

At Home in the Word

Shabdant by Dev
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Diaspora is not necessarily a condition of loss and cultural entropy. It could as well be a condition of possibilities that otherwise remain inaccessible and even unimaginable within the relatively insular space of belonging. Within contemporary Panjabi diaspora poetry, one comes across a range of responses to the post-national experience. Ajmer Rode, a Canada-based Panjabi poet, for instance, defines his position as that of a "seed sprouting/ in the clay of a wall". He has no answers, no fruits, no solutions to offer; anyone who comes to him goes with "a handful of questions". Navtej Bharati, another Canadian, on the other hand, accounts for his diasporic identity in terms of "eternally flowing/ village brook". To Surjit Kalsey, more than just spatial displacement, diaspora is a condition of temporal disjunction: "when time stands still in our pulses/ we live the moments of arrested time". To Amarjit Chandan, a UK-based poet, diaspora is almost a condition of cultural suicide: "Lost in the dawn, where shall we go . . ."

Dev, a Panjabi poet-painter who hops between Spain and Switzerland, in his Sahitya-akademi award winning collection of poems *Shabdant* offers us a very different, overtly optimistic, quasi-mystical response to his condition of exile. Far from being a position of deprivation, diaspora for him is a pretext, a vantage position for metaphysical emancipation. To him, belongingness is bad faith, a kind of fundamentalism that pre-empts the possibility of cross-cultural exchange, a meaningful con-fluence of cultures. Those who 'belong' create their own regime of meanings – a regime so complete and exclusive that it precludes any possibility of looking beyond or even peeping across it. Breaking free from the

binds of thresholds, Dev wants to meet people at the very level of silence – a level that transcends petty verbalization of ideological positions and arbitrary constructions. He therefore very legitimately asks: "You please tell me, where should I meet you? / at times you are chieftains of meaning/ at times you are slaves of / thresholds/ . . . / you have not left any room/ where we could greet each other / with our silences" (p.90).

Dev is not a poet of permanent addresses or final destinations. He is not in favour of settling down, for him it is only the impurities that settle. Eternal mobility is the mantra of Dev's search for self/home: "my address lies in my walking eternally" (p.91). The poet does not live on a well-mapped out piece of land, his address is either the wind blowing above or the subterranean waters that flow down below: "I am an address of the wind" (p.111) and "My address/ the silence of flowing water" (p.278). In his poem "Chhote Raah" (p.290), the poet pities those who "tag an address to their destination/ and thus become a part of petty crowd". The journey of the self is an endless pilgrimage along "deserted paths/ where sun, words and dreams/ wait for [the poet] me continually". This is a journey without milestones: "No destination/would become a milestone in my journey" (p.290). The physical journey lapses into a metaphysical one.

Home is not located outside the poet, it is within him, he carries it wherever he goes: "I am not a home/ homes live in me/ The search for home/ is not my dream,/ it might be the dream's dream" (p.91). More than just a fixed and stable structure, home is an idea of pure dream that cannot be contained in the structures of concrete. Also there is no desire to pin

down home to one particular static space; home is a trope of dynamic, ever-evolving, multiplying consciousness. Without any regret or remorse Dev accepts the destiny of a nomad: "travelling across different landscapes/ born of the sorrows of storms/ I am a nomad" (p. 99). He does not sensationalize his exile, for the kind of exile he lives in, is his own choice. Very candidly he admits, "I have earned exile: self-willed/ . . . / I have accepted loneliness as my lord/ . . ." (p.113). The way to self-attrition is way to self-blossoming: "the candle which burnt/ becomes a rose of wandering fire" (p.126).

Family, home, relations, province, nation, etc. are signifiers of facile security and false identity. This is what the poet writes on the politics of home: "home/ threshold/ . . . / are mere securities/ of no one coming/ and no one going." (p. 284). At another place, he expresses his disgust at the easy security that home provides: "Locked/ within the house/ you are safe/ beyond relations/ there either is danger/ or just love" (p.139). Security is a condition of self-imprisonment, it does not let us realize the freedom of open spaces. Using the binary of rain versus umbrella, the poet takes a dig at those who are obsessed with the idea of security thus: "rain does not wet us/ it washes us/ the people who have umbrellas/ complain that they get wet/ in spite of protection/ there is after all a limit to protection" (p. 268).

Family, the last resort of emotional retreat is done away without fear or risk of being exposed to the cruel 'objective' reality outside. Family does not empower the self; it rather erodes it: "family mice/ in their dark alleys . . . / keep gnawing at their own/ sunshine" (p. 274). Instead of love, family is a site of petty intrigues and

of being exposed to the cruel 'objective' reality outside. Family does not empower the self; it rather erodes it: "family mice/ in their dark alleys . . . /keep gnawing at their own/sunshine"(p. 274). Instead of love, family is a site of petty intrigues and conspiracies: "all families fight like this/ behind each other's back/ no family is absolutely honest . . ." ("Family", p. 272). The conventions and customs of family militate against the individuality of the self; they choke the poet to death: "Family/ is not love/it is [name of] those eternal advices/family-customs/ that kill you bit by bit. . . ." (p.272).

Dev wants to stay away from the cacophony of mindless meanings – meanings that are constructed to settle political scores; he expresses his anguish over this politics of meanings thus: "with their glittering bellows of meanings/ [we] have rendered silence into banality" (p. 128). Words are Dev's ships that ferry him across the sea of ignorance: "words are ships/that take me/ across the harbours/ towards the oceans of curiosity"(p. 159). At times, words become his weapons to fight the miasma of darkness all around him: "I have been fighting a battle/taking words and shapes as my weapons/ what distance should I cover to reach my 'self' from the crowd"(p. 190). As a true Sikh, the poet is disciple of Word: "I am a disciple (Sikh) of your word / . . . / that let us not become the crowd of blind meanings/that let us remain your words/ for company and dialogue" (p.95).

The boundless expansion of the poet's self "lies in the end of the Word" – *shabdant*. (p. 71) Alphabets are his "ladders climbing them he talks with moon" (p. 229). Words are often interpreted in opportunistic manner as panacea of problems. Dev warns us against the appropriation of words for our 'mean' ends. Using the medical imagery the poet says: "Do not use meanings/ as medicines/ so that words go into coma

forever"(p.195). The poet is retriever of words lost in the din of patriarchal structures; "Full of hope, I am/ the climax of my own silence/ searching the words lost inside the paternal dome" (p. 120).

For Dev, diaspora is a condition of self-reflexivity and self-recovery. A physical as well as intellectual distancing is required to explore and explode the myth of belongingness. Uprootedness is an enabling experience as it lends freedom to his search for roots: "No place is my place of belonging/ Therefore I could do anything/ to trace my roots, home, ancestry"(p. 119). This is how the poet brings forth the falsity of history: "what is history/ memory or curse/ it is a dirty water of our own shadows" (p. 84). Dev seeks to go beyond the banality of arguments; excessive display of knowledge obscures vision: "don't make your dialogue too argumentative/ that under the pressure of your 'proud' knowledge/ the bridge of communication cracks" (p. 128).

Dev's poetry, on the whole, is an invocation of the Word, the original, un-mediated, un-politicized, innate and organic gospel of the divine. He, in this sense, is a true inheritor of our Vedantic lore, and his poems could be seen as modern hymns to *vac*, but despite sincerity and emotional intensity, the poet fails to evoke the mantric connotations of the Word. As a painter of international repute Dev should have brought more colour and brilliance to the texture of his poems. The poet is repetitive in his imagery, and the limited range of his images belies the international exposure that the poet possesses. Also the poet seems to overlook the dissonances built in the discourse of contemporary multicultural ethos. Multiculturalism as an ideology of post-nationalism is alright, but the moot question is— is it as soulful an enterprise as Dev's poetry tends to paint? Well, since the poet is not exposed

to neo-Nazi movements in America and mainstream Europe, he has every reason to be optimistic!

Note: The poetry quotes used in the review have been translated from Panjabi by the author himself.

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