

Post-Colonial *Katha*: Continuities and Ruptures in *Videshi* Punjabi Fiction

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Before I narrativize my own version of the post-colonial *katha*, I should share with you the rationale behind my preference for and insistence upon the use of the term *katha*. To me, this particular word is richly layered as it instantly evokes a cultural context that resounds with *Pauranika* tales, *Jataka* tales, *Kathasaritsagara* et al. In short, it is evocative of a very vibrant tradition of story-telling available in our own cultural context. I had long believed that the narratives are essentially ways of organizing and mediating structures of thought, of transmitting, disseminating and critiquing the cultural traditions. Had it not been for that wonderful essay titled 'The Race for Theory' by Barbara Christian (1989: 225-236), the Black American critic and scholar, perhaps my understanding of the nature and function of the narratives would have remained hopelessly circumscribed.¹ For it was she who mentioned that narratives could also be used as effective vehicles of theory, and even as ancillaries to offer resistance to, if not completely overturn, the theory over which the white race appears to exercise complete power, control and hegemony. It's my considered opinion that such attempts to create counter-discourses should be taken more seriously than they often are. To me it appears that 'narrative' is not only a way of offering resistance to theory or a mode of undermining and critiquing it, but also a way of constituting a counter-discourse to theory. Narrative is a kind of a subaltern response of the blacks to the hegemony of the white-dominated theory (or the institutional practices promoted by the western academies) and for that reason alone, it could be posited as a form of meta-theory as well. Much more significant is the fact that this kind of interrogation is not marginal but central to the task we have on hand, viz., of reassessing,

revisioning, revalidating, as also reinterrogating post-colonialism, especially in the context of both *desi* and *videshi* literatures. Much before the ruptures and continuities of our *videshi* or diaspora literature are mapped out in some details (which is what significant part of this paper is also about), it is necessary to understand some of the ideological contradictions and confusions in relation to the post-Colonial theory in general. As a classroom is often the most preferred site or location of any intellectual discussion or debate on the post-Colonial theory, or for that matter, any other theory, the first *katha* I shall narrate is about the way in which the interaction between the teacher-student in our context invariably takes on the form of a Colonial rather than a post-Colonial encounter. Thereafter, the second *katha* shall deal with some of the institutional and market-driven practices that both facilitate and/or obstruct the promotion of the post-Colonial theory in our institutions. This shall mainly be done with the view to uncover the exact nature of the ideological burden that the hegemony of the west-generated and west-oriented epistemology creates in this particular field. In other words, it would be an attempt to deconstruct the creation, production, marketing and distribution of the post-Colonial theory at the site of our academic research. Having gone that far, I shall then narrate my third *katha* that shall seek to unfold the complex negotiation between capital and labour, white and black, production and distribution, *desi* and *videshi* in our newly created post-industrialized 'global context'. This might provide us with the necessary critical, conceptual framework we are looking for, the framework within which it may be possible for us to examine some of the ruptures and continuities that the representative short fiction from Punjabi diaspora throws up for our consideration.

Let us initiate our discussion with the classroom, the site all of us are familiar with and within which we often situate the debate on the post-colonial theory, or for that matter, any other theory as well. In any given situation, the strategic distance between the teacher and the student is almost thought to be an absolute necessity. Here, I am not talking of the psychic, emotional or the intellectual distancing but purely physical distancing, as we are often positioned not among the students but on the other side, even away from them. The physical space of the classroom is ordered and structured in such a way that it creates an oppositional discourse in terms of the 'self' and the 'other', in which the teacher always constitutes the 'self' and students the 'other'. Do I need to mention the fact that the entire western

discourse rests upon the substratum of this binarism, this dualistic, divisive, exclusionist mode? And that our classrooms, as derivatives of our west-oriented system of education, also tend to promote this dualism, this binarism, and this exclusionary politics of location? On account of this kind of structuration, a teacher is often perceived to be the superior, ideal, all-knowing 'self', whereas the student is regarded as no more than the debased, contemptible, ignoramus or the inferiorized 'other'. (I am saying this on the authority of Freire 1972). It's a form of negotiation which, in the language of the post-colonial theory, could easily be described as a transaction between Prospero and Caliban. In our classrooms, while we often use the critical framework of the post-colonial theory to re-examine Shakespeare and/or read the Prospero-Caliban transaction in the Colonial terms, rarely do we ever extend its boundaries to re-evaluate the complex nature of teacher-student relationship which, too, is structured along the same lines. More often than not, we as teachers are willing participants and collaborators in the process of perpetuating, validating and legitimating this hierarchy-conscious, unequal relationship of power/knowledge. So long as the teacher (Prospero) continues to be engaged in the process of civilizing, and therefore, controlling, dominating and hegemonizing the students (Caliban(s)), the ideological contradictions of our institutional practices shall remain hopelessly unmasked. In such an eventuality, while we might succeed in cramming the minds of our students with the intricacies of the post-Colonial theory/history, there is no way we can succeed in providing either them or ourselves with a liberatory narrative, which is presumably the ultimate teleological goal of the post-colonial theory/knowledge. Unless the post-Colonial theory turns inwards and becomes truly self-reflexive, reflecting and refracting the contradictions/complexities of our institutional practices, unmasking the unequal processes of appropriation, possession and distribution of power/knowledge in our classrooms, it would perhaps continue to destabilize and deconstruct itself into a series of *kathas* of de-empowerment and dis-possession. (And these discrete *kathas* are essentially part of the undocumented history, the unrecorded life histories that shall always remain under erasure; their self-exposure always threatened with the burden of oppressive silence).

It is not only within the restrictive confines of the classroom that a teacher, by virtue of his position, status and placement, often compels the whole of the post-Colonialist project into regressive, colonial postures; even outside the classroom, the story is not much

different. The relationship between the centre and the margin, as understood in the post-Colonial theory, could also be understood in terms of the politics of location as it operates between the shifting margins of the mofussil town and the metropolitan centre. A teacher/researcher located in a mofussil college and/or university bears the same relationship to his counterpart in a metropolitan college and/or university that obtains between Prospero-Caliban; and further, a black teacher/researcher in a metropolitan centre of learning enters into a similar praxis with his white counterpart located in a western institution/academy. On looking through the history of the post-Coloniality, we discover that the initial efforts in this direction were essentially made and will continue to be made by the western institutions/academies, that too, by the white scholars (the Colonial masters), and not by the blacks (the Colonised slaves) dispersed across the continents of India, Africa or Caribbean islands.² How far is it possible to hypothesize that the post-Colonial theory as it is being taught, researched and practised in our institutions, is truly a subaltern's response or a counter-discourse designed to offer resistance to the hegemony of the colonial institutional practices and procedures imposed by the Whites is a question well worth asking. The conceptual framework is as much an expression of the colonial practices as are the epistemological structures/practices or the complex processes of their circulation across the globe. I remember how Gauri Vishwanathan's *The Masks of Conquest* (which, according to me, did put some of the genuine post-Colonial concerns on our agenda) took some nine years to travel across from America to India. Oxford University Press, New Delhi printed the Indian version in 1998, whereas the OUP, New York had already brought out the first edition way back in 1989. Does it not mean then that it is not simply a matter of creating knowledge, but also of setting the agenda, controlling the market forces and also the processes of circulation, dissemination and distribution of knowledge? This sounds rather bizarre, especially in our times when the critic is certainly not perceived to be an obscure entity or an anonymous hack but has supposedly scaled new heights and, riding on the crest of the post-structuralist thought, has almost become a 'star'. The post-Colonial theory/discourse, being the latest bugbear, does offer a very bright prospect of easy and quick stardom. In his very interesting book *Dead Artists and Live Theories and Other Cultural Problems*, Stanley Aronowitz (1994: 94) has, at length, dealt with this phenomenon of a 'critic as a star.' Analysing this phenomenon,

he says: 'When the writer and the painter can only reproduce object relations, because they have lost the categories of mediation and have retained only technique, when culture no longer expresses an intrinsic meaning, except in so far as it expresses, unwittingly, certain linguistic and semiotic codes, then the act of interrogation becomes the source of signification. Hence, the critic as star.'³ What is interesting is that a critic becomes a star only in a culture that has either lost its intrinsic meaning or is unable to reclaim it.

Perhaps this process of cultural depletion and impoverishment is best illustrated through the third *katha* that is being narrated here. This is the *katha* of unequal distribution of labour and capital, which I can narrate only if I situate myself neither in a moffusil town nor a metropolitan centre—neither as a Prospero nor a Caliban, neither as a staunch supporter of the post-Colonial theory nor its sternest critic, neither as a producer of *desi* nor a consumer of *videshi*. For me, this part of the post-Colonial *katha* begins neither within the restrictive confines of the classroom nor in the complicated jargon-ridden postures of the theorists or critics, but instead somewhere in a downtown market of this Chandigarh city, where I live. Allow me to mention here that I have lived in the vicinity of Sector 19 and this could be described as one of the oldest, if not the largest markets in Chandigarh. I am not referring to the main market, frequented by the very rich and the upper middle class (occasionally by the middle-class yuppies as well) but a *rehri* market, located on the fringes of the sector, hidden away from the public view. Without going into the local symbology of *rehri* and its associative links with market, let me simply emphasize that this market is nothing more than a cluster of ramshackle, tin-roofed, 8 ft by 10 ft cubby-holed shops, where all kinds of people go shopping. If people like me saunter in occasionally, it is only because by virtue of being what we are, the middle class bourgeoisie, we tend to situate ourselves literally in the middle of these two markets. At some level, being middle class is all about managing the contradictions, I suppose, of the polished exterior of the well-laid out main market with the ramshackle, almost choking interior of the *rehri* market.

Wandering through the maze of the *rehri* market, once my eyes fell upon an eye-catching placard outside a makeshift shop. It said, PICK ANY SWEATER FOR ONLY 75. It was the middle of December and winter was well on its way. Until then, we had not done our customary winter shopping either for ourselves or for the children. It was with the idea of being able to strike a good bargain

that I had walked into the shop. Under a canopy of tarpaulin sheets supported by two large bamboo sticks lay a mountain pile of sweaters of all shades and colours! A horde of customers stood all around, rummaging through the pile. Struck by this strange manner of displaying the wares, I had ended up asking the shopkeeper if he was selling the 'seconds,' the cast-offs and the rejects. Offended by my query, the shopkeeper immediately set about giving me a long-winded explanation, saying how these were not 'seconds' but export surplus, goods which were actually manufactured in India, were meant to be sold in the international market, but often, on being rejected, were ultimately sold in the domestic market. What was indeed surprising was that before finding their way back into the domestic market, these goods had acquired 'imported' labels! He further told me how difficult it was for him to obtain these goods, elaborating on some of the hardships he had to undergo in the process of doing so. Seeing people literally drool over the goods, pushing, jostling and tripping over each other, I suddenly felt as if the discontinuities and continuities of the Colonial and post-Colonial history/theory were enacting themselves out, right there, in the backwaters of Chandigarh.

Wasn't Colonialism, after all, about this unequal relationship between labour and capital? Wasn't it about a trade-off between the Colonies that provided cheap labour and/or raw material, as also a cheap market for the goods, which were always manufactured elsewhere? History bears witness to the fact that ultimately an exploitative system was set into motion, which always served the best interests of the empire to the detriment of the colonies and the people residing there. Most of the former colonies have supposedly gained their political freedom, kick-starting the process of national reconstruction. It is also claimed, very often, that these emergent or emerging nations have even put the ideology of the empire behind. Now, after over fifty years, in what way has our situation altered materially? In what manner has the altered, political context helped in renegotiating or redefining the economic terms of this unequal relationship? The concept of cheap labour has come unstuck and so has the concept of cheap raw material or cheap market. The location of the capital has not changed; it has simply acquired a new face, which appears both familiar and accessible but is neither. One of the formerly colonized, but now a free subject, is neck deep into this pile of surplus, making a living while the other is rummaging through this pile, hoping to gain a new respectability by donning the export

surplus. And this surplus, I thought, was the surplus of theory, the intellectual baggage from the west, inscribed in the modifier 'post', which was absolutely redundant, as the old story of unequal distribution of labour and capital was playing itself out in the new post-industrialized, global context, with marginal variations. In the Colonial context, everything was well defined—the face of the labour, the profit motive of the capital and the location of the market. But now with the free and unregulated dispersal of labour and capital, all this had become rather fluid and indeterminate, leaving us with the surplus of modifiers such as 'post'.

Such are the complexities of Colonialism and post-Colonialism that concern me when I cast an angular look at the short fiction of the Punjabi diaspora. The relationship between the Colonial past and the post-Colonial migration, the centrality of the English language, society and culture vis-à-vis the marginalized status of a Punjabi immigrant writer, the unequal distribution of their intellectual labour and the flight of capital in reverse are some of the concerns that must preoccupy us here. Short fiction from the Punjabi diaspora, however, must be placed within the larger historical context that has both helped shape and constitute it in the UK. It is equally imperative to understand the dynamics of the unequal relationship between English, the dominant language (*margi*) and Punjabi (*desi*), especially in the *videshi* context. While the formation of the Punjabi diaspora in the UK could easily be traced back to the last few decades of the nineteenth century, by mid-twentieth century it truly witnessed a phenomenal and exponential growth. According to an estimate, the total population of the Punjabis in Britain is somewhere in the range of four hundred thousand or even more. Though the trigger points of the Punjabi migration to the UK were very different in the pre- and the post-Independence phases, the general pattern of migration was more or less the same. While the Punjabis never went to England as part of indentured labour, each time, they had ended up as an inalienable part of the work force of the English society.⁴ In the post-Partition period, however, a good number of Punjabi(s) who had either been uprooted or displaced from the western Punjab or the other areas of what is now known as Pakistan, decided to move across the shores, especially the UK, in search of better economic opportunities. This process was further accelerated by the expansion of the education base, a near absence of the industrial infrastructure, limited opportunities in the job market coupled with the slow shrinkage of the land holdings. While these local factors had only

started a slow trickle, soon enough, it had turned into a veritable deluge, what with the British government revising its visa policy requirements in the early 1960s.

Though Britain has now long been perceived as a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society, it was only in the early 1960s that a major paradigm shift in the policies of the British government vis-à-vis the ethnic minorities was first witnessed. Recognizing that racism had become the principal instrument of social tensions and conflicts, the British government decided to set up Race Relations Board and the Community Relations Commission, both of which were later merged into the new Commission for Racial Equality. The Government's White Paper of 1975 pointed out that, apart from strengthening the anti-discrimination laws, there was an urgent need to evolve a broad strategy to combat 'a cumulative cycle of disadvantage' made worse by the racial discrimination 'send(ing) the entire groups of people into downward spiral of deprivation'.⁵ Around this time, when the British society was poised on the edge of self-redefinition, the process of massive exodus and emigration of the Punjabi community to England got underway. On recovering from the post-war recession, when the British society had plunged itself into a massive reconstruction exercise, need was felt for the educated, semi-skilled and skilled labour force and so the doors were generously thrown open. Ironically, even those among the Punjabi migrants who were suitably qualified and educated had to ultimately settle for the semi-skilled and skilled positions in factories, postoffices, local transport etc. Most of the writers of the Punjabi diaspora were, at some stage, lured by the prospect of not-so-hard-to-find teacher-permits, though ultimately only a few managed to garner teaching positions in schools at various levels. Small wonder that more than a mere fact of physical dislocation or displacement, most of them prefer to think of migration as an incarcerated though livable memory, an eminently forgettable act of betrayal or treachery. The race riots in Nottingham or at Notting Hill, London in the 1950s, the horrors of Enoch Powell's rhetoric in the 1960s and the riotous eruptions in the British cities in the 1980s tell their own story of a 'multicultural failure' and the subsequent rise of aggressive 'identity politics'. However, despite all these constraints, the British government did acknowledge the contribution of the Punjabi community towards realizing the dream of multiculturalism by granting official recognition to the Punjabi language. Thanks to this recognition, now it is possible for the young students of the Indian origin to take their A-levels with Punjabi

language as one of their main subjects. Incidentally, Punjabi also happens to be the second most widely spoken language in England, second only to English in its geographical reach and/or user-friendliness.⁶

While helping us negotiate the process of cross-cultural migration that went into the making of the Punjabi diaspora in UK, the foregoing analysis also tells us, quite unambiguously, that the *videshi* Punjabi writers are essentially victims of the politics of location and exclusion. That they share the same transaction with the multicultural British society (of which they are now an integral part) that obtains between Caliban and Prospero (of course, in reverse). Despite the presence of a large number of Punjabi writers and the ever-growing visibility of the Punjabi diaspora, writing in Punjabi remains an isolationist and exclusionary activity, not a mode of internal communication within the community or the multicultural space. Unable to find patronage from among their own community in terms of sustained and committed readership in the metropolitan centres of England, most of our *videshi* Punjabi writers often turn to the moffussil publishers in Jalandhar or Amritsar to get their stuff published. While there is absolutely no recognition, official or otherwise, of the work and contribution of the *videshi* Punjabi writers in the country of their adoption, they continue to enjoy a fairly decent readership base back home within the (*desi*) tradition of the Punjabi literature.

As the relationship between the two peoples, the Punjabi and the English, has been both Colonial and post-Colonial, it would be worthwhile to explore the historical connections between the two peoples as also between the two languages. The Punjabi people as well as the language could be said to have shared an uneasy, almost a troubled relationship with English. In a way, this goes back to the days of the Colonial rule in India and more significantly, in Punjab. It is a matter of recorded history that the British found it much easier to succeed in the western or eastern parts of India than they did in Punjab. Not only did they have to face the severest opposition ever on the soil of Punjab, but it also proved to be the last outpost to fall under their dominion. Punjabis did not accede to the Colonial control until after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, when the annexation of Punjab became not only imminent but also inescapable. Though ultimately they had to submit themselves to the superior military

and strategic powers of the Colonial rulers, yet deep inside they continued to resist the hegemony of the British rulers in ways, both explicit and implicit. Whether it was the Kuka movement in early 1860s or the Singh Sabha movement of 1880s, these 'local rebellions' that the Punjabis sought to engineer periodically, were merely symptomatic of their deep-seated resentment of the alien rule. Of course, the Ghaddar movement was started with the specific aim of overthrowing the British rule in India.⁷ To a large extent, it was this resentment, coupled with their natural instinct for aggression and dissent, that propelled several thousands among them to plunge headlong into the national struggle for Independence. An expression of their inherently rebellious spirit and injured self-pride, their revolt against the alien rulers was as much an expression of their nationalistic spirit as it was a proof, if one was needed, of their constant search for self-identity and sub-nationalism.

While the nationalistic spirit acquired more overt forms of expression, the protection of the sub-national identity took on, as it always does, covert and subversive modes of assertion. Although the first Christian church had been set up in Punjab as far back as 1835, not only did the process of proselytization among the Punjabis proceed at a much slower pace than it did, say, among the Bengalis or the Keralites, but it also remained, to a large extent, localized. Even the spread of English education was not as rapid in Punjab as it was in Maharashtra or Madras. It was almost as if, realizing their own inadequacy in an actual, physical battle, the Punjabis were busy fighting a psychological warfare by constantly resisting, even militating against the imposition of another language, religion or culture. (Even during the Muslim rule, the Punjabis had put up as much of resistance, if not more, to counter what they had perceived to be a genuine threat to their own sub-national culture.) And this subterranean hostility and antipathy to the English language and culture, beyond a doubt, continued to define the self-identity or self-assertion of the Punjabis, right through the extended phase of Colonial domination, even later.

This extremely complex negotiation between Punjabi and English can be easily established through the material available in the cultural domain. An entire range of cultural signifiers can be located in the archives of Punjabi language/literature, which help in defining the contours of this negotiation. Grounded in the popular consciousness, such signifiers have often taken on forms as varied as idiomatic phrases, expressions, folk songs and the cultural stereotypes. It is

not quite uncommon to come across such idiomatic expressions in Punjabi folk songs as 'the black are the lucky ones, and the whites nothing more than a stinking dung-heap,' or 'so what if my husband is black as soot, damned be the whites', et al. In his famous *Jangnaama*, Shah Mohammed, a nineteenth-century Punjabi poet, has offered a graphic account of the last battle fought between the Sikhs and the British on the soil of Punjab. What is significant about this ballad is the way in which he represents the Britishers, the aggressors. Often he uses such euphemisms as *Toonda Laat* (Lord with a lopped off arm), *Firangi* (foreigner) and *Teesri Jaat* (The Third Caste) to describe the white aggressors.⁸ Interested in presenting the people's view of history, Shah Mohammed is simply giving expression to the popular sentiment when he seeks to reduce the British to the much hated 'other'.

Put differently, each time the Punjabi community perceived a threat, real or imaginary, to their own language/culture, falling into a state of hysteria bordering on paranoia, it thought of newer strategies of resistance to the hegemonic culture. While in the colonial phase, it often took on defensive, literary forms, in the post-colonial phase, it struck more aggressive postures in form of antipathy towards or rejection of the English language. It is largely reflected in the ambivalent postures that Punjabi people, politics and government have struck over the past fifty years on the question of relative status of English vis-à-vis Punjabi at different levels of education; primary, middle and secondary school, college as well as the university. Curiously enough, even after having lived in England for over forty years, only a very small proportion of the first-generation, educated immigrant Punjabis are known to use English as a language of self-expression both in private and in public discourses. The vast majority looks upon any attempt to acquire the English language as a serious act of capitulation, an act of abject surrender to the dreaded alien culture. No wonder most of them simply refuse to learn the language or even after having acquired it, refuse to make it part of their living practices. Realizing the benefits of the British education system and manifold advantages of integration, the second-generation immigrants, of course, appear to have moved on ahead, succumbing to the pressures of assimilation. They tend to look upon the whole problem of dual identity as an asset and not as a liability; they treat it as an expression of cultural replenishment, not of cultural deprivation. However, the first generation continues to look back to its cultural roots, draw its emotional sustenance through multiple filiations with the mother culture in terms of possession, both material and

linguistic, and is relatively more resistant and less amenable to the overtures of assimilation.

The first-generation writers, and even those of the second generation to a limited extent, are certainly into making gestures of protest or defiance, consciously challenging, even undermining the multiple strategies, the protagonists of assimilation have adopted over the years to integrate them into the mainstream culture. One of the visible forms of this silent protest is their stubborn, unyielding desire to write in their own language, despite heavy odds as it neither affords them readership nor fame, nor money or recognition as writers. In their characteristic manner, the *videshi* Punjabi writers appear to be ruled by a single passion, an overwhelming desire to redefine the contours of identity politics. Aware that their decision to write in Punjabi would only push them further into self-limiting, self-restrictive postures, they would much rather reclaim and replenish their own linguistic/cultural sources than sing hosannas to the pretences of multiculturalism. Even if relative anonymity within the culture of their adoption is the price they have to pay for such resistant strategies, it is preferred to acquiescent silence or assimilation through weak-kneed capitulation.

It is against this backdrop that the process of the slow but sure evolution of the Punjabi short fiction in the UK ought to be examined and critiqued. In a manner of speaking, every immigrant has a story to tell. And as far as this goes, an immigrant writer is almost doubly blessed. Residing in a dual cultural space, she/he constantly swings back and forth, forever extending the margins of her/his existence, forever creating newer metaphors of survival. More than mere personal statements, their stories ought to be seen as 'creative interventions' or 'disruptions' in the contemporary history of the English society. Documenting the ups and downs of an extremely crucial, even vibrant (or should I say, violent) period in its recent history, their short fiction maps out the struggles of a society that is constantly seeking to re-invent itself.

As I do not have the necessary space to go into a detailed examination of the thematic/narrative concerns of the three generations of the *videshi* Punjabi writers, I shall restrict myself to a specific analysis of three stories, each of which is representative of the generation to which it belongs. Though Raghbir Dhand, Tarsem Nilgiri, Shivcharan Gill, Baldev Singh, Pritam Sidhu and Swaran Chandan, among several others, are some of the well-known and deeply respected writers among the first-generation short fictionists,

I propose to concentrate on Darshan Dheer's story *Kakhan Kanan Da Ghar* (A Nest of Straw).⁹ I am not suggesting that this is the best story of Darshan Dheer, nor am I proposing that this story be viewed as the best possible representation of the first generation writing. But to me, it appears that in this story, Darshan Dheer has used the trope of journey in an extremely ingenuous manner and has also succeeded in portraying both the spatial/temporal 'in-betweenness' of the immigrant and his/her multiple dilemmas and conflicts. At the narrative level, it is a simple story of a young man, Harpal, who boards the train from Birmingham station to go to Manchester. Though the protagonist undertakes a physical journey in time-space, it becomes a pretext for another journey, which is internal and psychological, even historical and cultural. Having left his 'home', the protagonist is quite simply living in a permanent state of 'homelessness'. His journey between the two fixed stations characterizes his own condition of 'in-betweenness' as an immigrant. Having left his native country, his home, Harpal experiences no obvious traces of nostalgia. His memories of his native country are not centred so much upon his parents or the members of his immediate family, but instead upon his young beloved with whom he has failed to honour his commitment. Somewhere, this repressed sense of guilt and failure has taken on the substitutive form of a wished-for fantasy. And certainly there could not have been a better mode of capturing this duality between realism and fantasy than through the 'in-between' process of a train journey. Even in course of the journey, what is emphasized again and again is the separateness, isolation, lack of warmth and intimacy among the train passengers. No words are ever exchanged between the passengers and the scenes of 'hail-fellow-well-met' type of geniality and bonhomie that often characterize train journeys in India are, of course, virtually non-existent.

On the contrary, the vast emptiness of the space the protagonist confronts in the compartment becomes a cultural code of the unlimited social space and the resultant freedom available within the adopted country. It is another matter that this social space does not give Harpal an opportunity to either define himself in concrete terms or seek filiations or relationships within its alien, anomie-like framework. Though his paranoia and diffidence about taking a seat next to a white woman is rooted in a purely personal mythology, it is also an enactment of the historical relationship between the two races, the black slaves and the white masters. By serving as a reminder

of how Gandhi had once been thrown out of a train compartment in South Africa, it becomes an effective effort at reclaiming history. At the same time, it becomes a statement on how the relationship between the blacks and the whites remain frozen in space as well as time. Though the blacks are no longer thrown out of the train compartments, their distrust of the white passengers and the consequent self-imposed isolation is largely a form of cultural deviancy, the by-product of a long-drawn out history of racism. Despite the fact that Harpal carries this burden of history, at least, subliminally, he is not quite able to resist the pull of the white skin and ultimately does succumb to the miasma of desire. His unfulfilled desires and dreams explode in form of his abrupt decision to sit right next to a white woman, regardless of the consequences. Though he manages to overcome his diffidence to some extent, the signs of paranoia persist much longer, and perhaps, never quite leave him completely. His inability to make a simple overture to his fellow passenger and thus cross the cultural divide brings the whole question of 'identity politics' into focus for us. An acute consciousness of his own 'difference' from her in terms of skin, race, history and culture pushes him deeper into postures of self-defence. And ultimately, when the white girl literally pulls him towards herself, the entire mise-en-scene of the colonial history, with all the hegemonic, cannibalistic and appropriating strategies enacts itself out through the resultant encounter. While history enacts itself out as a subliminal text in this unexpected, latent manner, Harpal is shown reflecting over the historical monuments such as Ajanta, Ellora, Taj Mahal, etc., in the process externalizing his erotic desires, even seeking desperate justification for them. But the fulfilment of these desires, at best, remains an interlude between two journeys, a temporary process of instant gratification that enjoys the sanction of the commodified culture. It is in this sense that Harpal's personal situation becomes a site of multiple predicaments latent in the situation of every immigrant. His search for a permanent home must be constantly thwarted; he can, at best, build nests of straw that would not take long to blow away, and even a mild gust of wind is enough to do the necessary damage. Structured around the twin poles of fantasy and reality, home and homelessness, personal and historical, white and black, the story does ultimately succeed in locating metaphors of 'identity politics' within the dual spatial and cultural framework.

The second story that I have chosen for exegesis is titled *Dhoonan (The Smoke)*¹⁰ by Harjit Atwal, whom one would only place among the second-generation writers. Over the years, Atwal has definitely established himself as a gifted storyteller, one with a distinctive voice

and *métier* of his own, something that his other contemporaries are still struggling to discover. Often spoken of with great respect and admiration among the critics as well as the readers, Harjit Atwal shows impeccable control, judicious craftsmanship and fairly incisive understanding of human experience. Much more than just exhibit promise of mature creativity, his story *The Smoke*, quite simply, manages to become a living testimony to his rich resourcefulness as a storyteller. In this story, Atwal has explored the little-known world of an 'illegal immigrant' with a rare sensitivity, compassion, even inwardness. His preference for the first person, at once, lends a sense of urgency, immediacy and authenticity to his narrative. Often in a state of perpetual flight, an illegal immigrant is something of a fugitive, who does not want to confront either the 'self' or the 'other', and yet never ceases to aspire for a permanent settlement of some kind. Poised on the edge of this predicament is the narrator of the story, who, in the initial stages, simply keeps floating in and out of settlements, but ultimately lands himself in a job as a bus conductor with London transport. One day, he has a chance meeting with a young passenger, Manisha, who happens to be working in a factory along the same route where the bus plies. On learning that she enjoys legal status as a British citizen, he decides to hitch his wagon to her star. Driven into making this choice through sheer circumstantial necessity, the narrator ultimately clinches the matter only when he gets to know that Manisha is of the same caste as he is. The baggage of caste consciousness that he has carried from his native country is still an instrument of self-oppression for him. Not only that, he is also tied to his mother culture through multiple bonds of filiation and kinship. Though he is prepared to date, woo and court a young girl of his own volition, he must seek his parents' consent for marrying her. However, a sudden discovery about the girl's past throws him off-balance, sending his entire secret plans swirling through the smoke. The discovery about the 'other', however, fails to materialize into a discovery of the 'self'. The duality persists as hypocrisy and duplicity of the male attitude comes in for severe criticism. Ironically, it is among the billowing clouds of smoke that we ultimately get to see the real face of the narrator and recognize all the contortions of his tradition-bound, caste-ridden, orthodox self. Atwal's message is clear enough: moving ahead in a highly industrialized society is not simply a matter of tact and manipulation, it is first and foremost a matter of shedding one's agrarian, retrogressive, feudal and patriarchal mindset in favour of a truly modernist outlook.

To represent the third-generation of writers, I have chosen Veena Verma's story, *A Soiled Sheet*.¹¹ Veena Verma is a feminist with a strong, self-assertive voice, whose well-crafted stories consistently attack, debunk and critique false assumptions about women, their stereotypical role-fixation, their sexuality and its multiple misrepresentations often bred by the patriarchal system. Though Verma simply refuses to entertain any viewpoint other than that of her women characters, her stories reveal no penchant for shrill polemic or strident radicalism. Rarely does she carry the baggage of ideology in a very explicit manner, and never does she allow herself to be cramped by its constraints. She is, forever, engaged in locating newer metaphors for her 'liberatory narratives' in the country of her origin. Marking the culmination of such a search, *A Soiled Sheet* brings us face to face with the slow process, aimed at commodifying woman as well as her desires. A powerful cultural signifier, 'sheet' is a metonymic 'absence', speaking of woman in different voices such as a wife, a mother, a mistress and a prostitute; something that hides her 'presence' behind the cloak of invisibility. Sujata is just another name for such an eternal woman, another face of a woman who has as often been betrayed by men down the ages as she is by her own instincts or impulses. All through the story, the crumpled 'sheet' is repeatedly smoothed out, folded up and put away in the closet. But in the last scene, the objectification of Sujata is complete as it brings home to the reader the real significance of the 'sheet'. Only after Kumar peremptorily tells Sujata to take the 'soiled sheet' away, does she begin to identify herself with it! Ironically enough, the moment of her objectification is also the moment of truth; the moment of 'absence' is also the moment of 'presence'. Ultimately, the 'sheet' turns into a 'shroud' within whose folds all the dreams, desires, voices or memories of Sujata, even she herself, must now lie buried, eternally. It is apparent that, in her portrayal of woman's experiences, Veena Verma does attach a good deal of significance to cultural particularities. This is also reflected in her keen desire to abandon conventional methods of storytelling in favour of other modes, intrinsically better suited to the communication of the experience. Though it may appear to be no more than a simple framed tale on the surface, *A Soiled Sheet* is essentially a complex narrative, constantly resisting all attempts at framing, constantly readjusting the limits of self definition.

My purpose in mapping out ruptures and continuities of the *videshi* Punjabi short fiction as well as the contradictions and confusions of the post-Colonial theory is mainly to problematize them both. Some of the *kathas* I have narrated in this context may not appear to have

any direct bearing upon the subject on hand. But, I have designed this essay somewhat differently from the way in which such essays are ordinarily designed. Fracturing and rupturing it right in the middle, I have divided this paper neatly into two halves of theory and practice, of post-Colonial *kathas* and *videshi* Punjabi short fiction in such a way that each half, reflects and refracts upon the other. If I have been able to create a framework within which some of the theoretical issues raised by the post-Colonial theory can be re-interrogated and a new perspective be found for first re-contextualizing and then re-examining the *videshi* short fiction in Punjabi, I would say, my purpose has been more than served.

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NOTES

1. Christian, Barbara (1989) 225–236.

2. Some of the early investigations into the post-Colonial theory were started by people like Ashcroft, Griffiths Tiffin (1989); Bochner (1995), Moore-Gilbert (1997) and Walder (1998) et al.
3. Aronowitz Stanley (1994) p. 94
4. For details, see Tatla, Darshan Singh ed. (1987), Dhindsa, K.S. (1998), Singh, Pashaura and N. Gerald Barrier, ed. (1996).
5. Quoted in Nayar, Rana (2002) *Intro.* p. xv.
6. For a more extensive discussion on this argument, see Nayar, Rana (2002), *intro.*, pp. ix-xxvii.
7. Grewal, J. S. (1999) pp. 30-38
8. Shah Mohammed, (19th cent.) *Jangnama*, Jalandhar: Chetna Prakashan, 1993, pp. 137-147.
9. In this case, reference is being made to the translated version of the story in Nayar, Rana (2002), pp. 30-38.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-147.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 170-193.