

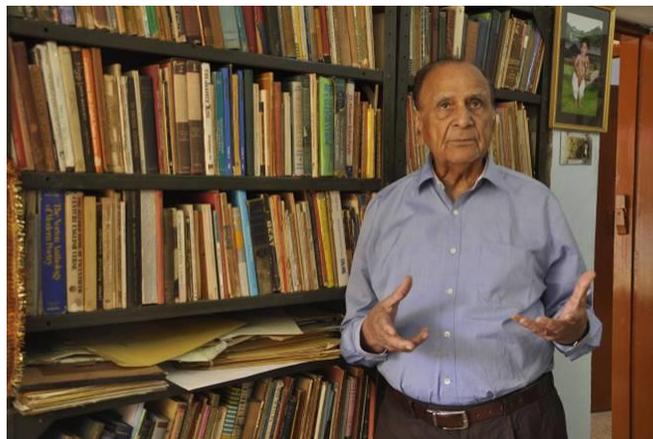
Rough Passage from Motherland to Other Land: A Study on Shiv K Kumar's Select Poems

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Abstract

The prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award recipient, Shiv K Kumar is a *protean* writer who stamped his name in all genres of literature. Being a victim of partition between India and Pakistan in 1947, he had the first-hand knowledge of the sufferings of people who were exiled from their homeland. His well-known novel *A River with Three Banks* and some of his poems express the sufferings of the refugees and the pain of partition. After a few years of his migration from Delhi to Lahore, he went to Cambridge to pursue his doctorate under the guidance of David Daiches. He couldn't stay in the lands of Britain peacefully. He had a constant urge to return to his native soil. This paper focuses on the select poems of Shiv K Kumar that expatiates the sufferings of the refugees and his uncongenial days in Cambridge.

Key Words: Shiv K Kumar, Poems, Partition, Refugees, Suppression, Identity, Exile, Pain, Suffering



Shiv K. Kumar

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Shiv. K Kumar, Akademi Winner

During a visit to Poland in the year 1983, Pope John Paul II stated that “I kiss the soil as if I placed a kiss on the hands of a mother, for the homeland our earth mother”. A motherland is not just a place but one's feeling, emotion and memories are intertwined with it and even Elysium cannot replace it. Shiv. K Kumar, a notable Post-Colonial Indian English writer who got

Sahitya Akademi Award for his work *Trapfalls in the Sky*, has hands-on experience of exile since he himself was an immigrant once. In an interview, while answering a question, what prompted him to write a partition novel, *River with Three Banks*, he said

The reason is very simple. I myself am a migrant from Pakistan. I was born in Lahore and I migrated to Delhi in 1947 when the communal holocaust was at its worst. You know, every Punjabi writer has to get the trauma of the partition out of his system sooner or later. (219)

Writing Is Impossible Without the Experience of Some Kind of Exile

Julia Kristeva, once an exile herself believes writing is impossible without the experience of some kind of exile (7). Shiv. K Kumar had undergone many pains and sufferings while exiling from Lahore to Delhi and he had witnessed the sufferings of other exiles too. In his novel *A River with Three Banks* and some poems like “Refugees”, “A Tibetan woman in Delhi Pavement”, “O! Delhi”, he portrayed the sufferings and pain of those refugees. In 1970s, George Steiner says, “the 20th century is the age of refugees”, thinking of last century’s huge number of exiles, refugees, immigrants and expatriate – victims of wars or dictatorships, of genocides and poverty (1). Steiner’s words are not an exaggeration, and Kumar uses literature as a medium to explore the pains and sufferings of refugees. Kumar includes two poems under the same title “Refugees”. One poem appears in the anthology *Cobwebs in the Sun* and other is included in his collection *Trapfalls in the sky*. Both the poems clearly express the physical pain and mental agony of the refugees.

Refugees

The poem “Refugees”, included in the anthology *Cobwebs in the Sun* is a pithy verse written in plangent tone, expresses the pathetic condition of the immigrants. The poem personifies the motherland of the refugees as ‘secure walls’ to exhibit the comfort and security one enjoys in one’s own country. He compares the alien land to bare skies to epitomize the vulnerable condition of the emigrants. The alien land is not going to roll out red carpet to the refugees instead it will besiege them with too many rude questions. Due to migration, the health and wealth condition of the emigrants starts to deteriorate,

From secure walls
to bare skies –
the snail’s way
through the arid zones
of aching slime to the alien
lands of rude questionings
The Hiroshima faces, skull-thin,
eat shadow at noon. (1-8)

The spring season is no more a springing season for the immigrants. The land of the refugees becomes dry which favours only the cactus and hence the fertile land becomes a futile land in which no flowers, trees or human being can subsist.

This year the spring’s miscarriage
disgorged a still-born
Only the Cactus survives -- (9-11)

The poem “Refugees” subsumed under the title *Trapfalls in the Sky* is the reiteration of the condition of immigrants. It gives an account of how they move from their homeland to other land. The migration is not a whole-souled act but they are coerced to move, so they limp throughout the way. They move slowly and unsteadily because their aching heart and mind pull down the movement of the footsteps

Between the nest’s gloved warmth
and the vision of a perch
beyond the river-bend
they limp through dark spaces (1-4)

The way they pass through is referred as dark spaces. Customarily ‘dark’ is a synonym of fear, mystic and dismal. They feel a kind of insecurity in their minds, so the poet is very particular in using the word ‘dark spaces’.

Minds of Refugees During Their Migration from Their Homelands

During their migration from their homeland the minds of the refugees are filled with nostalgia for their motherland. The term ‘ancestral memories’ refers the nostalgic mood of the emigrants. Kumar’s way of presenting the ‘milestones’ as ‘tombstones’ simply portrays the condition of the exiles.

Blinkered like yoked bulls,
burdened with ancestral memories,
they trudge on, counting the milestones
which look like maimed stones (5-8)

Forsaken Beach

The poet compares the tired faces of the exiles to a forsaken beach. The uncertain and aimless future of the refugees is represented as, “under each footfall, the sands slither / into holes- dots and dashes-” (13-14). they feel a kind of nothingness in their life. Bijay Kumar Das in his book *Shiv K. Kumar as a Post-colonial Poet* says that in “Refugees”, “Kumar reflects on the miserable condition of the refugees and bring home the plight in the changing situation”. The Poem, “A Tibetan Refugee Woman in a Delhi Pavement” explores the excruciating exile of a Tibetan refugee woman and her state of destituteness. The conflict between Tibet and China, arouse in 1959 when China wants to keep Tibet under its rule and invaded it. Even though in no way Tibet is linked with China in cultural or traditional ground, it infringes it. After 1959, with the permission of then Prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, HH Dalai lama and several Tibetans reached India as refugees.

Refugee Women

The poet begins with the description about the physical condition of the refugee woman whose body is very soft by nature, turns hard like a black stone. Kumar is very particular in using the colour ‘black’. Among many gemstones, black gemstone, Tourmaline is a high-quality stone and the hardness level of that black Tourmaline is 7 to 7.5 according to Mohs scale which is considered as one among the hardest stones and black is generally compared with mourning and sorrow, so the poet personifies the hard skin of the Tibetan refugee to black stone.

Your body has hardened

into black stone.
Lice creep through the sparse
crop of your singed hair
Looking for terrafirma. (1-5)

The poverty of the refugees is expressed by the poet as
The only thing not for sale
are the sombre beads of your eyes
and the onyx amulet
on your left arm. (9-12)

Due to migration and poverty there are a lot of wrinkles in her hands. For the sake of survival, she sells the things like jades, mongas and rubies which are as hard as black stone and her body. “A wrinkled hand caresses / tiny pyramids of Jades, mongas, / rubies ... (13-15).

A Member of the Diasporic School

Shiv. K Kumar is one of the important members of the diasporic school. Like many Indian writers like Sarojini Naidu, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Khushwant Singh, and Gayathri Spivak etc., he went to overseas to pursue his studies. He did his PhD in Cambridge University, London. While his study there, he was not happy. He had a constant urge to return to his native land. In West, he witnessed a kind of suppressing attitude of the whites who still thinks themselves as leaders. In his poem “Heathrow Airport: Immigration check post”, he talks about the British officers who subdue the immigrants.

Hegemonic Attitudes

The opening lines of the poem clearly explores the hegemonic attitude of the British towards Indians and other immigrants. The condition of the immigrant check post is described by the poet as follows

The white raven, perched on a high
Stool behind his magic book
can caw off the names
of all your ancestors
like the panda of the Ganges bank. (5-9)

In the Poem “A Letter from New York” he mentions his life in New York as follows
Pardon my long silence
or blame, if you like, the thermostat
in my inverted man hole
on the ninth floor (1-4)

He states that his life in New York is an inverted life style he also says that “Here I live in a garbage can” (6). The unsatisfactory life of Kumar is revealed in this poem. All the poems of Shiv K. Kumar depicts the agonies, trauma and pain of the emigrants in the form of words. Hence the above poems written by Shiv K. Kumar are the archetypes of exile literature.

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