

Utopia, Dystopia and Exilic Experience in Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways*

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Abstract

*This paper examines the social contexts and repercussions of the experiences of Indian migrants in England as portrayed in Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways*. Although narratives of migration is attached to the very genesis of human existence on planet earth, but the experience of human mobility has in recent history taken an unimaginably traumatising dimension and this has continued to draw the attention of creative writers and literary scholars. From the analysis of the text named above, this unprecedented trend in migration experience is fuelled by the apparent inequality in the world in which a greater percentage of nations of the world, especially in the developing countries, continue, in the midst of plenty, to wallow in abject poverty, underdevelopment and poor governance that make the mass of the underprivileged humanity that populate these disadvantaged realms to continue to exist in their varied states of disillusionment and vulnerable to diverse dangers and indignities in their quests for bare survival. Failed leadership in most of the Third World nations and societies occasioned by greed and leadership ineptitude, corruption, nepotism, bigotry, chauvinism, superciliousness, and extremism constitute the bases for the abysmal socio-economic and political performance of these nations with the concomitant human mobility that result in avoidable suffering of the weak and disadvantaged of the world. The paper explores the socio-political trajectories of migration narratives and migrant encounters where dreams of utopia confront the reality of dystopia as projected in Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways**

Keywords: utopia, dystopia, migration, displacement, trauma

Introduction

Migration has become a dominant feature of modern life as people across the nooks and crannies of the world are constantly moving from place to place for obvious, multi-faceted, and varied reasons. Ayo Kehinde (148) attributes this

constant movement of people from one place, locality, region or nation-state to another to the prevalent situation of insecurity in many nations of the world, the search for greener pastures in some foreign lands, social instability, excruciating poverty in the migrant's homeland, violence, danger, wants and diseases, "therefore, people migrate out of their traditional homelands in search of better life, security and sustenance" (148-149). In the same vein, Christian Dustmann and Yoran Weiss (2) aver that throughout human history, the tendency for human migration has been predicated on the triad of economic motives, natural disasters and persecution even as Raymond Hibbins and Bob Pease (2) identify socio-political/economic changes, terrorism, violence, natural disasters and globalization as the fundamental bases for migration.

Generally considered, two salient factors are responsible for migration trends the world over – the push and the pull factors. While the push factor accounts for emigration trends, the pull factor is behind immigration tendencies. Thus, whether propelled by the push or pull factor, people migrate, essentially, for the following reasons: the search for peace and security, the need to flee from an impending crisis whether political or civil, and the search for greener pastures in the form of employment opportunities or admission prospects. Other categorical grounds for migration include the search for better quality of living occasioned by availability of basic infrastructure such as improved and quality health care facilities, educational facilities, steady electricity or power supply, effective transportation, housing and telephone services. The rest of the factors may revolve around availability of some favourable economic environment, improved standard of living, availability of business prospects, cultural tolerance including the recognition and respect for one's religious and social beliefs as well as recognition and respect for human rights and values.

In many instances, migration normally offers itself as a last resort, a panacea for escape from untoward, somewhat perplexing, and in some cases, life-threatening situations, circumstances or environments. It is a form of escape from a situation or society whose values are no longer acceptable to the individual self. Sometimes, it may be seen as the ultimate solution after various other attempts at escaping from the problems of life prove unsuccessful. Marcus Bullock (223) expresses this ineluctable imperative for migration thus: "Nowhere do we more vividly experience the inescapable immediacy of the powers that determine our lives than in the need to escape

one place and strike out for another”. He, however, subtly identifies some likely grounds for migration thereby foregrounding our earlier identified ones:

Whether we are living in the aftermath of a national disaster, a crisis of violence like a war, an insurgency, a repressive tyranny, or are driven by intolerable social conditions of poverty and a hopeless future, we have to leave a world we know and enter another where we shall be strangers. We become foreigners, alien to those among whom we shall henceforth live, in fear that we might ourselves become so even to ourselves (223).

Thus, migrants' decision to leave their traditional homeland is most times deliberate because there appears to be no better choice or option available to them at the time. But whether they are conscious of the aftermath of the decision or not is inconsequential as the realities of migration soon dawn on them – loss of home, identity, culture, family/relationships, pride, and so on. Incidentally, these huge losses, as far as the migrants are concerned, do not equate with the anticipated safety and psychological balance that they desire especially at the initial moment of the journey. To this class of migrants, home is “not where one is pushed into the light; it is where one gathers it into oneself to become light” (Ihab Hassan 216). Here, home becomes an improvisation aimed at filling an emergent vacuum. This conception of “home” for this class of people corroborates Theodore Adorno's famous lines that “It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home” (qtd in Conor McCarthy 231). At this point, “home” takes the form of a creation, albeit accidental or circumstantial – especially so because “We cannot escape the knowledge that all human experience comes to us conditioned by accidents not of our choosing” (Marcus Bullock, 232). However, in spite of the dogged resolve to abandon the traditional, native or biological home for a new, foreign one, migrants soon come to grasp with the ambivalences of exile occasioned by the fact of alienation, displacement or dislocation, solitude, isolation, nostalgia, hostility, and the like. They soon realise the fact that they do not belong there, and that they are aliens, exiles, the “other”, in the new homelands.

From the point of view of its etymology, the word “exile” may be traced to the old French verb “*esillier*”, which means to banish, expel, or drive off, and from Latin, “*exilare/exsilare*”, which means banishment

(<http://www.etymonline.com>). In current usage, exile designates both the situation/experience of finding oneself in a foreign land far removed from home, and the subject or migrant himself, amidst other meanings. Exile may be considered an integral part of human existence and experience. An atavistic account of exile presents it as a punitive measure for insubordination. In the Old Testament of the Bible, exile is mentioned as an aftermath of the disobedience of Adam and Eve who ate of the forbidden fruit and consequently got banished from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). In contemporary usage, exile presents itself not necessarily as a result of humanity's rebellious or irrational decisions, but rather as a condition that defines human existence. Exile is sometimes linked to political circumstances, yet there are broader perspectives to it, as Ada Savin observes: "In its narrow sense a political banishment, exile in its broad sense designates every kind of estrangement or displacement, from the physical and geographical to the spiritual" (2).

Jan Crew views an exile as a creature balanced between "limbo and nothingness, exile abroad and homelessness at home" (453). This *in-betweenness* creates, in the mind of an exile, a perpetual feeling of nostalgia. In many an instance, nostalgia is apparent when a person finds the present to be deficient in comparison with the past and there appears to be access to the past only through images, objects, or associations. Nostalgia becomes, then, "a strategy for overcoming the anxiety of separation from the native country, allowing self-exploration and understanding of one's identity" (214). There is, thus, an ambivalent attitude in which migrants share a dread of restlessness in a new homeland, and a yearning to connect with their surrounding in a bid to belong (Kehinde 160). Home at this point becomes a place one loves; that one wishes to return to, somewhere that draws one back again. Consequently, plans to return home become a project in the minds of exiles. In most instances, these plans for a return migration often times suffer perpetual deferment as exiles come to realise the sheer impossibility of doing so.

Exile, Displacement and Disillusionment in Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways*

The hallmark of migration narratives is the apt portrayal of how postcolonial subjects negotiate new spaces in foreign lands in a bid to survive. Such narratives examine the struggles of migrants from the ever-struggling, ever-dependent Third World nations in their host nations, basically the rich, industrialised First World. Migration narratives generally capture the basis or imperatives of the journey on the part of the migrants, the bizarre experiences that characterise the journey, the disillusionment or utter frustration that

constitutes their overall experience in their host land as well as the nostalgia or a longing for a return to the native or traditional homeland. Migration is one of the tropes through which writers have explored the human condition. Apparently, the theme of migration and its outcome has been an inherently attractive or captivating one in the recent decades to writers working in a number of different literary genres, movements and traditions. This is particularly imperative given the ever-widening gap between the rich, industrialised nations and the poor, developing ones. Since the cardinal preoccupation of the literary art is to realistically capture or portray the milieu and the moment, a handful of writers, particularly of Third World origin, have delved into the experience of these migrants as a way of exploring their peculiar conditions.

Sunjeev Sahota, a British writer of Indian origin, is one of these Third World writers whose interest is hinged, not only on the indices that account for the ever-widening gap between the First and the Third Worlds, but also on postcolonial subjects' disillusioning migration experience as portrayed in his *The Year of the Runaways* (henceforth, *The Year*). In the text, Sahota takes his readers across the Asian and the European continents creating scenes, events, and happenings that succinctly capture and as well distinguish the two climes from the perspectives of just a few variables. The novelist vividly evokes events and episodes from his home country, India, even as he also creatively recreates the multifarious and untoward experiences of the country's citizens in the host land.

Sahota's narrative aptly captures the experiences of four young Indians, who, frustrated by the socio-economic and political upheavals in their homeland decide to run away to a somewhat stable, peaceful, life-supporting, economically viable and prospects-building one. The horrible experience the foursome of Randeep, Avtar, Tochi, and Gurpreet undergo in India forms the basis of their decision to leave their homeland for England in a bid to have jobs to cater for themselves and their poverty-stricken families. Unfortunately, however, none of them has what it takes to travel to England without being apprehended and deported by relevant authorities. None has what it takes to acquire a valid travel document. They therefore resort to a number of illegal and near-legal approaches to get to England.

Randeep approaches a travel agent who links him up with a young English lady, Narinderji, for a marriage deal. The deal is that Narinderji would accept

to marry Randeep for a fee, which marriage would last for just a year. Under the arrangement, Randeep would be issued a visa to travel to England and live with his English wife. After a period of one year, Narinderji would file divorce papers in England where the marriage would be terminated while Randeep would then have full documents that would qualify him a full resident. This is how Randeep gets to England and begins to scramble for menial jobs to enable him to fulfil the monetary aspects of the agreement which involve paying rent for his visa wife and giving her money for monthly upkeep, in fact, shouldering the traditional responsibility of a typical husband (*The Year*, 21-24).

In a bid to beat all barriers and hindrances against his anticipated journey to England, Avtar approaches a travel agent who collects huge sums of money from him and issues him a student visa which is expected to last for one year (*The Year*, 14). Tochi's journey into England is courtesy of a forged travel document issued by Mr Thirpureddy, a fake, yet renowned travel agent who has accomplices virtually everywhere including Turkey and France (*The Year*, 75-76). Gurpreet is the only illegal Indian migrant whose mode of entry into England is not explicitly stated. Perhaps, he would have also taken the routes Tochi took to find himself in England. Certainly, the poise by these four young Indians to leave their homeland through any means possible is emblematic of the fact that their homeland has abysmally fallen short of citizens' expectations and aspirations. Thus, for the young Indian migrants, home is not a place one wishes to belong or return to, but, in the words of Marcus Bullock "a state of having escaped" (230). However, no sooner had they landed England than the realities of exile begins dawning on them – joblessness, homelessness, hopelessness, hardship, rootlessness, restlessness, displacement, nostalgia, trauma, and general disillusionment.

Randeep is eighteen years old; he is from a family which, ordinarily, should do well economically. His father, Sanghera, had served the Indian government as a civil servant for more than three decades. But just a year to his retirement, Sanghera mistakenly slips and falls in his office, and this sudden fall results, not just in a serious injury, but ultimately in a mental condition that renders him totally uncoordinated amidst fits of incoherence even as he loses the cognitive ability to communicate with colleagues and family members. To make matters worse for the Sanghera family, the authorities have him sacked from the job following the indisposition and subsequent inability to report to duty as it used to be (*The Year*, 142-153). The

responsibility of feigning for the sick father and indeed the entire family accordingly falls on Randeep who resorts to some menial jobs at nights while he goes to school in the morning. As things get unprecedentedly tough for the Sangheras, Randeep's last resort is to leave for England, an industrialised, well-to-do nation, apparently, every young Indian's dream (*The Years*, 171). Randeep and indeed the Sanghera family appear finally relieved when Vakeelji breaks the news of the willingness of Narinderji, an English young lady to accept to marry Randeep for a fee. The happiness in the Sanghera household knows no bounds. Randeep's mother, who had started developing symptoms that are trauma-related becomes, all of sudden enlivened, vivacious, and invigorated. For her, Narinderji is divinely sent into the family to have them rescued from the pangs of poverty and every semblance of hardship (*The Year*, 182). At this point, Arnold Cassola's conceptualisation of the imperative of migration aptly captures and succinctly finds relevance in Randeep's case:

At a psychological level, migration is usually intended to be a definitive form of escape from a society whose values are unacceptable to the individual self. Sometimes, it is seen as the ultimate solution after various other attempts at escaping from the problems of life prove unsuccessful (174).

Migration at this point becomes, in the words of Paul Harrison, a form of voting with one's feet, "of demanding a seat at the table where the feasting is going on. It happens because development is uneven and benefits of growth are so unevenly spread" (149). Unarguably, the Sanghera family is convinced beyond every sphere of doubt that Randeep's migration to England is the most desirable thing to happen to the family.

Randeep is in England as a result of the marriage visa procured for him by Narinderji. However, for the agreement between him and the latter to remain binding, he has to work hard, raise enough money for the lady's rent, feeding and general upkeep. After all, the lady is his "wife", and he is duty-bound to play the traditional role of a typical "husband". This is amidst the fact that he has to cater for himself, find himself accommodation, and if possible send some money to the parents back home in India. At the moment, he is an illegal resident or migrant. His status would only change if or when, at the end of the year, he would have lived up to the terms of the visa marriage agreement and accordingly gets a divorce. The overall implication is that, until otherwise stated, and at the appropriate time too, Randeep remains an

illegal migrant, a foreigner, or an exile in England.

Quite perplexing is the experience Randeep undergoes in England in a bid to survive and as well abide by the dictates of the visa marriage agreement. Arriving England alongside Avtar, the duo is received by Massiji, Randeep's cousin's wife, who resides with the husband in Ilford. The coldness that characterises the welcome banter between him and his cousin, Jimmy Bhaji, is a direct pointer to the kind of disillusionment that awaits them in England (*The Year*, 193). Though Jimmy and wife live in a multi-room flat, they find it difficult to give up just one of the rooms to Randeep and Avtar to, at least, pass the night. The duo has no choice but to manage the “settees in the front room” (*The Year*, 194). It is this apparent lack of affection on the part of his cousin and wife that causes Randeep to quickly leave for Sheffield while Avtar goes in search of his school located at a distant part of London (*The Year*, 195).

The high hopes and expectations with which Randeep brought to England has started growing wane given the scarcity of jobs in Sheffield and some neighbouring cities. He has spent three good months so far without the least of menial jobs with which to take care of himself let alone cater for the needs of the visa wife (*The Year*, 206). However, the first prospect of having a menial job in London makes Randeep unprecedentedly elated. Out of excitement, he calls Narinderji on phone and informs her of the development: he has a job; his employer, Virender, has given him a room; the job is a weekly paid one; Mr Virender loves him so much, and so on (*The Year*, 210-212). What he would, however, not mention to Narinderji is the fact that the much talked about job is a menial, hard, debilitating, and strength-sapping one. Thus, in spite of the usual desperation, excitement or enthusiasm to travel to developed nations, jobs that are available for Third World migrants are menial, tedious, tough and energy-sapping ones, which jobs are most times, short-lived (*The Year*, 208).

Rather disturbing to Randeep is the fact that when a particular menial job finishes, it is often difficult to find a new one. Since most of these jobs are time-bound, they finish without notice thereby throwing the labourers into a fresh round of job search (*The Years*, 410). In a bid to ensure he does not renege on his agreement with Narinderji, Randeep is always faithful to pay, not just the rent, but also her upkeep as soon as he raises a little money from a particular job (*The Year*, 358). This is why he most times goes penniless and utterly frustrated whenever another job is not yet in sight. In one of such

times, Randeep grows thin steadily as a result of hunger even as his clothes no longer fit him (*The Year*, 364). Certainly, exile is an experience in hardship, angst, frustration, and loss (Salman Rushdie 10, 172).

In *The Pleasures of Exile*, George Lamming notes: “To be colonial is to be in a state of exile. And the exile is always colonial by circumstances” (qtd in Claire Alexander 59). In spite of the hard, debilitating or strength-sapping nature of the jobs, Indian migrants/job seekers have no say in what would be paid to them before the commencement of a particular job. What is paid is strictly the decision or volition of the employer as there exists absolutely no room for negotiation or bargaining (*The Year*, 388). It is, however, possible to attribute this high level of impunity with which the migrant labourers are treated to their number. Indian illegal migrants alone are in such a huge number that the employers or contractors do sometimes devise means to screen out, reject or send back some of them. The situation is so chancy that those who are normally selected for the job at the end of the day are wont to accept whatever is offered for fear of losing their chances to bystanders (*The Year*, 386-389). Randeep, for instance, has, not just himself to cater for, but also his visa wife whose rent and monthly upkeep remain his sole responsibility. In a situation such as this, he is bound to remain humble, deferential, tractable, and if need be, subservient to his employer.

Homelessness is one of the key leitmotifs of exile. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines it as the state of having no home or permanent place of residence (www.britannica.com). The result is the act of roaming the streets or cities with one's handbag, suitcase, grocery carts or even shopping bags. This is the fate of all the four Indian migrants in London. Every accommodation they have is strictly conditional and provisional. For example, when Virender, Randeep's first employer assigns him a place in one of his buildings, the latter would have been elated thinking he had had a place he could always come back to lay his tired head, but no sooner had the job Virender had as the contractor finished than the labourers, Randeep inclusive, being asked to leave (*The Year*; 215). Most of the times, Randeep, Avtar, Tochi, and Gurpreet spend their nights under the bridge or go to the nearest gudwara (Sikh's place of worship) to rest their heads (*The Year*, 386-387). Here, they become highly vulnerable and susceptible to every kind of environmental hazards. At this point, exile becomes a disillusioning, disenchanting, and debilitating experience characterised by rancour, angst, anguish, guilt, and regrets. Indeed, “No amount of theorisation can

adequately encompass the entirety of suffering that is inherent in exile” (Zoran Samardzija 180)

In “The Politics and Poetics of Exile: Edward Said in Africa”, Paul Zeleza conceptualises exile as “an existential and epistemological condition, a spatial and temporal state of being, belonging and becoming” (2). For him, exile is a multifaceted experience which involves every aspect or facet of displacement – physical, spatial, ontological, structural, and temporal, and entails:

...alienation from homeland, family, language, and the continuities of self, a life continually yearning for the love of parents, for the comfort of belonging, an existence battered by the dislocations of endless departures, arrivals, returns, travels (3).

Zeleza's conceptualisation of exilic realities above aptly captures the experience of Avtar in England. In a bid to flee from joblessness, despair, insecurity and general uncertainties that characterise life in India, Avtar sells one of his kidneys and as well obtains a throat-cutting loan and takes to Mr Thirpureddy, a travel agent, who “arranges” for him a student visa which is expected to remain valid just for one year. The caveat, however, is that if he performs well in the programme, the institution would recommend that his visa be extended or that he be retained (*The Year*, 171). But Avtar had already made up his mind to seize the opportunity of finding himself in England to look for jobs, work very hard, raise enough money to settle personal and family indebtedness, cater for his needs, save a good chunk of the amount, and afterwards go back to India and marry Lakhpreet, Randeep's sister (*The Year*, 107, 117-119). In spite of having met Dr Cheemaji, a British-Indian lecturer in the institution who is willing to give him every needed support to succeed academically apparently because of the Indian kinship they share in common, Avtar remains bent on finding menial jobs thereby undermining academic activities (*The Year*, 225-227). He wants to meet his immediate needs, yearnings and aspirations. In no time, however, Avtar comes to grapple with the reality of life as an exile – joblessness, restlessness, anxiety, frustration, and hardship, among others.

Like other Indian migrants in England, Avtar is most times homeless. Unlike Randeep and Gurpreet, he has never enjoyed the luxury of a single room to himself even on a temporary basis. His has always been an experience of

squatting either with the former or the latter. The result is that whenever any of these folks loses accommodation, he becomes directly affected. When Randeep, for instance, vacated the room Virender assigned him simply because the job that caused the latter to consider allotting Randeep the place had finished, Avtar suddenly became the secondary victim. The result is that most times, Avtar sleeps by the road side after returning from the day's labour. This is also the fate of Randeep and Gurpreet; none of them has any definite home or room they can call their own (*The Year*, 215, 369-370). Rather more worrisome to the trio of Avtar, Randeep, and Gurpreet, is the absolute lack of freedom of movement occasioned by their status as illegal migrants. Granted, Avtar has a student visa, but there are many places, towns and cities he is not supposed to go or be seen. Perhaps, he is expected to be found or seen in the school environment or places that are not far from there. Randeep is an illegal migrant; his hope to obtain the relevant documents and legalise his status hangs in the balance. Gurpreet's fate appears rather hopeless. He was issued a fake visa, and so, he knows he dares not go where he could be apprehended and deported. Consequently, the trio of Avtar, Randeep, and Gurpreet, live their lives in fear, restlessness, and despair (*The Year*, 464-465). Certainly, there can be no theoretical synthesis that can encompass the suffering and indeed the entirety of the untoward experience of exile (Zoran Samardzija 180). Edward Said aptly corroborates this assertion by conceptualising exile as a life "led outside habitual order" and characterised by insecurity, apprehension, disquietude and all-round uncertainties (164).

Of the four Indian migrants in England, Gurpreet is perhaps, the only one whose antecedent is not expressly stated in the narrative. There is no categorical insight about his life in India prior to his coming to England even as no story exists about how he managed his way to the European nation. From the narrative, however, he appears older than the rest of the three Indian migrants having already spent about eleven years in the hostland (*The Year*, 234). Perhaps, it is worth mentioning that Gurpreet is the black sheep of the four Indian migrants in England. He is a rogue who carries a sharp knife about everywhere he goes. This is the knife he uses to threaten prostitutes with whom he has sex but would not pay (*The Year*, 349). He is said to have killed a prostitute even as he is always on his toes as a result of being hunted by the police (*The Year*, 350). Whenever he lacks money as a result of prolonged joblessness, Gurpreet steals from his fellow Indian migrants and even threatens to kill them when uncovered. He indulges in excessive

alcoholism and smoking apart from stealing. His is a life of unconscionable anger, aggression, and violence (*The Year*, 380-383).

Unarguably, Gurpreet's roguish and violent disposition may not be unconnected with the frustration inherent in exile. It could be seen as a direct consequence of the exasperation, bitterness, rancour, and un-fulfilment that characterise exile. Gurpreet has spent eleven good years in England with absolutely nothing to show forth as his achievements or accomplishments in all those years. He has no place to lay his head, no consistent or steady job even as he goes penniless most of the times. As a grown up young man with natural sex drives, he is supposed to get married to keep his sexual urge in check, but since he cannot do so, apparently because of his socio-economic status, he resorts to having sex with prostitutes whose services he can hardly even pay. His life as an exile is characterised by total despair. While Randeeep and Avtar appear somehow hopeful about the possibility of acquiring relevant documents that can have their status as illegal migrants changed, Gurpreet has absolutely no hope anywhere of either having his life improved or having his status changed. This, perhaps, might contribute to the kind of lifestyle that pitches him against many persons including his fellow Indian migrants. Exile is, thus, a debilitating experience capable of fuelling illogicality, dementia, and other forms of belligerent attitudes in the mind of the exile. In a desperate bid to survive, exiles sometimes do things that undermine self-worth, image and personality. While it is difficult to hold brief for Gurpreet, it would be safe to deduce that his criminal and general amoral behaviour and disposition may not be unconnected with the over-all rancour, bitterness, regrets, and un-fulfilment that constitute the mainstay of exile.

Escape from poverty, the search for safety, and the quest or yearning for a better life constitute the primary basis for migration. This is the case with Tochi, one of the four Indian migrants in England. Tochi's migration is indeed a journey in search of survival, peace, and comfort having lost every member of his family to violence in India (*The Year*, 66-68). Left alone after the death of his parents and siblings, Tochi has no option but to leave India to anywhere that he feels can help him put his devastated mind together and forge ahead in life. Tochi is also interested in finding himself in a clime where job opportunities abound; a place that is capable of drawing one closer to his dreams and aspirations. That place, for Tochi, is England – a place that can grant him a “sense of freedom” (*The Year*, 80). He accordingly approaches

Mr Thirpureddy, a travel agent in Patna, India, for visa. After collecting a humongous sum of money from Tochi, the former issues a fake travel document to Tochi. Through the assistance of Mr Thirpureddy's accomplices in Turkey and France, Tochi successfully arrives in England as an illegal migrant.

Like other Indian migrants in England, Tochi's experience is a tale of woes. Having spent some months in England without a job, the first menial job he has is in a restaurant owned by Sukhjit, an English young man who engages the former's service without mentioning what he was going to offer or pay whether weekly or monthly. But since exiles are like beggars with absolutely no choice, Tochi begins the job but only projecting in his mind what he was likely going to be paid. At the end of the first week on the job, Tochi is paid just one-tenth of what he had expected. This is where his disillusionment begins. After working hard for a number of months including jobs in the evening and night, Tochi notices that what accrues to him over the last two years only amounts to nothing as the banter he exchanges with Avtar indicates: "Nothing is coming out of my wages" (*The Year*, 90-92). Tochi's income makes absolutely no sense in view of the huge indebtedness he had incurred to enable him to acquire the visa that brought him to England. Of course, it was with high hopes and expectations that he came to England, and had assured himself from the outset of his early plans and subsequent journey that he was going to remain in England until he "has earned enough" (*The Year* 94). More than two years down the line, the reality that has unfolded is an apt pointer to the fact that he was only romanticising, after all.

For Said (cited earlier), exile is a debilitating solitude, a loneliness and a discontinuous state of being. It is a feeling of incompleteness, angst, and unfulfilment even as it creates in the mind of migrants a sense of deracination (161). Said's depiction of exile above best describes Tochi's migration experience in England. Tochi is a twenty three year old Indian who lost his parents and siblings to a devastating violence in India. Expectedly, he is not a happy man; his is a life of perpetual despondency even as he sometimes vents his frustration albeit inadvertently on those around him including his fellow Indian migrants with whom he sometimes works (*The Year*, 329-330). As the only surviving child of the family, Tochi would love to work hard, earn enough money that would enable him to go back home or anywhere else to marry and start off a family. But rather than allow him gradually plan his life at his own pace, a couple he normally serves as house help in the evening after the normal day's job, would not allow him to do so. Aunty and Uncle, as

Tochi normally calls them, want him to marry Ruby, their thirty seven year old niece who is a divorcee with a twelve year old son. At first, it appeared as a recommendation; later, it sounded like an appeal, and much later, it turned into an instruction or a command. Since Tochi now lives with them by virtue of the time and kind of chores he does for them, Aunty and Uncle simply assume that the former has and/or should have no mind of his own. They blatantly refuse to consider the age difference between their niece and Tochi – while Ruby is thirty seven years old, Tochi is twenty three. All they want is to force Ruby down Tochi's throat just to make them happy. When Tochi stands his grounds and vehemently turns down the offer, the couple gets irritated and sends Tochi away from their house, ending every relationship with him (*The Year* 319-327). This action results in Tochi becoming homeless. Rage and bitterness which was already an easily noticed trait in Tochi becomes unusually heightened as he now physically fights his fellow Indian migrants such as Avtar and Randeep whether there is any justifiable ground for such anger or not (*The Year* 329). When life becomes overly unbearable for him in England, and when he finds that frustration has assumed the level of a decimal in recurrence, and that none of his dreams are anywhere near fulfilment, Tochi leaves England for Spain (*The Year* 478).

Juxtaposing the entire experience of the four Indian migrants in England, it could be observed that none of them is anywhere near dream fulfilment. They are homeless, rootless and friendless. Theirs is an experience in all-round displacement even as their condition appears worse than it was in India, their traditional homeland. They are perpetually banished to humiliating, debilitating, hard, and strength-sapping menial jobs. They are exposed to all sorts of hazards when they spend nights under the bridge and other public places as a result of sheer lack of accommodation. Their sense of freedom is mortgaged apparently because of their illegal status even as they appear panicky, nervous and uncomfortable each time they find themselves in some public places, towns or cities. From the experience of the foursome above, it would not be out of place to describe exile, in line with Said's conceptualisation as a condition in which placidity, satisfaction and security should never be contemplated or envisaged. Rather, exile is “a mind of winter in which the pathos of summer and autumn as much as the potential of spring are nearby but unobtainable” (163)

Conclusion

This paper analysed critically the socio-economic contexts of Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* in order to explore the backdrops to the pull and push

exilic experience in recent literary creativity and critical discourse. Based on the context of the text analysed, the paper arrived at the point that the decision to leave one's ancestral or traditional homeland in the postcolonial space to a foreign one is most times deliberate because there appears to be no better choice or option available at the time. Such decision is often times anchored on the need to escape from some unfriendly, tough, disgusting, intolerable, and sometimes, life-threatening conditions or environments and seek safety, peace, happiness, social privileges, and life-enhancing opportunities somewhere else. At this point, one's traditional home becomes a place one wishes to run away from while the anticipated or fantasised and foreseen utopian land somewhere away from home, becomes a creation, or an improvisation aimed at filling an emergent gap. However, in spite of the dogged resolve to abandon the traditional home for a foreign one, migrants do come face to face – sooner than later – with the realities of exile such as displacement or dislocation, alienation, solitude, nostalgia, homelessness, rootlessness, trauma or psychological torture, and general disillusionment. In such case the dreamt-of utopia waters down into a situation that can aptly be described as dystopia. Based on such experience, exile becomes a feeling of incompleteness, angst, and un-fulfilment even as it creates in the minds of disillusioned migrants a sense of deracination. As could be deduced from the creative momentum of Sahota's *The Year*, exiles in the context of this analysis soon find themselves victims of prejudice, racism, and chauvinism in their host land. They become the vulnerable “other” and constitute the deprived, suspected and despised group. Indeed, life for the exiles can be very challenging, frustrating, and traumatising.

Majority of the world's exiles are from the poor, developing Third World and postcolonial countries. Failed leadership, massive poverty, socio-political upheavals and social unrests most often than not, ultimately fuel the desire for migration in the quest for meaningful existence. Based on the categories of migrants that characterise Sahota's *The Year*, it becomes clear in this critical context that migrants are propelled by the push and pull of existential circumstances. If migration denotes a journey in search of survival, security, and better quality of living to some; migration could also in another perspective connote revolution, albeit non-violent, against the status quo; against an unpleasant condition back in the homeland. This paper submits that Sahota's *The Year* in its creative pursuit, adds to sheds more light on the subject matter and circumstances of migration which in recent history has become a site of recurrent literary and scholarly engagements.

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