
CAPITALISM AND COOLITUDE: IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES IN ANDREW SUKNASKI'S POEM "THE GOLD MOUNTAIN"

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Abstract

Canada is a kaleidoscope of divergent nationalities and cultures. This *mélange* of cultures, the crisis of multiculturalism, the marginalized existence of native and immigrant cultures got reflected in the Canadian literary mirror. Andrew Suknaski is an Ukrainian Canadian poet of the twentieth century. His poems are innovative for its experimental tone and techniques. His poems also deal with realistic narrations about the native and immigrant cultures. *The Land They Gave* (1982), *Wood Mountain Poems* (1976) and *The Ghosts Call You Poor* (1978) are his most popular poems. Suknaski's poem "The Gold Mountain" with its lucid diction and realistic imagery emphasizes the hostile conditions suffered by the immigrants in the foreign land. The Gold Mountain in the poem refers to Canada. The poem focuses on the plight of the Chinese immigrants who migrated to Canada to work as labourers on the construction of rail road. Globalization and immigrations provide a fertile ground for the capitalist economy to flourish. Capitalism is concerned only in increasing production by reducing its economic output in the form of labour and the same mechanism is exercised on the Chinese labourers immigrated to Canada. "The Gold Mountain" portrays how the dreams of Chinese immigrants are being shattered because of the capitalist exploitations by the authorities.

Keywords: Capitalism, Diaspora, Exploitation, Immigrants, Labour, Migration.

Canada, a nation with unique geographical and cultural landscapes has a versatile symphony of poets, novelists and essayists. A *mélange* of literary voices- of the natives, immigrants and of the travelers from Canada has been recognized worldwide. Andrew Suknaski is an Ukrainian Canadian poet. He was born to the parents who were second wave immigrants settled near Wood Mountain. His name is etched with the names of the avant-garde poets of twentieth century like Robert Kroetsch and Eli Mandel. Suknaski occupied a prominent position in the Canadian literary history with his experimental poems. "Clearly, he was experimenting with radical new ways of writing and disseminating poetry in order to escape- both literally and metaphorically- the confines of modernist poetic tradition" (Grekul 91). *The Land They Gave* (1982), *Wood Mountain Poems* (1976) and *The Ghosts Call You Poor* (1978) are his most popular poems along with some exquisitely crafted visual poems. "The Gold Mountain" highlights the miserable plight of the immigrant Chinese Canadian labourers.

In the poem, the poet details how decades before, the Chinese people migrated to Canada in search of a lucent future. The 'coolies' in the poem refer to indentured labourers transported from China to another nations. This term is considered as derogatory in many nations but nowadays it is considered as inoffensive in South Asia, where the term usually means labourers or porters (In India). Khal Torabully, a famous Mauritian poet has introduced the term 'coolitude' to suggest the cultural interactions and migrations of the coolie Diasporas. The labourers who could only get meager wages in their homeland couldn't save up enough to meet their basic needs. Their wages were not enough for them to buy a piece of land to live or to walk in freedom. Then they heard of the gold mountains (Canada). Here significance of the gold mountain can be assumed literally and metaphorically. It refers to a symbol of hope and immense wealth. The migrants may have imagined a far-off land which will alleviate all their poverty. They imagined that they could work hard in this far-of land, were more wages are paid and could return to their native land after amassing the wealth necessary to buy a piece of land in their homeland. They assumed that a five years hard work on the new rail road will provide them with sufficient money to accomplish their dreams. So, they set off to Canada carrying with them a luggage of dreams and hopes.

But once they reached the land, their dreams suffered a setback. On arrival/ the coolie found the rules were already made/ contracts stipulating. (Suknaski 75). Severe restrictions were imposed upon what they were paid. They were forced to pay taxes and are persuaded to buy food from the company owned areas. "...buy your oil and rice in the company store/ or else..."/ the storekeeping gougers inflating prices daily/ as the coolies' expense list grew (Suknaski 75). Thus their payment was being surveilled by their authorities. Huge chunks of their salaries were retrieved into the government's or company's treasury by one way or the other. As a consequence, the coolies were left without any savings. And the coolies paid and paid/ savings here/ and there/ till scurvy took its toll (Suknaski 75). What left after all the cuttings were not even enough for their livelihood. Their dreams were shattered and their hopes were forced into the burning pyre. "...till the long workless winters sapped savings/ to nothing/ until the dreams grew tired/ of the cold/ and its chattering teeth" (Suknaski 76). The poet describes how even the geographic landscape of Canada acts as a villain to the immigrants.

They were trapped in the land in such a way that they couldn't save enough money even to return to their mother land. Similar to many of the immigrants they also existed in a liminal state- in which they aspired to move out of the foreign nation- to return back to their homeland. But unfortunately they were nailed in the alien land. "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said 173). They could neither assimilate into the culture of the foreign land nor could move out of the

land to freedom. Thus those who came to the land for a temporary existence were trapped in the land for generations. They like other migrant counterparts across the world especially similar to the French Canadians were neither titled as Chinese nor as Canadian, but as a sandwiched version of two- the Chinese-Canadians. They belonged to two nations and two cultures. But even after the generations, they couldn't escape from their hybrid existence. Even though they are the citizens of Canada, they are not titled as Canadians, but as Chinese-Canadians. The poet doesn't details this hybrid experience of migrants that will shroud the generations in the future also. He frames his verse in such a way so as to effectively convey how the dreams of the Chinese migrants are deferred as such narrations about them are on the verge of losing into oblivion. "...Something very old speaks in the language/ of unimaginable silence/ something stepped in the whole earth's pain/ wedged between stone" (Suknaski 76). Suknaski envisions how the Chinese immigrants got settled in Canada and wipes out the dust smeared in the memory of their ancestors, who were trapped in the alien land. These ancestors who were coolies remained poor through their lives and even for generations due to the illegal system of capitalist exploitation.

This is not a unique phenomenon, but a universal system faced by majority of the diasporic people. Suknaski's poem echoes Lekshmi Gill's poem "A letter to a Prospective migrant" in which she says that Canada is not a country for immigrants. "This is no cotton candy country/ no penny arcade;" (Gill 78). These people are usually deemed as the racial 'other'. In the contemporary scenario also many people therefore is part of an imagined land where their ancestors lived once, which many of them haven't even visited and also of another land in which they were born and brought up. Thus being part of a land and excluded from it simultaneously. This was the case with most of the labour migrants across the world, though the scenario has changed nowadays. The poet explicitly states that many of them migrated to Canada to put an end to their hardships or to buy a piece of land in their homeland. This raises pertinent questions regarding the concept of nation. Even when many of these labourers are devoid of a piece of physical landscape, they wanted to return back. They were devoid of a sense of belonging in the foreign nation. Because many set off to Canada expecting a return to their homeland in the future and all these expectations shattered after being hit on the hard wall of strict immigrant rules carved by capitalism and monopoly.

Thus the cruel exploitation of the immigrant labourers is aptly captured in the poem. The strategies adopted by the authorities were cunning and cold blooded. They seem to put forward the capitalist intentions and motives. Encouraging Immigrant labourers is a strategy of capitalism as immigrant labourers play a major role in surpassing both boundaries and wealth. The authorities want the labourers to remain in a perpetual state of poverty, without land or money as this will increase the chances of getting cheap labour easily. "The capitalist, it seems, therefore, buys their labor with money. They sell him their labor for money. But this is merely the appearance. In reality what they sell to the capitalist for money is their labor power" (Marx, 678). Capitalism ensures maximum work for minimum wages. "Reducing labour costs, a key aim of capitalists at all times, can be achieved by paying lower wages" (Selfa and Helen 7). The hard

earned money of the coolies was extracted by the authorities by imposing rules, which always had the tempo of a warning or threat. Thus a labour aristocracy takes shape and the coolies were deprived of even their basic rights. Neither the labourers were provided with enough money nor were they allowed to use it freely. Thus the coolies were suppressed and tortured by a dominating authority.

Such systems of power exist in most of the societies across the world. Suknaski's poem is not only a remembrance of atrocities suffered by immigrant labourers in the past but it persuades the readers to ponder about the contemporary situation of immigrant labours also. Humans and their physical or mental powers are used and abused by the authorities for development, by not even paying a decent remuneration for them. Increased unemployment in the homeland may force many of the immigrants to continue in this system bearing all the tortures. Such scenarios exist everywhere even in the midst of certain laws and policies framed to help the immigrant labourers. Such brutal tortures and exploitations of the labourers is a matter of concern and should be protested against.

The poem has a versatile pattern without a full stop. The poem in this sense flows. Such a flow of the poem reminds the readers of the waves that may have brought the immigrants to Canada. It is also symbolic of dreams that remained in their hearts without getting fulfilled. The poem devoid of a full stop indicates the ensuing hardship of the immigrant labourers across nations. Even though the poet doesn't directly indicate the hybrid existence of the immigrants in the alien nations, this patterning of lines in the poem evoke the continuing conflicts an immigrant has to face in one form or another (race, class, nationality or colour) in a foreign land. The poem ends by the repeating line "the ghosts call you poor..." The ghost can be considered as a metaphor for past or it can be the long lost ancestors who lived and died in extreme poverty. The ghost calls the hostile nation and its people as "poor", as they were drenched in the lack of humanity. The poet thus using his poignant narrative draws the readers' attention to the plight of the immigrant labourers and carves a seat for the Chinese immigrants in the literary landscape of Canada.

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