

“Absolutely true. What else?” It was his youngest sister who spoke now.

“Going by that account, if he had lived for some more time the remaining two acres also would have been mortgaged and disposed off and we would have been left....” Amrik was still to complete the sentence when Mohinder interrupted him, “We would have been left paupers... facing bankruptcy and destitution. What else? I say, brother, he still died in time. It is good in a way....”

Mohinder laughed a little, having said this. There was no tinge of pain in his laughter nor any hint of joy. It was a strange laugh, not revealing anything. In the darkness of the night, one or two other members of the family were heard smirking. It appeared as if everyone agreed to what Mohinder had said. And they were all relieved that the head of the family had departed well in time.

Translated from Punjabi by Paramjit Singh Ramana

*

1857: Looking for Things Misplaced

Asad Zaidi

Asad Zaidi’s disturbingly powerful poem (published in *Sāmān Kī Talāsh*, 2008) opens with a complex telescoping: 1857 has returned, with an immediacy it did not have in 1857. The battles that seemed far away are now right here, at the door. You could then put off the fight. You no longer can. You could probably say then, “It is for them to take care of freedom.” Now it must be taken care of by you. Delhi was a long way away then. It is everywhere now. One can think of two Delhis. The symbol of freedom to be won. And the symbol of a kind of power that is a menace to freedom.

There is guilt and a sense of wrong. Can we evade the burden of responsibility for all that has gone wrong? But then a generalized sense of universal responsibility might also hide a pathological condition.

The narrative voice is ambivalent. Are ‘we’ the people or the writers, or both? The soundscape seems to be ambivalent, but in reality it could be marked by a sharp, brewing conflict. For there is the restive, loud, carnivalesque India of people and the whispering India of agents, touts and opportunists. But the fears about the conflict could just be illusory, a product of our popular culture. Perhaps the very reality of contemporary India is a product of fiction and commercial cinema. An unreal, unreal reality.

But such a suspicion could also mean an ironic shifting of the blame for our sordid reality on to fiction and cinema. A guilt-induced aporia of representation. Our popular cultural representations have probably keenly followed the reality we have produced, but it is such a sordid, fantastical reality that we would just not acknowledge its existence and admit our concomitant responsibility in its making. The better option: blame the popular culture for all that has gone wrong.

The metaphor of noise again changes – to become, before

being promptly disowned, the tinkle of money. The poem takes aim at a Prime Minister's magisterial faux pas. And then it returns to telescoping: freedom has become only a name for the quest for a convenient unfreedom. Obviously, this is a pointed assault on the neoliberal avatar of colonialism that conceals itself behind the mask of a freedom won on such and such a date as an 'indisputable empirical fact'.

The rumble – the noise – of the battle-drums of 1857 knocks on the heart, to bring back memories that the canonical national writing has for long kept locked in silence: except for Subhadra Kumari Chauhan who remembered to remember 1857. The writers of the canon may not have exactly aspired for a more convenient slavery, but their taking for granted the freedom arguably made them complicit in the subversion of freedom.

Freedom is not something you download once and for all, and then forget all about it. It must be continually updated and firewalled.

Freedom is a condition of being.

1857 was not just those people's affair who arose and marched and fought and died. It remained the case for those too who came afterwards. And it remains the case for us too. 1857 just cannot be othered, consigned to them. It must be owned.

- Rajesh Kumar Sharma

The battles of 1857
that once upon a time were far-off battles
are here and now.

In these times of shame and sense of wrong
when any wrong done oppresses you as like own doing,
the ears catch the rumble of war-drums of the mutiny
and the hubbub too – so very Indian
and the whispers of frightened pimps and traitors
and the restive footfalls of chance-mongers.

This could just be an effect of fiction and commercial cinema produced since.

But this is certainly not the clamour of those 150 crore rupees which the Government of India has sanctioned to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the First War of Independence, sanctioned with the pen of a Prime Minister who is embarrassed over every battle for freedom and who goes begging around the world for apologies, a Prime Minister who would sacrifice all for the national objective of a *better* subjugation.

This is the reminder of a fifty seven erased by national elite, by Bankims and Amichands and Harishchandras, and by their offspring installed in their thrones, who never wanted anything better than a better enslavement.

A fifty seven for which there was nothing, except contempt or reticence, in the minds of Moolshankars, Siva Prasads, Narendranaths, Ishwar Chandras, Syed Ahmads, Pratap Narains, Maithili Sharans and Ramchandras.

A fifty seven that came to be remembered in the exclusive literature of Hindi only by Subhadra some seventy or good eighty long years later.

This is the reminder of a process that now gets relived some 150 years too late in suicides of peasants and weavers whom you cannot even call rioters or protestors and who go their lonely way - as input of national indexes of development and starvation - from SEZs towards collective graveyards and cremation sites

like a melancholy, grime-wrapped, ungovernable procession.

Who has left them so terribly forsaken?

Back in 1857

the common people were probably meant to be that soiled and filthy,

fated perhaps to be so,

with an irrevocability that no one questioned.

Today such appearance has become an extreme crime.

Battles often remain unconsummated,

only to be consummated in times to come, in other ages, with other weapons.

At times it so happens

that the soil-laden corpses too rise to give battle yet again, mocking the living that are deader than themselves.

And they want to know from them

which section of the infantry or cavalry they belong to, which leader they follow; or, taking them to be sympathizers, they happen to tell them of their destination Najafgarh, or else they pause to ask the way to Bakhtawarpur.

The dead of 1857 speak.

Forget about our feudal leaders, forget about the jagirs they fought to repossess, forget too the way we died for their sake.

Tell us something of yourself.

Is the world now fully delivered of injustice?

Or is it just that you are blind?

That you just can't see any way out?

Translated from Hindi by Rajesh Kumar Sharma

*

Punjabi Cultural Identity

A Note for the Margins¹

Rajesh Kumar Sharma

I am making two assumptions. The first is that Punjabi cultural identity stands problematised today and we need to face and understand the resulting situation. The second is that we may usefully enter the situation at the site of dialogue between language, literature, culture and media.

It can be reasonably claimed that the dialogue is not taking place on equal terms between the interlocutors since media enjoys a disproportionately far greater power and visibility. In fact, media almost constitutes the environment in which the dialogue happens to be currently embedded. Speed, transience, private stakes, consumership and spectacle—which characterize the media and its products today—cast their shadow on the dialogue, a fact that may not be overlooked.

There is also the question of how to treat the constitutive terms (language, literature, culture and media) of the dialogue. The question must be kept indefinitely open, for the simple reason that these terms have only a discursive existence and not an ontological one. The complex terrain of the relationship between language and reality requires to be traversed and explored over and over again. As such, we would do well to begin with further theoretical reflection on Punjabi language *as language* with a view to assimilating the insights which philosophical thought has produced on this terrain. The reflection has to be plugged into the current state of theory and philosophy in the world. Archaic passions and atavistic fantasies which nest in the thinking on language have to be confronted and exorcised. Theologies of culture have to give way to cultural genealogies. The concept of 'Punjabi literature' has to match its historical reality by embracing more than the literature written in Punjabi.² 'Punjabi literature' has to be conceptualized as including all literature of Punjab, whatever