

Diverse Dimensions of Immigrant Experiences in the Select Poems of Surjit Patar*

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Abstract

The meaning of migration for Punjabis is radically different from that of a person from Europe. It appears to be a significant arena for Punjabis, as they willingly undertake numerous risks and employ every possible means to achieve success. Surjit Patar is highly feted Punjabi non-immigrant writer though his poetry effectively articulates the diverse dimensions of immigrant experiences. The immigrant consciousness embedded in Patar's writings can be divided into three distinct sections: the nostalgic recollections of immigrants and their yearning for their homeland, the portrayal of the accomplishments that immigrants have achieved in their adopted nations, and the depiction of the experiences of migrant labourers who travel to Punjab from various regions in search of work. The purpose of this paper is to elucidate each of these three distinct components of Patar's poetry by anchoring it in the theoretical framework of the postulates given by Homi K. Bhabha and Salman Rushdie. It also examines the migrants' dilemma of assimilation or alienation, as portrayed in Patar's poetry, as well as their nostalgic recollections of the motherland in the light of J. W. Berry's theory. These aspects are analysed using the methods of close reading and textual analysis.

Keywords: Surjit Patar, Immigrants, Punjabi Literature, Assimilation, Alienation.

Introduction

Migration has become an integral aspect of the contemporary global landscape. This led to the formation of a diasporic community. The term diaspora is derived from a Greek word that means "to scatter." The term was originally associated with Jewish dispersion outside of Israel, but it is now evolving to reflect the advances of the digital age. Numerous individuals migrate in pursuit of employment, business, and trade in the present globalised world. These people frequently encounter the challenge of managing diverse cultural identities in order to confront the obstacles posed by their native lands and their adopted homelands. Accommodation, acculturation, assimilation, and adoption are viable alternatives for diasporic communities, and diasporic literature beautifully captures the complex range of human experiences, from feelings of alienation and loneliness to the search for identity and a sense of belonging. It delves into themes of displacement, cultural hybridity, and the longing for home, while also exploring the power of protest and self-assertion.

Diaspora people are akin to nomads, constantly shifting from one location to another, as highlighted by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, "...we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past

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and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (Bhabha 2). The majority of immigrant or diasporic writers are nostalgic for their homelands and use creative writing as a significant medium. This includes Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Shashi Tharoor, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Meera Syal, Amit Chaudhury, Meena Alexander, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Vassanji, Bharti Mukherjee, and many others. Their writings are a reflection of their lived experiences; however, there are other writers who felt the existential dilemmas of immigrants and conveyed them in their writings without ever leaving their homeland. Surjit Patar is one such Punjabi writer who does not fall under the category of immigrant writers. However, his poetry effectively articulates the emotions experienced by individuals who migrate, yet maintain a strong emotional connection to their country of origin and a desire to preserve their cultural heritage. There are many things that have been written about Surjit Patar’s life, poetic brilliance, long legacy, contributions to Punjabi literature, and influence as a poetic master. The primary focus of this article is on the diverse dimensions of immigrant experiences as described by him in certain poems, drawing on the theories provided by Homi K. Bhabha and Salman Rushdie. This study also explores the migrants’ dilemma of assimilation or alienation, as portrayed in Patar’s poetry, and their nostalgic recollections of the motherland in light of J. W. Berry’s theory. These aspects are analysed using the methods of close reading and textual analysis.

Discussion

Surjit Patar is widely regarded as a highly esteemed poet within the realm of contemporary Punjabi literature. His evocative poetry and profound thoughts have permanently etched his name into the annals of Punjabi literature. His distinctive artistic approach, utilisation of bright imagery, and skillful employment of evocative language have garnered acclaim from literary analysts and resonated with individuals across various age groups. Patar’s poetic works have been featured in various literary publications, and he was awarded the esteemed “Sahitya Akademi Award” for his anthology titled *The Smouldering Script in the Dark (Hanere vich Sulaghdi Raat, 1992)*. The works of Patar have been translated into various other languages. This increases the visibility of Punjabi literature worldwide and makes his poems accessible to a wider range of readers. During his literary journey, he has been honoured with numerous accolades, notably the esteemed “Padma Shri” award bestowed on him in 2012, which stands as one of India’s most esteemed civilian awards. As a result of his efforts, Punjabi literature is now seen as a major literary force, and he himself has become a literary legend.

Patar’s writings on immigrant consciousness can be divided into three distinct sections: the nostalgic recollections of immigrants and their yearning for their homeland, the portrayal of the accomplishments that immigrants have achieved in their adopted nations, and the depiction of the experiences of migrant labourers who travel to Punjab from various regions in search of work. The purpose of this paper is to elucidate each of these three distinct components of Patar’s poetry. The meaning of migration for “Punjabis” is radically different from that of a person from Europe. It appears to be a significant arena for Punjabis, as they willingly undertake numerous risks and employ every possible means to achieve success. It can be described as a self-initiated phenomenon. As Dr. Surinder Pal Singh stated (quoted by Dr. Akal Amrit in her book *Parvasi Punjabi Galap: Nave Pasar*):

Many Punjabis left their homeland around the turn of the twentieth century in pursuit of work and better economic prospects. Punjabis, being hardworking, independent, and resilient by temperament, did not hesitate to position themselves for long hours of work. This allowed Punjabis to spread to countries nearby, such as Burma, Siam, Malaya, and Singapore, as well as to more distant places like Canada and the United States. (Amrit 60)

This form of migration also encompasses a sense of powerlessness. Instead of prompting self-reflection, it elicits strong emotional responses. Such individuals who “migrate temporarily to a foreign land in search of employment or in the desire to obtain more economic resources” (Singh 3) just wander in foreign lands in search of daily bread for an indefinite period of time; they do not lose their attachment to their land. After 1849, when Punjab officially became a province of the British Empire, many Punjabis moved to other countries, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Fiji, Australia, and New Zealand. Most of these early migrants were Sikhs, who primarily came from the rural areas of Punjab. In the first quarter of the 20th century, this migration grew even more, especially to East Africa, due to the building of railways and the new trading and business opportunities they provided.

Patar was a mere eight years old when his father embarked on a journey overseas in search of means to sustain their livelihood. Through his poem titled “Upon Barren Paths, Scarce Traces Remain” (translation mine), the poet skillfully depicts his mother’s profound sorrow, which was clearly discernible in her eyes.

On a bleak winter morning
When the sun’s gentle touch had yet to unfold,
My father embarked on a journey to a distant land.
My mother’s eyes, pools of darkness, welled with tears.
Still, in her glance, a profound sorrow appears.
(Punjabi Kavita [translation mine])

The social, political, and economic climate of Punjab plays a significant role in the migratory process. It can be broadly attributed to several key factors, including a scarcity of employment prospects, shrinking land holdings, debt, pervasive corruption across various domains such as education and administration, and stringent laws implemented by the state government that disproportionately affect the populace, particularly the business community. Patar accurately depicts this unfortunate scenario in his article “Somebody has come to rejuvenate my son’s barren garden” (translation mine) with these lines:

One may leave his homeland in pursuit of knowledge.
One may depart to explore new horizons.
One may choose to roam to spread enlightenment.
But why should anyone leave their motherland to make a living?
If only our leaders were wise and true.
Our sons would not wander to lands anew. (translation mine)

Other than these push factors, some pull factors are also there, such as the abundance of opportunities abroad, the economic appeal of the countries that are receiving migrants, the improvement in the living conditions of those who have already emigrated, the increased chances for children’s futures, the financial security provided by pension plans, and the clean environment. The disparity in wage rates across nations is also a significant contributing factor. As Patar’s poem “Every Verse of Yours, Patar” (translation mine) so eloquently demonstrates:

The few pounds they possessed
when converted to rupees
turned out to be more precious than the celestial orbs.
The sun, thus, tilts towards the upper bar.
(Lafzan di Dargah 53 [translation mine])

The allure of enhanced prospects, improved educational resources, and increased economic stability in foreign nations has exerted a profound influence on individuals, resulting in a diminished desire to remain in their home countries. Many people yearn to visit these territories

in order to transform their aspirations into tangible achievements. Surjit Patar has frequently drawn comparisons between migrants and birds. The utilisation of “bird” and “tree” imagery is prevalent throughout his writings. He has employed a captivating metaphor with trees in his poem “Birds have already taken flight” (translation mine) to symbolise the current situation in Punjab, where everyone is willing to migrate:

Birds have already taken flight.
Even trees conspire.
Let's go from here.

Within every house, sons doth declare:

Oh, dear Father, In the realm of farming, nothing remains.
By selling the remnants of our land
And forging a path anew.

Let's go from here. (“Somebody has come” [translation mine])

People aspire to build a secure future for themselves and their descendants. The choice of immigrants to establish a safe haven in a foreign land can be comprehended through the words of Homi K. Bhabha:

Home may not be where the heart is, nor even the hearth. Home may be a place of estrangement that becomes the necessary space of engagement; it may represent a desire for accommodation marked by an attitude of deep ambivalence towards one's location. Home may be a mode of living made into a metaphor of survival. (“Halfway House”)

According to Bhabha, the concept of home may be different for individuals who migrate willingly. Bhabha has used the term “unhomely” to describe their distinct experience, which is different from homelessness. These unhomely moments are marked by instability and a sense of uncertainty regarding one's sense of belonging and purpose. Bhabha posits home as a fluid notion that is neither fixed nor permanent, and it gives rise to the existential dilemmas of the immigrants, which are felt so strongly by Patar that they echo aptly in his verses. Leaving their homeland in search of better opportunities, as well as the agony of severing filial ties, often induces a sense of nostalgia in immigrants. The sense of helplessness associated with this decision invariably lingers in their hearts. Their entire lives, they carry a longing for their homeland, and the pain of separation from the families and friends they had to leave behind weighs heavily on them. Surjit Patar, through his poetic compositions, has effectively portrayed the profound anguish endured by these individuals, as is evident in his poem “Patar, Let's go and discover” (translation mine), published in *Lafzan di Dargah*:

In my haste to pursue the ventures anew
I, alas, forsook what I once held dear.
The realms of time, once revered and resplendent
Now lie abandoned, lost in a fleeting sphere.

In this ethereal hour, the midnight veil descends upon my village.
Where mothers, tender and vigilant, sit awake beside their slumbering sons.
I fled the arid expanse to shield my tender soles.

Yet linger still those paths that once were mine. (22-23, translation mine)

It's not just the migrants who experience the anguish of separation; their families also endure the same pain. Mothers eagerly anticipate the reunion with their sons, and unfortunately, some pass away before that moment arrives. Patar depicts the emotional distress of a mother experiencing separation from her sons in his poem “Mother.”

One beloved child of mine hath met his fate.
Departed, hence, from worldly burdens freed.

The second one doth wander amidst life's verdant woods,
 Uncertain if ever he shall return, or be forever lost in solitude.
 May divine blessings grace his path!

And the middle son of mine
 May his days be adorned with grace.
 Yet fragile he did chance to be
 One day proclaimed, "My feet burn on this land."
 He entered the foreign shores.
 Selling the few things he had,
 Boarded the train at night.

Alas, I remain the sole dweller in this realm.
 Just to chase away the crows
 And to etch lines upon the earth in anticipation.
 (*Lafzan di Dargah* 40 [translation mine])

Immigrants carry a vision of their homeland in their hearts, and even after so many years, they want to see it the same way they left. As in *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie discusses the significance of history and memory in the immigrants' narratives of "home." He puts forward that discussing home or writing about one's homeland involves envisioning it, creating "a version, and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions" (10). While frequently envisioning their homeland and yearning to go back, some of the migrants even reconsider their decision to leave their homeland, assuming that perhaps the outcome would have been different had they remained and waited. Patar eloquently expresses this emotional distress.

In the early morning, oft do immigrants stir,
 Their hearts, aflutter with emotions pure
 Oh, if only they had remained in that place.
 Enduring the scorching trials with unwavering grace
 Perchance, fate's hand wouldst have turned anew.
 And the searing heat, quenched by the gentle rain's caress
 Pitter-Patter.

("Self-assertion" 10 [translation mine])

Nevertheless, individuals experience a profound emotional longing for their country of origin and possess a strong desire to return, but apprehension regarding the potential unavailability of familiar circumstances prevents them from doing so. As in the poem "Patar, Let's go and discover" (translation mine), Patar writes

Let us forsake the path of return, for what remains to be reclaimed?
 In yearning for thy tender steps, e'en the paths have met their demise.

(23, translation mine)

Immigrants are expected to assimilate into the cultural norms and social conventions of the host nation. It is commonly referred to as acculturation. In his scholarly article titled "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation," John W. Berry provides a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon, defining it as the intricate process of acquiring knowledge and adjusting to a foreign cultural environment. In his work, Berry outlines four distinct methods associated with the process of acculturation: biculturalism, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. When examining Berry's theory in the context of Punjabi immigrants, it becomes evident that a certain number of these individuals adopt the culture and practices of both nations and thus become bicultural. Bicultural individuals often experience a sense of in-betweenness and double consciousness. Some assimilate so thoroughly into the host country's culture that their origins

and roots become indistinguishable. This is how Patar portrayed them in “Life, we are your guests today” (translation mine):

From our humble abodes, we embarked, full of vitality.
Yet the trails we traversed left us forlorn and weary.

Mothers, with tender kisses on our brows, bid us farewell.
Like ethereal dreams of youth, we once gleamed and grew.

In a distant world, we matured swiftly.
And with that growth came the marks of life’s trials.

Now, our very essence, body and soul, have transformed anew.
Even our beloved mothers struggle to recognise the residue.

(Punjabi Kavita, translation mine)

Individuals who choose to follow a separation strategy typically experience a sense of displacement in their new surroundings and long for their places of origin. The immigrants’ strong desire to return to their village, be with their people, and enjoy dawn and dusk often caused them distress. These lines beautifully capture the feelings of those who have been rendered economically powerless to the point where they cannot even travel back to see their ageing parents. And when they finally return, nothing remains the same. The poem “How will darkness tolerate my words?” captures this emotion:

Those who ventured afar, seeking new horizons
When destiny beckons them back to their roots
Some will feel the blistering flames of their mother’s pyre.
While others, beneath the trees, mourn their beloved’s repose.

(Punjabi Kavita, translation mine)

Berry’s marginalisation method is a form of social exclusion that involves individuals renouncing both their culture of origin and the dominant host culture. The motives of Punjabi immigrants to migrate are distinct from those of Europeans; that’s why they rarely adopt this approach.

The second and most innovative feature of Patar’s poetry is its portrayal of migration as a positive development, rather than associating it with negative connotations. He has portrayed the foreign land as a magical place where the aspirations of migrants could become reality and they could explore new horizons. As Patar writes,

Blessed be the foreign land.
A sanctuary before the eternal unknown.
Where one may draw a breath, untamed and free.
Shielded from the tyrants’ cruel and callous strife.
A realm where thoughts transcend the caste’s divide.
Rescuing labour from the clutches of dismay
A refuge from the silence that instills fear.

Blessed be the foreign land.
Oh, praise be to the heavens, for we have been bestowed with a new life.
Ere the final breath escapes
Blessed be the wisdom bestowed by Guru Nanak.
For he revealed that ‘foreign’ transcends mere earthly bounds.
It also includes the state of our hearts, a realm profound.
(“Self-assertion” 9 [translation mine])

The definition of migration has also altered over the twentieth century; it is no longer associated with poverty. This phenomenon is a result of the demands of globalisation. The east is now migrating to the west. Earlier, the west used to come to the east to colonise them. The migrant community not only adjusts to the conditions of the host country but also repositions itself by opposing the established order of the country, in which its community has no respectable role. Because of this propensity, modern Canadian and American societies are working extra hard to carve out new spaces for these immigrant minority communities. The migration of Punjabi immigrants to distant lands and their subsequent accomplishments in foreign countries serve as evidence supporting the notion that migration can have positive outcomes. Punjabis have successfully created a unique and discernible cultural identity in foreign nations, firmly preserving their core character without compromise. The following lines by Patar can be used to better illustrate this situation:

If we cultivate the seeds of profound expression,
 If we plant the seeds of virtuous acts,
 Then behold the blossoming flowers and bountiful fruits.
 Witness the comforting embrace of love's gentle shade.
 Even distant lands will transform into cherished abodes.

("Self-assertion" 10 [translation mine])

Another form of migration in Patar's verses alludes to the labourers hailing from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Punjab has historically been a preferred location for individuals migrating from the aforementioned states. The migrant communities from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the "land of five rivers" have enthusiastically embraced the traditional advice of conforming to the customs and practices of the locations they visit, commonly known as "When in Rome, do as Romans do." The descendants of these people are also actively involved in the pursuit of acquiring knowledge in the Punjabi language. In this context, Patar's poem "Nand Kishore hath arrived" (translation mine) is noteworthy.

Seeking employment
 Nand Kishore hath arrived...

Daughter of Nand Kishore
 doth write Uda Aida (Punjabi alphabets)

Oh, what a bond so intimate they share!
 Words and bread.
 (Lafzan di Dargah, 76-77 [translation mine])

Patar has effectively encapsulated the contemporary paradox in Punjabi society. The children of migrant labourers who work as farm labourers are studying *uda* and *aida* of Gurmukhi in government schools, while native children from affluent families are applying in convent schools to learn English.

Conclusion

For Patar, poetry is the voice of the heart, the mirror of the times, and the call for change. It is not merely a creative outlet for him; it is a powerful tool through which he confronts and advocates for social issues. He addresses every tangible aspect of Punjabi immigrant consciousness in his verses, including the love for the motherland, the pain of separation, economic helplessness, the dilemma of assimilation or alienation, the plenty they encountered in foreign territories, the influx of migrant labourers, and their efforts to assimilate into Punjabi culture. The unique elements of immigrant experiences that he presents in his poetry prompt readers to reevaluate

conventional norms and reassess previously held beliefs. His writings have the potential to inspire action, question accepted beliefs, and teach readers more about the human condition. The aforementioned poems hold a tremendous deal of importance in terms of offering a full comprehension of immigrant consciousness and its various dimensions.

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