

## DIASPORA LITERATURE: VOICING CONCERNs THROUGH POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to analyze the poetic works of Ajmer Rode, a leading poet, an established playwright and translator and Surjeet Kelsey, a poet, short story writer and translator who has made a mark in the literary field. The Punjabi community records a significant place as a part of the worldwide Indian diaspora. Immigrant writers of Punjab origin initially addressed the issues of migration and resettlement in a new land reflective of their experiences and concerns such as racism, cultural differences, and nostalgia. The contribution of writers of Punjabi diaspora is immense towards the Punjabi literature as well as English literature. Ajmer Rode's contribution to the literary world is indeed remarkable. His poems paint pictures of Indian culture and society in all its shades. He foregrounds complex social issues with great ease and presents the grim reality of the society. His poems under discussion are taken from 'Poems at My Doorstep' and 'Blue Meditations'. Rode seems to have a strong dedication to exploring cruel realities of society. Poet Surjeet Kalsey has established herself as one of the leading writers of Punjabi diaspora in particular and Indo-Canadian community in general. Her works encapsulate the tribulations of Indian immigrants especially women. The poems selected for the analysis have been taken from: 'Shakti's Words: An Anthology of South Asian Canadian Women Poets', 'In this Solitude' and 'The Geography of Voice'. Besides dealing with the issues of assimilation, racism and gender bias there are echoes of feminism in her poems.

**KEYWORDS:** Immigrant Literature, Racism, Gender Bias, Cultural Differences, Nostalgia

### INTRODUCTION

#### Diaspora Literature: Voicing Concerns through Poetry

Immigrant literature is also known as diaspora literature takes into account the literary output by the authors outside their native country. The most important feature that makes these works fall into the category of diaspora is the explicit presentation of the culture and background of the writer and his association and bond with his homeland. The Punjabi community records a significant place as a part of the worldwide Indian diaspora. Immigrant writers of Punjab origin initially addressed the issues of migration and resettlement in a new land reflective of their experiences and concerns such as racism, cultural differences, and nostalgia. Uma Parameswaran has defined it as follows;

"first is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves ethnocultural issues. The fourth is when they have 'arrived' and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues." (Parameswaran, 165)

The writers of Punjabi diaspora have immensely enriched the Punjabi literature as well as English literature. Immigrant literature deals with the themes of alienation, displacement, rootlessness, and quest for identity. The issues of amalgamation and disintegration of cultures are also discussed through literary writings. Diaspora writers have not restricted themselves to defined boundaries but they also talk about the issues of global concern from a wider perspective. While many of them celebrated their love for roots and culture through their mother tongue others have used the English language as a tool to express and explore their creative faculties which plays a significant role in connecting their culture to the rest of the world. They have come a long way in achieving their endeavors and left a big impression undoubtedly.

This paper is an attempt to analyze the poetic works of Ajmer Rode, a leading poet, an established playwright and translator and Surjit Kelsey, a poet, short story writer and translator who have made a mark in the literary field.

Ajmer Rode's contribution to the literary world is indeed remarkable. His poems are highly significant to have a thorough knowledge of Indian culture and society. He foregrounds complex social issues with great ease and presents stark reality of the society. Rode seems to have a strong dedication to exploring cruel realities of life.

Poverty, peasantry, racial discrimination, feudal practices, and casteism are some of the themes quite close to his heart. He unravels the caste-based discrimination and injustice prevalent in the society sarcastically in one of his poems:

“When my mother’s loose shirt  
could no longer hide the universe  
expanding around her belly button,  
someone sneaked into her womb  
felt my forehead  
and stamped: achhoot, untouchable, outcaste.”

His poetic expression is intense and presents the complex social issues with a fine sense of poetic sensibility and gravity which jolts the reader and urges him to bring a transformation or revolution. He mocks the caste system when in one of his poems titled ‘Labels’ he discusses that how a child is labeled with different tags of class, creed, and color even before he takes birth. In his poems based on caste bias and Dalit experience, he does not scream or preach but through his powerful means of communication, he uses tropes such as irony and sarcasm. For instance:

Already a variety of  
labels have been  
etched on him.  
One for a race.  
One for color. One  
for religion and maybe  
one for a caste. At the same time he

is told

you are born into a free world –

Congratulations!"

Poverty and racial criticism are the themes most recurrent in his poetry. His sensitivity and concern get reflected in his poetry the way he foregrounds the social ills poignantly. ‘The Sphinx in me’ is an attempt to expose the racial discrimination ingrained in the minds of people. The poets’ daughter is perplexed and enquires from her father, why Cindy one of her classmates has been chosen over her by the teacher to play the role of Cinderella whereas she believes that she is better than Cindy.

The poet expresses the trauma beautifully and dramatically when he probes into the matter for an answer to: “was it or wasn’t it the color

of your child that robbed her

of the chance to play the fairy?

And he wonders about the teacher, ‘Could he be a racist?’

“Meanwhile the monster inside me

expands to full Giza size and

demand an answer.”

To pacify the magnificent Giza who asked for an answer whether it was the question of racial discrimination or not, he turned to history books, tore a picture of chimp and hangs it on his daughter’s wall to affirm that: “Genes of chimpanzee, I knew,

traveled over and over

million times to survive

in me in my daughter,

Cindy, in the drama teacher.”

The poet finds hope in the future generations and believes them to be humane and sensitive, educated and enlightened in the true sense of the word as compare to the generations of today. He feels that our children will read and wonder at ‘Those Times’ when people would celebrate all the different colours in the form of flowers, festivals and seasons but despise a person with different colour. The idea of racism is expressed again with a streak of irony in the following lines from the poem ‘Those times’:

“Every summer they

celebrated a new color

yet human face of a

different color

they barely tolerated”

Rode’s poetic piece ‘playing with big numbers’ addresses the issue of poverty and presents the realistic, heart-rending plight of the South African children who die in big numbers due to hunger every day. Irony is probably the most pervasive characteristic in his poetry. The horrifying effect of the penury leading to starvation and the magnitude of the problem are presented with a sense of urgency to expedite some action. The grim reality and the gravity of the situation are captured as follows:

“Suppose as a result of the debt,  
 five million children die  
 every year, as in fact they do,  
 and each dying child cries  
 a minimum of 100 times a day  
 there would be a trillion cries  
 floating around  
 in the atmosphere just over a  
 period of five years.”

The poet believes that a sound wave once generated keep floating in the air and never leaves the atmosphere, thus affect the whole atmosphere. The poem conjuring up images of the starving, crying and dying children has the power to shatter anybody’s soul with such intensity that “it will take/ 14 years to gather /the pieces and put them /back into one piece.” At the same time, the poet feels that it may not affect you at all. Maybe you have become a master at ‘playing with big numbers’.

The issue of poverty and hunger has been touched upon by the poet in a philosophical way also in one of his poems, ‘The Maharishi and the Baby’. The poet seems to ridicule the philosophy of Maya, because hunger follows: no philosophy, no rule, no religion but food for food is one of the most basic needs to survive. For instance:

“The Maharishi whispers: the flesh is Maya, temporal,  
 the soul is eternal,  
 the truth.  
 The baby  
 inside the starved mother  
 insists it must come out  
 the mother has to eat.  
 The Maharishi

and the baby in the womb

stare across

into each other's eyes."

The stark reality of life-death of basic necessities, food and shelter make the poet utter a cry of despair. The poems are an attempt to jolt the readers and urge them to contribute to eradicate poverty and save the society from this another form of violence. It is an appeal by the poet to protect the basic right of the poor people and restore them to a life of dignity and decency.

"A great writer in writing of himself writes his age" T.S Eliot

Rode fulfills this dictum when we go through his works. Looking at Rode's poetry it is concluded that his poetry becomes a vehicle to raise some very contemporary issues since for Rode, poetry is not a pastime but a serious commitment. He does not hesitate from expressing his deeper emotions. Rode remains a true representative of his times as was Tennyson in the Victorian era.

The other poet under discussion is Surjeet Kalsey who has carved a niche for herself as one of the leading writers of Punjabi diaspora in particular and Indo-Canadian community in general. Her works encapsulate the personal problems of Indian immigrants especially women. There are echoes of feminism in her poems. She deals with the issues of assimilation, racism and gender bias. Her poems speak volumes about the condition of women who are marginalized by their male counterparts in all walks of life. 'A Color of Nothingness' is one such poem where she points at the indifferent attitude of a patriarchy towards women. She discloses the harsh and unacceptable reality of patriarchal society which undermines the role and contribution of women in all spheres of life. A woman has been rendered helpless, hapless and powerless since her life is 'devalued' which makes her existence 'a blank colorless page' because the 'indifferent shadows' are always 'unappreciative' of her work, her qualities, her potential and her beautiful existence.

In her next fine creation 'Voiceless Women' she points out at her being silent and waiting for 'someone' to come forward to fight for her rights. The poet provokes the women to voice their pain, agony, and suffering and urges them to bring change. She indirectly encourages the women to be the agents of change, to watch their interest and safeguard their rights against the oppressors who try to disparage their status. Similarly, many other poems register the pathos of women life. 'Selection' is one such poem which expresses the plight of women through ages and exposes the gender bias sickness deep-rooted in the psyche of Indian society. The poet reveals that the girl child has always been unacceptable irrespective of the times she takes birth in. She concludes the whole story of female foeticide in the following stanza:

"History laughs.

Nothing has changed

between now and then

from the ancient midwife's making

the baby girl sucks her poisonous thumb

at her birth, to see her unborn body through

the ultrasounds and wash her out.

Difference?

Only it looks more accurate, surer,  
professional and six months' time saver."

Kelsey despises the idea of society's preference and wanting of the male. And she believes that technology has made it all the easier for the oppressors to kill the girl child in the womb and save time.

Another aspect that surfaces in the poetry of Kelsey are immigrant experiences and encounters with a new different, unaccepting world. The poem 'Migratory birds' records poet's reflections and observations of the immigrant psyche. The desire and longing for the native land are so strong that it overpowers and overshadows the charm and joy of new, vibrant and promising land. Painful experiences of migration, non- acceptance in the new country and homesickness make it difficult for the immigrant to survive happily. The poet believes that the migratory birds will return home one day and she relates this to the immigrants beautifully:

"We  
the migratory birds  
are here this season  
thinking  
we will fly  
back to our home  
for sure"

She brings out the doubts and dilemmas of the human beings who migrate to other countries in search of better future. "How shall we reach the threshold/of our home with crumbling self?"The poet seems to be worried about the consequences of this change.

Kelsey imparts emotion and passion to her poetry. She pulls up the reader and awakens his attention through the deep and profound thoughts. The poem 'Saffron Leaves' embodies the cries of poet's heart. The theme of loneliness and despair has been dealt with autobiographically by the poet. Not only women struggle in their homes for their identity but also face racial discrimination in the hands of natives of the new country. The idea of racism and diversity run throughout in the poem. For instance: "The imaginary fruits do not

mix well to become jelly  
in the melting pot,  
and their non-adjusting  
identity gets stung by  
an insect called racism

has multicolored wings  
covered under the velvet of  
race-relation and diversity."

The immigrant experiences and the turmoil of her heart find expression in her poetry. The intensity of the emotions has a personal appeal and relates to every woman, immigrant or Indian. She has undoubtedly emerged as a writer of prominence.

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