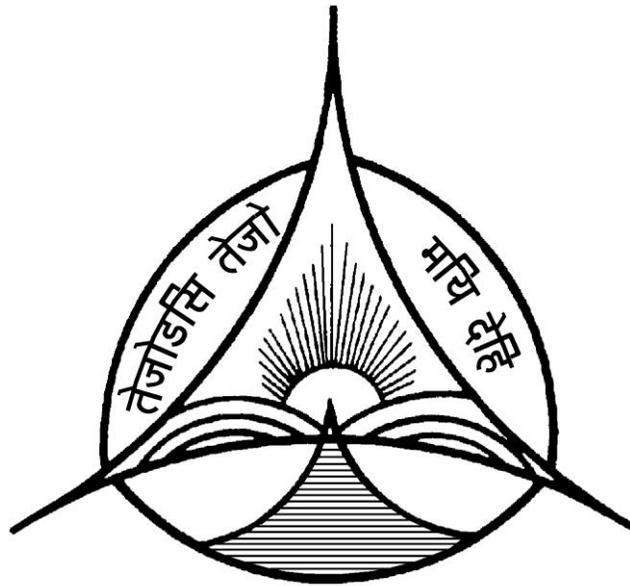


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The Year of the Runaways by Sunjeev Sahota. London: Picador, 2015

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Like Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* also undertakes an exercise in scrutiny, examining the luggage that migrants carry into another country. It appraises the manner and ways in which people still continue to float away from history, from memory, from time, coming unstuck from their homelands but nevertheless dragging invisible suitcases bursting at the seams. It is an evocative narrative on the lives of present day Indian migrants in English cities like Sheffield, and the tenacity and trauma this invisible luggage offers them or subjects them to, making each one handle it in poignantly different styles. As the characters carry their caste and class politics from back home into an alien soil that buys only their migrant labour at cheap rates and refuses them human status, each passing day sees them increasingly becoming temporary commodities, sans sanitation, sustenance, shelter and satisfaction.

The novel charts the journey of Indian immigrants in England, all runaways from the failure of decolonisation in India. Thus India's tryst with decolonisation that is so much a part of their history and memory becomes a travesty as they arrive at the centre of the erstwhile empire and almost immediately get sucked into transnational models of colonial domination. Innocent of new crises in the postcolonial in the metropole, they plod on within structures of exploitative labour, citizenship status and racial hegemony. However, the epistemic violence suffered by the subaltern in postcolonial India is carried on and perpetrated in transnational spaces. It is precisely colonialism's investment in caste and patriarchy within colonised nations that helps create a crisis within the postcolonial that further helps support the logic of transnational capital. Thus native patriarchies and caste politics provide the bulwark for stabilising the neo-colonial rationale of mercantile capitalism. That these migrants can never gain access to the public sphere or civil society, and their reduction to the status of bare life that people like Agamben have theorised upon, provide further pointers to the crisis in the postcolonial.

The Year of the Runaways is a searing critique of the failure to engender a politics that could address the new forms of dominion that are spawned by transnational capital. The poignancy of the book is in the manner in which it shows how individuals plod on with the business of survival in the face of a complete absence of intellectual ferment or labour unionisation that could offer a more structured and codified understanding of new forms of transnational subalternisation that seem to be taking place in the context of the rise of global capitalism. As labour markets play unskilled labourers, pitting one against the other in a scramble for visas and 'legality', as is the case with the major characters who are illegal or quasi legal immigrants in the UK, Sahota gives this struggle a geographical turn. The Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants in transit, ironically enough through countries like Russia, finally end up in England, housed in freezing subhuman conditions. With passports confiscated, we see them fighting to

keep themselves afloat by taking up any menial job that comes their way. It is through a geographical imagination that Sahota unravels the key to their exploitation. For example, the fact that Tarlochan is a rickshaw driver from Bihar, an 'untouchable Chamar' who carries his caste and memories of communal riots that killed his family, fixes the manner of response that he evokes in the minds of his fellow immigrant labourers.

What the book lays bare is the internment of the immigrant within a zone of indistinction that so characterises his life, treading the fine line between legality and illegality, law and violence, citizenship and outlaw-hood, and more often, life and death in life. Through a brilliant portrayal of this visibly 'invisible' minority community, the book illustrates how the cheap labour upon which globalisation builds its edifice is historically, socially and culturally contingent. It is in a glaringly conspicuous neocolonial global world that Sahota chooses to situate the postcolonial crisis that his principal characters undergo. Narinder, the visa-wife and the only character with a British passport is in a sense a metaphor for women haunted/hunted by native patriarchies in global spaces. Constantly reminded of her duties as a Sikh woman

This saga of modern day migrations serve to remind us that class, caste and patriarchy are things that make people run away from India. These escapades are marked by the fact that an early diet of honour and shame has prompted Indians to pack the very same catalogues into their luggage that they are running away from, making their journeys circular and keeping them in the loop of religious and cultural nationalism. Thus Randeep, Avtar, Tarlochan and Narinder, after having run far, still continue to be haunted by the same uncertainties that marked the beginning of their journey. The monetary conditions might have improved but the persistent feeling of *loss*, nostalgia, vulnerability and existential angst continues. Thus, the postcolonial crisis that the book seeks to engage with in some ways is linked to the co-option of the working class into the empty promises of a global economy, in which they remain mired in spite of its failure to deliver the dream. None of the protagonists seem sufficiently matured in consciously analysing their conditions of oppression. Here is a novel that while attempting a truthful picture of the migration of labour, also attempts to diagnose its failure. By laying bare a different political and cultural environment that the migrant labourers inhabit at the centres of the erstwhile empire, Sahota examines the neat perfection with which hegemony operates in modern capitalist polities, hinting at its historical and cultural rootedness in the minds of the once colonised people.