, preservation and proliferation of their Punjabi cultural identity as a result of the economic prosperity of Punjabi brethren settled abroad and its concomitant effects back home on Punjab, Punjabi language and Punjabi culture. The paper places on record the direct contestation between the fictional microcosm comprised of the diasporic milieu portrayed in diasporic literature and the actual life led by diasporic Punjabi expatriates on the host land, which is the replica of the original back home in Punjab, and the macrocosm of the actual real culture of geographical terrain called Punjab in India on the world map.

Terms- Diaspora, fictionality, faultlines, transnationalism, cultural identity, dialectic negotiation, microcosm, macrocosm

Paper

The chequered exodus of Punjabi expatriates from the soil of Punjab starting from colonial times as outsourced indentured Indians to the self exiled globalized citizens of the 21st century makes a good study to see the dialectical interplay and discursive positioning of the Punjabi language and Punjabi culture within the transnational matrix of postmodern order. Having traversed a long distance journey for decades and crossed a number of borders, the Punjabi diaspora has seen it all-from being on the margins to a hyphenated swinging existence and finally to the rightful claims to an equal partnership in the contemporary western social and political discourse. Unlike overseas migration from other parts of India, Punjabi migration really commenced during the final quarter of the 19th century and was very much part of the strategic and influential position which Punjab acquired within the British Empire. Punjab's formal

incorporation into the British Empire after 1849 resulted in a movement of Punjabis to other regions of the empire such as Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Fiji, Australia and New Zealand. The majority of these pioneer migrants were Sikhs who originally came from the rural areas of Punjab and went abroad either through military postings, police service or for other economic operations. The first quarter of the 20th century saw the further expansion of this migration especially to East Africa, associated with the construction of railways and the new trading and business opportunities which this created. Having been exposed to wider horizons through the imperial connection, the numbers migrating independently to pursue better economic opportunities also expanded, especially to the Pacific coasts of Canada and America. The post-independent period saw this pace in migration to UK and USA. Soon after the first OPEC price hike of 1973-74 the Gulf region also became an attractive destination for Punjabis and finally, the ending of the Cold War after 1989 opened up new land and sea routes to Punjabi migrants, with many settling in Greece, Italy and Spain. Historical experience, global exposure and the visibility of NRI affluence continue to spur the further migration of Punjabis from Punjab even now in the 21st century.

. It goes without saying that the world of post modernity at large is sometimes described as a transnational village where multiple borders have merged and are sequestered, or crossed and double crossed with regularity. The borders range from territorial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious and caste differentiations to a quasi-secular porous identity of no-fixed address. It is diaspora which crosses borders of nation-states leaving behind ancestral homeland in search of new social, economic, educational networks. The collective diasporic experience of Punjabi expatriates in particular can be summed up through Sudesh Mishra's neologism, namely 'diaspoetics' which consists of three moves- dual territoriality, situational laterality and archival specificity.

In the first phase, the diasporic subject has a sense of dislocated identity between the stable host country and the former homeland, which is marked by 'living without' belonging in one, belonging without living in other. Swaran Chandan's novel *Apne Guache* (Our Lost) exemplifies this stage aptly.

In the second, the boundaries are transcending, there is more fluid identity formation and the diasporic citizen is ambivalent about physically returning to the former land.

In the third, the subject moves away from both the above and questions the history and identity written as it were on his or her transmigrated body, sometimes even returning to wider moral and religious configuration to form a specific identity distinct from the above two. This experience of dialectic contestation gets represented amply well in diasporic literature as UK based Jagjit Brar's story *Jhhande Di Meil*, Harbhajan Singh's *Ground Zero*, Karam Singh Mann's *Fence* and Rani Nagender's *Curfew* have explored the issues of identity, racial discrimination, eastern and western conflict etc. Moving ahead one step further, the expatriates now consider themselves very much part of the host culture so much so that the title *Watno dur* of a magazine of the first phase was changed to *Watna*, making Canada their own home while taking interest in active politics. But this apparent merger into the host culture seems to simplify things apparently but only to complicate further. As said by the noted Punjabi NRI writer Harijit Atwal –we are being sandwiched between two cultures. Our roots are here but our children have their roots abroad and have reached a point of no return. He further shows a concern that there was a serious problem of preserving our culture before it becomes part of heritage and archaeology.

In the light of the above statement of being at a crossroad of no return in a multicultural scenario of the globalised world, a number of questions stare us:

1. Is it admissible to expect that the preservation of one's culture, language and identity is possible in the globalised melting pot of identities and nationalities when one has chosen to have a self-exiled status?
2. Isn't it an over-simplification to look at the feasibility of maintenance of local flavour in the imagined land where the established diaspora has enjoyed the benefits of the host culture?
3. Is it fair or wise to think that globalisation is a phenomenon independent from cultural changes?
4. Isn't the hybridisation of culture and chutnification of language the rightful corollary of globalisation?

5. Don't the faultlines at various borders and junctures presuppose the opposition to nativist cultures?

There is no denying the fact that the consumerism of host western culture is bound to have a toll on the oriental value system of immigrants as the migration of Punjabis was entirely dictated by the purely economic considerations into an unknown territory where they are determined to negotiate and navigate their way at each step to meet any eventuality whatsoever. But as the time passed, they got lost in the whirlpool of materialism, consumerism, quest for identity, nostalgia for homeland and the preservation of native culture. Harjit Singh Atwal's novel *Ret* clearly states this- a story of a man gone astray in the over-developed capitalist system looking for something he himself is not sure of. *Ret* is a metaphor for crumbling relations, highlighting the gravity in the decline of human relations leading to breaking of families and homes. This is the price they have to pay and the borders they have to cross to have some land under their feet in the imagined reality to lead a neo- normal life. Invariably, the Punjabi diaspora has to push on and push through a good number of these frontiers epistemically and socially when, for instance, they need to upgrade their jobs, fight for better education of their children, build gurudwaras against local tempers, and become CEOs of some MNCs to get them accepted. But having said that, it is noteworthy to underline the fact that certain indigenous irritants or borders continue to find place even in alien lands within the local communities. The regressive mentality of the migrated Punjabis seems to get stuck in time wrap and does not show any sign of substantive qualitative changes over the years. The initial concerns of racial discrimination , generation gap and nostalgia of the diasporic writers gave way to the hackneyed theme neutrality [as in literature written in Punjab] like 'honour killing ' in 'southall' a novel by Harijit Atwal, female foeticide in *Nirlazz*, a play by the Canadian playwright Ajmer Rode. These themes depict the obsession of the diaspora with indigenous feudal mindsets showing no signs of intellectual and cultural growth despite living in the evolved atmosphere of the west. In their microcosm of larger western macrocosm, men are free to take all the liberties of 'English culture' and allow their sons as well but they become fanatic and orthodox when women try to avail of the same. The girl who dare to be part of alien culture like free swimming in a pool either are thrown out of home or liquidated in the family honour by their orthodox families. In a developed society like Britain where women have all the rights to realize their personal freedom, Punjabi

women are subjected to sexual exploitation, domestic violence or honour killing if they realize their freedom and dare go against the dictates of the family head and norms of the mini Punjab in London. The Punjabi male psyche is caught in the vortex of contradictions of liberated western culture in its proximity and the regressive discriminatory mentality of remote native Punjabi culture.

The Punjabis living at Southall in London are culturally stagnant and are not able to make a mark in host culture because they remain aloof and alienated in ghettos forming minority groups at margins whereas 'the cultural identity of a society is defined by its majority groups [Stephen Bochner 1973] which might help or get helped by the members of a sub group only if and only if they fit into the system as its productive members. 'Towers', a short story by a Canadian Punjabi writer Jarnail Singh, shows the anxiety and eagerness on the part of immigrants to prove their allegiance to the host culture in their struggle to locate or establish their identity.

The depiction of trials and tribulations, ambitions and disappointments, anger and anxieties, frustration and insecurities of the Punjabi immigrants in a body of literature called diasporic literature might have earned the writers of this genre some critical acclaim and some awards too, but too much of limelight on the diasporic people and their achievements in the mainstream discourse has backfired in term of the revision of the western policies to the nativist version –America first for Americans –and overall hostile threatening atmosphere for the new crop of immigrants . Second, the homeward orientation of the successful immigrants, entrepreneurs and singers to flaunt their wealth, material exploits 'phoren' accented language , hairstyle etc. has not done much service either to Punjabi state, Punjabi language or even to Punjabi culture . Punjabi youth have started taking them as their role models. What in the West operates as a culture of narcissism finds embodiment in India or Punjab ,for that matter, as hero worship. They are positively brainwashed to talk, act think and live as their heroes do. The stars and the worldview marketed with and by them are hyped and hyper ventilated. This hero worship has weaned them away from hardwork in fields to drug addiction and glamour and glitz of America, Canada etc. leaving agriculture sector in distress and farmers in despair. Though the diasporic philanthropy has resulted in some tangible benefits to the people backhome but has ended in some sort of rhetoric , diasporic patriotism (we must be giving back something to our mother country). It makes sense when we say that at the saturation point of the hyphenated existence of the Panjabi diaspora , they should

renegotiate their links with homelands as living in the imaginary and artificial sites of fictionality by recreating and transplanting their religious rites, cultures and ecology in the western land is not enough . The self exiled diaspora should remain self conscious of their history, identity, culture, genealogy and heritage in the wake of hidden onslaughts of cultural imperialism which is bound to spread its fangs and take control over the empty spaces and fill them with homogenised identities. Defending identities does not mean denying the process of globalization, or the encounter of several cultures in the world, but rather it means defending the traditions ,ruptures and tendencies that identifies a local culture which further provides each individual a sense of self,structure his value system,engineer his worldview and pattern his response to new experiences .

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