

The Year of the Runaways Study Guide

The Year of the Runaways by Sunjeev Sahota

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Sahota, Sunjeev. *The Year of the Runaways*. Picador, 2015.

The novel is told in past tense. It is divided into four sections titled after the four seasons and describing the events in the characters' lives during each season—hence the title, *Year of the Runaways*. The structure also includes three novella-length chapters detailing the prior lives of the characters.

Narinder is Randeep's "visa wife" an Indian British citizen who has married Randeep for one year so he can live in England on a marriage visa. Narinder lives in a flat in Sheffield, and Randeep lives nearby in a home he shares with eleven laborers, two of whom are Avtar and Tochi.

Tochi is a 'chamaar,' or member of the lowest caste in the Indian caste system. While in India, Tochi lived in poverty, struggled to find work and faced discrimination because of his caste. He worked in the state of Panjab for four years but returned home to be with his father, who had lost both of his arms in a machinery accident and was ill. Tochi earned money for his family as a rickshaw driver until a militant group brutally murdered all of his family members—his parents, brother, and pregnant sister. Tochi then worked in a brick factory for two years and earned enough money to travel to England.

The next chapter describes Avtar and Randeep's lives in India. Avtar worked as a conductor for a train system and was in a secret relationship with Lahkpreet, Randeep's sister. Avtar's friend and fellow conductor, Harbhajan, was addicted to drugs. One day, he drove Avtar to visit Lahkpreet, and crashed the car on the way home. As a result, Avtar lost his job. Avtar had an operation to sell his kidneys and borrowed money in order to obtain a student visa in England.

Randeep was a successful college student in India until he was forced to work a weekend job and a night shift because his father was suffering from dementia and had lost his job. Randeep's academic performance suffered and he returned home when possible to help his father, who once tried to hang himself while Randeep was on an errand. Randeep raped a classmate and was expelled. A lawyer arranged Randeep's visa marriage to Narinder, which allowed him to immigrate to England along with Avtar.

Avtar and Randeep struggled to find employment for months before signing a contract with a group of migrant workers. Randeep moved in with Narinder so he would know the layout of the flat when the immigration inspectors met with them; this would make their marriage appear more legitimate. After they passed the inspection, Narinder made him return to the laborers' home although he wanted to stay with her. Avtar tried to study for his examinations and worked a second job as a security guard. Tochi also found a second job working at his relatives' shop; the relatives urged him to marry a divorced woman named Ruby they knew so he could gain a marriage visa, but he refused because he had lied to his relatives about his caste and didn't want them to find out.



The next chapter described Narinder's life. She grew up as a devout Sikh in Sheffield, England. As a teenager, she met and befriended a girl named Savraj, who worked as a prostitute. Narinder brought her food and money and the two grew close although Narinder's brother, Tejpal, opposed the friendship. When Narinder visited India over the summer, she met Savraj's family and learned that Savraj wanted her to marry her brother, Kavi, so that he would have a visa license. Narinder refused, but when Kavi was later killed trying to immigrate, she agreed to become a visa wife to Randeep, whom she had never met. She left her fiancée, Karam, and moved into her own apartment.

The narrative shifted back to England. Avtar went to London to take his exams so he could retain his student visa; while there, he was threatened by his creditors because he was late on payments. Tochi met Ruby but his relatives discovered that he was a chamaar and forced him to leave their home. Tochi took Avtar's job by offering to work for less pay. Hearing rumors of raids, Tochi moved out of the group home and began inhabiting the apartment underneath Narinder's while Avtar and Gurpreet looked for a new apartment.

Narinder met with her former fiancée, Karam, and told him she would still marry him at the end of the year. Avtar and Randeep looked for new jobs and began stealing and selling chickens, but were caught. The boys' group home was raided, so Avtar, Randeep and Gurpreet moved into Narinder's flat. One day, Gurpreet sexually harassed Narinder and Randeep attacked him. Fearing deportation, the two left an unconscious Gurpreet outside of the surgery door at the local hospital. The next day, an immigration inspector arrived at the flat. Avtar and Randeep went to a van that would take them to work; Avtar cut through the crowd of immigrants and managed to make it onto the van, but Randeep was left behind.

Narinder was hired as a library assistant, but Tejpal later broke into her home and forcibly took her to live with her father. Avtar worked cleaning sewers but eventually grew frustrated by his boss's behavior and escape from the van where he was living, causing an immigration raid. Randeep lived on a bridge and was given food and a phone charger by the gurdwara. Narinder returned home from her father's and asked Tochi for his help finding Randeep before the next immigration inspection. The two began eating dinner together frequently and grew very close, eventually having an emotional conversation about faith and discrimination. Avtar found a job cleaning a nightclub, but one night he destroyed furniture and mirrors inside it. Unable to find a new job, he reunited with Randeep and the two again moved into Narinder's home. Avtar grew very sick and learned that his family had been attacked by his creditors because he was behind on payments; he stole all of Tochi's savings and used the money to pay back his debts. Tochi attacked Avtar, who was hospitalized and operated on. Tochi left for a job in Spain and Randeep divorced Narinder.

In the epilogue, Narinder had never married but had cared for her father, who had suffered a stroke, for ten years. She lived with Tejpal and his wife. Randeep lived with his parents in a brick estate and worked as an assistant manager. Avtar was out of work and married to Lahkpreet. Narinder's father died and she ate lunch with Randeep – the

first time she had seen him since the divorce – then travelled to India to scatter her father's ashes. While in India, she travelled to the shore, where Tochi worked selling souvenirs. She saw Tochi sitting with his wife and children in the audience at a play.

Chapter 1

Summary

Narinder Kaur arrived at Randeep Sanghera's flat in Sheffield, England. Randeep showed her around, telling her that he was lucky to have found this apartment. He showed her the meter for the electricity bill, which she did not understand, and gave her money for the next month. Randeep rode the bus home, masturbated and fell asleep. He woke up and found his roommate, Avtar, drinking from the tap in the kitchen. They talked about one of their other roommates, Gurpreet, who had hit Randeep in the line for the bathroom that morning. Randeep returned to his bed and thought about the note he had left for Narinder, welcoming her to the flat.

Avtar received a phone call and met the caller at the gardens nearby. Bal, the eldest of three brothers sitting inside a BMW, exited the car and took money from Avtar. Bal was agitated throughout the exchange and slapped Avtar before returning to the car. Avtar was quiet because he knew the brothers kept a baseball bat in their car. He returned home and slept for three hours before joining Randeep and their ten other roommates for prayer. All twelve men boarded a bus to go to work. Vinny, their boss and the bus driver, told them the day's job was to begin construction on a hotel site. The men worked until lunchtime, then played a Muslim vs. Sikh cricket match to stay warm. On the bus ride home, the men saw snow falling.

After work, Vinny brought a new worker, named Tochi, to the house and assigned him as Randeep's roommate. They fell asleep without speaking, and Randeep woke up at 3:15 the next morning because it was his shift to make lunch for the work crew. At work, Gurpreet discovered that Tochi was a 'chamaar', a member of an indigenous people who were historically classified as untouchables in India, or the lowest caste on the social caste system. At night Gurpreet decided to go visit prostitutes and told Randeep and Tochi to get groceries. While walking to the store, Tochi saw a police car and hid, revealing that he did not have a visa. Randeep told him that he was in the country on a marriage visa and that Narinder was technically his wife.

At the end of the month, Randeep visited Narinder in her flat. He brought her groceries, more money and an album of doctored photographs; proof of their marriage for official inspections. Narinder became irritated at the photographs, as they showed the couple with their arms around each other, which she believed was too intimate. Randeep warned her of the possibility of immigration raids in which authorities discovered illegal workers living together and she became extremely worried, but he relented and allowed her to remove some of the photographs. After Randeep left, Narinder felt dismayed and prayed for strength. On the other side of town, Randeep replayed their conversation in his head and felt satisfied with it. He asked Tochi if he had any family back home, but Tochi did not respond; he then said that he enjoyed hearing the rain outside, and Tochi agreed.

Analysis

The novel opens with Randeep examining a “green-and-blue map tacked to the wall” (1), and this very first object introduces a key theme: the challenges of separation. Randeep, Narinder, Avtar and Tochi are each living apart from their families, in environments that are completely unfamiliar not only geographically but culturally. England, to them, is not home, but a place to be utilized, a place that serves only one function—to aid their economic advancement. The characters perceive England as industrious and hope to find greater opportunity there, but they are not socially or culturally connected to it. Sanghera emphasizes the businesslike atmosphere of England. “[Avtar] liked this road in the day, a place of business and exchange, a road that seemed to carry on into the hills” (9); Avtar’s respect for the business and exchange aspect of England underscores his desire for economic advancement.

However, Avtar, Tochi, Randeep and even Narinder are forced to live on the outskirts of British society and do not receive the benefits other citizens do. This dichotomy creates an emotional conflict. The characters are unable to decide on a clear motive for their migration. Gurpreet says that the immigrants came to England out of “love for our families” while Avtar argues “we’re doing our duty” (7). In this bleak world, the division between choice and necessity is blurred. Although the characters’ backstories differ, they are all bound by this sense of separation between their identities and the world they now inhabit. They are all conflicted by the necessity of conforming to British society and they simultaneously struggle to determine what that society entails.

From the start, the novel is brutally realistic and focuses on the physical challenges the immigrants face. Avtar receives bodily pain and threats at the hands of relentless creditors. Avtar, Randeep, and Tochi all live in squalid, overcrowded, and illegal conditions. Their work is challenging and tiring. They are almost always cold and exhausted, unaccustomed to British weather and lacking sleep. Yet these very concrete realities produce even more harrowing psychological challenges. Sahota interweaves descriptions of the purely physical with the characters’ emotional reactions, creating a comprehensive picture of the struggles that illegal immigrants face.

The pain and isolation that all four main characters suffer create several emotional effects; primarily, they each suffer from a deep sense of loneliness. Even Randeep and Narinder, bound through marriage, are uncomfortable with each other, as their awkward interactions demonstrate. Randeep and Tochi’s short conversation also demonstrates how uncomfortable they are with each other. After Tochi responds rudely to Randeep’s question, he “looked annoyed with himself” (20). He is not intentionally rejecting attempts to communicate, but does so out of a sense of mistrust.

These brief attempts at communication are unable to provide characters with the relationships they need. Connected to their loneliness is a suppressed desire for intimacy. Separated from their families and friends, the characters struggle to form emotional bonds that approximate those they had attained in India. Randeep attempts to gain Narinder’s trust but fails and satisfies his sexual desires alone. Tochi tells



Narinder he wants to be in her bed out of an angry attempt to corrupt the idea of intimacy. Gurpreet visits prostitutes, unable to find true emotional connections. Randeep, too, told Avtar about a job “during a low moment, needing solidarity” (7). Failing to make a connection through other means, he attempts to bond over their single shared priority, employment. Through the stiff interactions between the primary characters combined with insight into their emotional states, Sahota emphasizes that they are only connected through the bond of immigration.

Perhaps the strongest theme in this chapter, and throughout the book, is the persistence of immigrants in the face of harsh demands. “Keep working hard and one day we’ll be the bosses,” Avtar says, demonstrating an optimistic mindset (18). In a conversation with Narinder, Randeep says one of his goals is to travel the world. These lofty goals are juxtaposed with the harsh daily life of the immigrants. Each immigrant wants to earn a better life and they are willing to endure squalid conditions in order to reach their goals.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Avtar refers to Gurpreet as a “sentimental creep” after Gurpreet says he immigrated due to love for his family (7)? How do sentimentality and duty relate for these characters?

Discussion Question 2

What does the falling snow mean for the immigrants? How does snow function in the novel in terms of metaphor?

Discussion Question 3

Consider the release of information, the way in which Sahota reveals details about his characters, in this chapter. How does he create suspense?

Vocabulary

vouchers, vague, solidarity, sophisticated, corrugated, marooned, methodically, dungarees, riled, plashing

Chapter 2

Summary

Tochi was seventeen and had worked in the Indian state of Panjab for four years. He told the owner of the household where he was a hired hand that he must resign because his father was ill and had lost both his arms. He rode the bus all day and slept in a hotel at night. While waiting for the next bus, he played cards with a little boy, whose mother took him away when Tochi said his full name, revealing that he was a 'chamaar.' After several bus rides, Tochi arrived home and found his father sleeping on the floor of their one-room house. He walked up the lane and found Kishen, the tailor, who told him there was no available work in the village or the surrounding area. Then he saw his fourteen-year-old brother, Dalbir, walking down the street carrying grain and realized that his family had pulled Dalbir out of school. The two returned home and their mother told Tochi that his father's arms had been cut off in a machine accident. Palvinder, Tochi's sister, arrived and helped his mother start a cooking fire.

The next day, Tochi joined Dalbir in harvesting wheat and collecting water buffalo milk for his mother and sister to sell in the market. Then Tochi walked two miles to the nearest village and asked for work at a large home, but was turned down. The following day, Tochi tried again at the next-closest village, and a woman told him to enter the house and wait for the owner to return, but sexually abused him. Afterward, Tochi continued into the village and was told to register at the dhak-khana, a panel that would provide him with work if it became available. Tochi was unable to bribe the man at the dhak-khana to give him an advance on his wages, so he left the village. On the way home, he slipped in a mud pit and cleaned himself off in the back of the liquor store. Tochi then went to a coal station to attempt to steal a rickshaw, but was shouted at by the men congregated at the station. Finally, a man named Ashok offered to meet him tomorrow and sell him a rickshaw. The next day, Ashok sold Tochi the rickshaw despite his brother-in-law's protests when he learned that Tochi could not afford to pay them at the time but would send them a portion of his future wages. Tochi brought the rickshaw home to his family, and Dalbir said he hadn't seen their mother so happy in a long time. Over the next few weeks, Tochi began driving a wealthy woman he referred to as Madam around the city and soon gained many more customers. Tochi learned that his sister Palvinder had been matched in an arranged marriage. Soon after, he visited Babaji, the wealthy landowner whom his family used to work for, and explained that the family of Palvinder's future spouse was demanding a large dowry. Babaji denounced the arranged marriage system but did nothing to help. Days later, Tochi and Madam were caught in a traffic jam caused by a member of the militant group Maheshwar Sena, who was promising to start a violent war against the Maoist, or Communist, Indian government forces. After the interruption, Tochi dropped Madam off and visited his co-worker Susheel, Palvinder's arranged spouse. Tochi exchanged a letter from Susheel to Palvinder. Over the following days, the political violence in the city grew more extreme and Tochi's family and customers urged him not to drive on the more dangerous streets. On the Hindu festival day of Navatri, Tochi stayed home and worked in the fields



because the Maheshwar Sena had been threatening to hurt the chamaars. Three days later, the rainy season began, so he returned to the city and earned triple the normal fare driving people through the floods. He saw no sign of the Maheshwar Sena, and a friend told him they had spent Navatri getting drunk, although Tochi also heard rumors that three men had been killed.

Palvinder was married and soon became pregnant. On the day she went into labor, Tochi was sent into town to get the midwife. He was unable to find her and was instead met with carnage, fires and destruction. There was a rebellion occurring against the Maoists, who were rumored to have dumped Brahmin bodies into the village with a sheet saying Happy Day of the Pure Anniversary. Unable to find the midwife amidst the chaos, Tochi quickly returned home to try to protect his family. Babaji called and said the world was going crazy and he must bring the family to his house. Tochi boarded the family onto his rickshaw and they successfully left the village by pretending to be part of a higher caste. Then they drove into the woods, where they were met by a group of rebels. Tochi and his siblings left the rickshaw, but their parents refused. Tochi attempted to pull them out as the rickshaw was saturated in gasoline and bursts into flames.

In the next section, Tochi had been working in a brick factory for two years and was finally able to return home. He took the bus to his village and entered his home, where nothing was left—he had burned all the objects—except for Palvinder's chunni, which she had left behind in the rush to leave. Tochi washed his back, which was so scarred he could not feel the water. The next morning, Babaji came to Tochi's home and tried to convince him not to spend all his savings on a plane ride to a foreign country, but told him to consult Mr. Thipureddy. Tochi visited Mr. Thipureddy several times over the next ten days and the two arranged his airplane trip to Turkey and subsequent truck and ferry rides to France. Mr. Thipureddy's niece accompanied Tochi to the airport and explained the free food on the flight and the escalators; a woman named Annie cleared him past customs despite his lack of documentation. On the ferry, Tochi met a Turkish man named Deniz who convinced him that London had better work options, and after two months in Paris the man arranged a boat ride for Tochi to London. Once in London, Deniz helped Tochi get a job at a restaurant with two bosses named Marat and Sukhjit. He works alongside a mentally challenged seventeen-year-old named Munna. One day, Sukhjit's nephew, Charandeep – who demanded to be nicknamed Chico – visited and mocked Tochi. Tochi slept on the kitchen floor for the first three weeks of his job, but once his suitcase was stolen he moved in with Ardashir, another worker at the restaurant. On Christmas Day, Tochi told Ardashir he was staying in England until he'd earned "enough" (89) and Ardashir responded that he had been in England for thirty-three years and still hadn't earned enough. On New Year's Eve, Tochi worked past midnight while Sukhjit drank alcohol and celebrated. The next day, Ardashir's friend offered him and Tochi a new job, and they accepted.

Analysis

Tochi's backstory is characterized by the severe prejudices that he faces daily. The Indian caste system is a complex social hierarchy that dictates many educational and employment outcomes. As a result, India is largely a socially immobile country and some groups face intense discrimination. The term 'chamaar' is a derogatory term for those that the speaker considers to be of a lower caste.

As a chamaar, Tochi is forced into deference towards members of higher castes; Sahota demonstrates that he is effectively powerless due to ingrained patterns of social discrimination.

Sahota demonstrates the relentless nature of the prejudice by inserting it into each step of Tochi's journey to find work. When he travels home, he is discriminated against by a child, demonstrating how discrimination begins early; Sahota emphasizes the youth of the "boy" (28), juxtaposing his prejudice with the innocence the reader would expect from a child. Furthermore, Tochi does nothing to protest when the boy demands his full name; Tochi lacks power even compared to a young child of a higher caste, underscoring the role that discrimination plays in his life.

This trend is emphasized further when Tochi returns home and is sexually abused. When the woman tells Tochi to enter her home, he is hesitant until she adds "Things easily go missing from these houses...I wouldn't want anyone in this village to think you weren't trustworthy" (38). Tochi recognizes that he lacks both power and credibility, and is thus manipulated into the situation. He again makes no attempt to protest because his caste removes his power to assert himself as an individual.

When Tochi gains the rickshaw, he feels "almost criminal driving home" (45). In a socially immobile environment, he does not expect to improve his situation and feels guilty because of it. His passengers are also conscious of his caste and feel guilty because of it, yet make no attempt—and see no need—to speak against societal injustices. Madam, his primary passenger, is often uncomfortable around him and told him she sold her private car "to help the poor in society instead" (50).

This pattern exemplifies Sahota's technique of building tension through an escalating pattern of similarly intentioned actions. Each of these cases of discrimination build a sense of mounting desperation and despair, creating a figurative wall of oppression that traps Tochi. The pattern culminates with an explosive act of violence—the brutal murder of Tochi's family—demonstrating that comparatively subtle acts of discrimination can quickly turn physical.

Sahota also emphasizes how ingrained such discrimination is and simultaneously highlights its unjust nature by focusing solely on describing the prejudiced acts, devoting virtually no text to Tochi's emotional reactions. When a mother takes her child away from Tochi upon learning of his caste, when Tochi loses work due to his caste, and even when a speaker threatens against Tochi's caste in the square, Tochi only observes; such lack of emotional texture indicates a deep resignation on his part. Due to the

relentless volume of discrimination that Tochi has experienced, he largely internalizes his reactions and prevents himself from becoming overly angry. This is a coping mechanism; if Tochi reacted angrily to each injustice he encountered, he would be unable to find employment. Although “anger flamed inside” (55) him when he saw the Maheshwar Sena promising a purge of his caste, he heeded to his passenger’s instructions to leave instead of speaking against it.

This technique is also a continuation of Sahota’s stylistic choice to focus heavily on physical realities in order to create a clear and jarring picture of the challenges his characters’ face; they are bound by systematic forces that they have little control over.

Yet Tochi does have moments of rebellion; Sahota intersperses these reflections into the text to hint their presence to the reader while simultaneously depicting Tochi’s necessary coping. Tochi continued driving his rickshaw even after the Maheshwar Sena threatened violence because of “a desire to be allowed a say in his life” (58). Yet the sense of duty that has permeated all his actions causes him to question even this declaration of self-determination; “He wondered if this was selfish; whether, in fact, they were right and he should simply recognize his place in this world” (58).

Even the objects in Tochi’s home serve to reinforce this division between resigned acceptance and repressed anger. Near “a glass of whisky on an upturned bucket” (31), his father’s sustenance, is a shelf containing “a picture of a white girl with straw-coloured hair hugging a dog in front of a thatched cottage” (29), the English inscription of which Tochi can’t read. This photograph, along with objects like “a gold pen...an address book still in its plastic wrapping” (29) symbolize escapism and unattainable hopes. The family implicitly recognizes that in order to break out of the institutionalized discrimination they face, they must leave the physical area they inhabit.

Tochi’s decision to immigrate represents a breaking point in this conflict between independence and resignation. It is also important to note that the death of Tochi’s family drastically altered his motivations: without his family, he is no longer bound either economically or emotionally to the land he grew up on. While many immigrants choose to immigrate in order to gain financial security for their families, Tochi has no such need. Therefore, by immigrating, he is attempting to escape his homeland and has little intention to return. Tochi recognizes that he will not only be socially immobile but physically unsafe as long as he remains in Panjab. Furthermore, he also lost his faith, which served as his second connection to his homeland; as the granthi, a religious leader, stated, Tochi hadn’t been seen praying since the death of his family.

Tochi’s determination is a result of another major theme of the novel—the precedence of family over the individual, and the sacrifices that duty to family entails. Tochi’s life is governed by his need to provide financially for his family, who rely on him completely and often emphasize the necessity of his contribution. “You need to go back and work” (31) Tochi’s father said while he lay crippled and drunk on a mattress; “We need a man in the house” (31) his mother added. Both used the word “need,” dictating in clear terms the responsibility placed upon Tochi.



When Tochi lost his family, he lost this governing force in his life. His decision to move abroad is an attempt to gain new focus and freedom in this shapeless life. As the plane took off, “the ground tilted away and the dark sky opened, beckoned, and a sense of being freed, of freedom, poured beautifully through him” (75). As the physical space between Tochi’s trauma and his future widened, he felt that he was gaining more control over his life. Tochi’s sense of duty is also reflected in his actions and words, which are single-mindedly focused on his next objective. Although his journey is highly difficult and roundabout, he remains fixated on his goal.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Sahota chose not to describe Tochi’s two years working in a brick factory?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Tochi’s rickshaw beyond its economic benefits?

Discussion Question 3

How would you characterize Madame’s attitude towards Tochi?

Vocabulary

fodder, mellowing, dwindled, nearhand, canisters, materialized, petrol, clucked, dredging, deposited, seductive, tugboat, saffron

Chapter 3

Summary

Tochi asked for a job at a local shop but was turned away due to the village he'd come from. Outside, the shop Narinder—who Tochi didn't know—told him he had been treated unfairly and urged him to go to the gurdwara, the Sikh place of worship. Tochi, offended, told her he needed “a woman's bed” (93) and she left. The next night, Tochi found a job cleaning and shelving at a shop.

In the next section, Narinder's landlord attempted to raise her rent, but she successfully shamed him into changing his mind by saying, “I might be your tenant but I'm also your friend and neighbor” (97). She reflected on her immigration interview in which she pretended to be in love with Randeep, using doctored photographs and love letters to prove her case. Narinder worked at the gurdwara, and one day she saw Randeep there. He offered to visit more often, and she told him it made no difference.

The next section shifted perspective to Avtar, who counted his money and realized he was still unable to save enough. He reduced his meal payments by half and pledged to eat half the normal amount of food.

Analysis

The title of this chapter is key to understanding its narrative purpose. “Settling In” implies that the characters are becoming accustomed to the major characteristics of their environment: the fact that Sahota focused on challenges that the immigrants faced reveals that those challenges are an integral part of their new lives. This chapter also neatly shifted perspectives between each section, allowing the reader to clearly see the different sets of challenges that each character faces and how their separate narratives interweave.

Tochi faces another challenge in addition to the difficulties of immigrant life: caste prejudices in the Indian community carried over into England. Even poverty and a new geography do not create a common bond strong enough to erase ingrained discrimination. Tochi has become accustomed to discrimination; when Narinder spoke out against it, Tochi interpreted her reaction as mocking. He thinks she has “no idea how she might be misconstrued” (93) and finds her naivety repulsive after having endured so much discrimination. After facing evil at the hands of others, he is unable to digest kindness and considers it offensive. His response is an almost instinctive protective reaction—he wanted to “hurt her the way he was hurting” (93). He hopes to destroy her innocence because he cannot accept it.

Narinder's moral sense extends beyond her sympathy for Tochi: she crusades against injustice whenever she perceives it. When she dissuaded her landlord from increasing her rent, she remembered someone told her “that when she spoke she made people



feel naked against the world” (97). Narinder is representative of pure truth and is a morally guiding force within the ambiguities of the novel.

Meanwhile, Randeep and Avtar’s desperation increased as their situations become more and more challenging. Avtar again demonstrates the theme of self-sacrifice as he pledges to reduce his food in order to support his family—family honor takes precedence even over physical necessities.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss possible motivations for Narinder’s marriage to Randeep. Do you believe that her impending marriage to Karamjeet played a role in her decision?

Discussion Question 2

How do Randeep and Avtar differ in this chapter? How are they united?

Discussion Question 3

How are Tochi’s experiences in England shaped by his backstory? Why do you think Sahota chose to place Tochi’s backstory before this chapter?

Vocabulary

seeped, enshrouded, manoeuvred, surmised, compact, nib, inscribed, distributed

Chapter 4

Summary

The chapter introduced “Avtar Nijar, former student and now the youngest conductor employed by BUTA Travel” (102). Avtar visited his father, a silks salesperson, and went home to his mother – who was twenty years younger than his father – and brother, Navjoht. After taking a nap, Avtar joined his family for dinner and then sat on the balcony staring out at the city. Then he secretly met his girlfriend, Lakhpreet Sanghera, Randeep’s sister, in the bell tower of a cement factory. He described his first meeting with Lakhpreet, in which rudely told her that he was from a shareef, or “respectable” (106), family, then received a phone call from her promising she did not care.

The morning after receiving his wages, Avtar walked with his friend and fellow conductor Harbhajan, who stole a businessman’s cell phone left at the marketplace. Avtar protested that Harbhajan “could buy ten of those” (109) but Harbhajan ignored him. At home, Avtar’s mother quizzed Navjoht on mathematics questions. Over dinner, Avtar tried to convince his mother to let him work abroad. His mother said no and added that the Sangheras were moving to a different city tomorrow and implied that she knew about Avtar and Lakhpreet’s relationship. That night, Avtar and Lakhpreet made a scared promise in the temple to remain faithful to each other.

The next section shifted perspective to Randeep, whose father had locked himself in the bathroom prior to the move. Randeep was irritated by Lakhpreet’s clothing from the scared ritual she had just completed with Avtar, not knowing its purpose.

The perspective shifted back to Avtar, who was in an office talking to his boss Nirmal–Harbhajan’s father – and had to cancel his trip to see Lakhpreet because he had to work an extra shift that weekend. Harbhajan arrived in a motorbike and argued with his father. That week, he was sullen at work and hit the train alarm at an unnecessary time. He also demanded that Avtar accompany him to a party next week. The party was actually just a bar. Harbhajan left Avtar at the bar and went upstairs to use drugs. Avtar conversed with a woman who mocked him for his commitment to conservative values. Finally, Avtar dragged Harbhajan away and carried him home on the motorbike. When Harbhajan arrived home, he became extremely aggressive towards his father. Nirmal drove Avtar home and said that he “did the right thing. Under the circumstances” (122). At work, Sreenath, a fellow driver, complained about how Harbahajan was stealing company funds to buy drugs. Avtar angrily confronted Harbhajan, but accepted his offer to drive to visit Lakhpreet. The boys drove the four hours to Lakhpreet’s new home, and she had lunch with Avtar, mentioning his possible move to America, while Harbhajan left to find drugs. Harbhajan crashed the car on the way home and injured his ankle, and upon return Nirmal told Avtar that Harbhajan had bought the car with stolen funds. Avtar was dismissed from his job; returning home, his mother told him that his brother Navjhot had scored in the top five percent on his examinations.

The next chapter returned to Randeep, who said that his family moved frequently due to his father's job postings. Lahkpreet questioned Randeep about the availability of jobs abroad, but could not attain an answer since she would not say she was asking on behalf of Avtar. Randeep went to university during the week and visited his family on weekends. At university, he developed a crush on Jaytha, a girl living in his building. One weekend, Randeep's father – who had been suffering panic attacks and showing signs of dementia – went on a walk with Randeep, during which Randeep lied that he and Jaytha had been dating for a month. When they encountered a neighbor, Randeep's father became disoriented and grew violent; upon returning home, he screamed and threw a chair at the wall. At the end of the weekend, Randeep returned to college and watched television with Jaytha. The next morning, he received a call from his mother and returned home to meet his father's lawyer, who warned the family that his father's employer may not renew his contract if his erratic behavior continued. Randeep found a job working in an insurance office during weekends, then added another job working at a night processing shift. He failed a test at school and the principal encouraged him to improve his performance, as he was being considered for National Institute of Technology (NIT), a prestigious engineering school. At his night job, Randeep called a customer named Michael in England and befriended him, calling him frequently to see how he was doing. Returning home for a brief leave from school, Randeep handfled his father, who attempted to strangle him.

The next day, his father seemed to have improved and the two played backgammon. Randeep ran an errand and returned to find the door locked. A neighbor opened the door with a crowbar and they found Randeep's father attempting to hang himself. Returning to college, Randeep received a call from Jaytha, and once she came to his room he described the events of the weekend. The two began kissing but when Jaytha did not want to continue, Randeep pushed down her arms and ripped her clothes. His roommate, Abhijeet, entered the room and told him to leave. The next morning, he was summoned to the student services office and expelled because Jaytha had lodged a sexual complaint against him. Randeep was allowed to continue attending school for a week so he could receive his paycheck, but was shoved down the stairs and sworn at by other students. At the end of the week, a group of students bound his ankles and wrists and locked him in a classroom cabinet. When he pounded on the door, the teacher opened it and he fell out in front of the other students.

Avtar and Lahkpreet consulted a lawyer about moving overseas, who advised Avtar to get a student visa. Avtar told his parents that he planned to move to London and they discouraged him. He visited Harbhajan, who had fallen deathly ill due to his drug abuse.

The next section was set six months after Randeep was freed from the cabinet in the classroom. He had written a letter to Jaytha apologizing for his actions and had not told his family the reason for his expulsion. One day, Randeep came home to find his lawyer and a Sikh woman from London, willing to marry him so he could obtain his visa. They were married in a small ceremony in the temple, and she returned home. The lawyer produced wedding cards, a photo album and video from the wedding, and fake love letters, and told him that Avtar was also planning to move overseas and that the boys should travel together.



The next section shifted perspective to Avtar, who had an operation to remove his kidney for money to pay the visa fees. He also borrowed a large sum of money from a creditor known as 'Pocket Bhai,' and made a plan to pay the creditor back at an interest rate resulting in five times the original sum.

At the end of the summer, Avtar and Randeep flew together to England; on the plane, they talked about Randeep's new wife. In England, the boys stayed with Randeep's aunt Massi and her children, Jimmy and Pehn.

Analysis

This chapter examines the social ills plaguing Indian families in more depth and creates a parallel storyline between Avtar and Randeep. Both boys witness someone close to them struggling—Randeep's father in a battle with dementia, Avtar's friend in a battle with drugs—and both react by attempting to avoid and silence the problem. This is partially because drug abuse and mental illness are perceived by Avtar and Randeep, and the larger society they are part of, as private issues, to be resolved by the family. The concept of honor, or the idea that a family must be viewed well publicly, virtually dictates the actions of both boys. To violate a family's honor is to destroy the fabric of the family unit. As such, honor takes precedence over even physical safety; Harbhajan's father refuses to acknowledge Harbhajan's drug problem or stealing of company funds until public awareness forces him to; even Avtar, who has seen physical evidence of Harbhajan's abuse, attempts to overlook the problem by keeping silent about it. Similarly, Randeep's mother goes to great lengths to conceal her husband's illness from neighbors and constantly worries about what others are saying or thinking about the family; her husband's outbreak at work destroys her spirit, and she is further horrified at the prospect of the family's women being forced to work.

Class also plays a role in Avtar's decision. Harbhajan is wealthy and powerful, and Avtar knows that by revealing his knowledge of Harbhajan's addiction he will also implicate himself. In this chapter, one of only two set entirely in India, Sahota is demonstrating the webs of social connection that are prioritized over hard work in deciding economic status. The characters' seek to escape this entrenched system when they immigrate. By devoting much of the text to this theme, Sahota demonstrates that a major goal of the 'background' chapters is to reveal character motivation.

Sahota also argues that those who cannot or choose not to immigrate seek alternative escape routes. For example, Harbhajan seeks an escape through drugs because he is dissatisfied with his life. His resultant path of self-destruction is another, more consequential, method of escaping his life. Harbhajan's drug use helps him to avoid his anger with his father and his career status. Harbhajan's physical and emotional destruction even culminates in him approaching death, emphasizing the severity of his need for escape. Sahota's decision to show Harbhajan's self-destruction is particularly effective because he is richer than the other characters. Harbhajan serves to foreshadow the consequences of wealth and embodies the argument that money alone cannot resolve the characters' issues.

Family honor also serves as the connecting link between the major personal problems depicted in the chapter—drug abuse, sexual abuse, and dementia—and Randeep and Avtar's deep drive to work in order to support their families. The same motivation for concealing issues produces a staggering work ethic. Therefore, Sahota demonstrates that honor is not necessarily a completely problematic concept: it has different results for different characters, depending on both the character's personality and situation. This concept is further demonstrated by the dual perspectives employed in the chapter.

Avtar's social standing is the opposite of Tochi's. He belongs to a shareef family, a noble class. This social rank is obviously beneficial, yet it carries a set of expectations as well. "Sex, as far as Avtar was concerned, was not something boys from respectable families got themselves involved in" (106). Such thinking demonstrates the connection between sex and honor explored in earlier chapters—sex is seen as a largely taboo act, and carries important social implications. When Lahkpreet says she does not care, she is speaking against this set of societally imposed values.

Randeep raping Jaytha suddenly escalates the consequences of the characters' actions. He struggles to rectify an act of pure evil with his perception of himself, which is childlike and morally confused. In an act of moral denial and self-delusion, he is unable to even articulate his actions. "He couldn't quite say it any more strongly, even to himself. It was too adult a crime," (170) he thinks. This is another piece of evidence that, although the characters inhabit a world of adult cruelty and evil, they are innocent and confused in many ways, and they struggle to adapt. This theme is echoed again when Randeep thinks his marriage causes "a strange dissonance, how the bald fact of it made him instantly adult, and yet their handling of it all, of his life, was like a regression to childhood" (184). Sahota uses Randeep and Avtar's body language and physical characteristics to emphasize the division between their attitude and their reality, emphasizing their youthfulness. Their mental attitudes are also innocent: when Avtar goes to the college, for example, he envisions himself being groomed for an employed future, yet his treatment by the worker at the front desk exposes the difficult reality he must face.

Discussion Question 1

What are the parallels between Randeep's father and Harbhajan?

Discussion Question 2

What does Randeep's mother's attitude towards her husband's illness reveal about her character?

Discussion Question 3

What are potential implications of the concept of honor in different realms of the characters' lives? For example, how might honor affect their experience at school?

Vocabulary

vaulted, hob, pre-emptively, alchemy, amrood, elasticated, absurd, embroidery, constricting, chippered, sibilant, sullen, prancing, sanctioned, benighted, deliberate

Chapter 5

Summary

While working on a construction project, Gurpreet told Avtar that he would kill him if it was necessary to improve his own life. Avtar went to his second job, at a restaurant with his new coworker Kirsty. The restaurant was not busy so Avtar studied and slept. Harkran, the security guard, woke him. A group of boys had been harassing Kirsty, so Avtar told them to leave or he would call the police. They spat on him but left.

Narinder received a letter from her fiancé, Karam. He threatened to tell her family that she was living alone in Suffolk if she did not agree to meet him.

Randeep visited Narinder and talked about the weather and the upcoming visit from the visa office. Randeep wanted to stay in the house so he would know where everything was located, because it would look suspicious to the visa office if he didn't. Narinder said it was too long of a stay.

In the next section, Randeep has begun working out in preparation for his stay; Narinder has agreed to let him live in the house. Avtar and Randeep walked together and Avtar studied the road signs in preparation for his exams.

Meanwhile, Tochi's aunt and uncle told him their divorced niece was willing to marry him. Tochi decline the offer. Vinny arrived at the aunt and uncle's shop while Tochi was working and asked his uncle for a loan. After Vinny left, the uncle told him to stop working for Vinny because raids might happen soon and to accept the marriage offer. At the communal house, Tochi told Avtar about the potential raids.

Randeep has been leaving for work early so he doesn't disturb Narinder. They have been eating dinner together quietly and avoiding each other. One night, Randeep told Narinder he wanted to travel the world, and she said she was "happy wherever God led her" (quote). Randeep took back his words, not wanting to offend her. Narinder rejected his invitations to spend time together by going to the fair or the gurdwara. One day, Randeep's work was cancelled due to rain. He returned home early and went inside Narinder's room because she wasn't home. He looked inside her drawers and touched her bras. He left the room and when he heard Narinder opening the door later, he realizing he forgot to turn off the lights and quickly did so. That night, they hung up their wedding decorations and fake honeymoon pictures and put Post-It reminders on the fridge. They barely ate their dinner because they were nervous.

The next afternoon, two inspectors—David and Katie—arrived and drank tea while asking questions. Randeep was able to tell them the name and contact information of their landlord. When they asked about children, he said they wanted two, a boy and a girl, and Narinder said nothing. David remained suspicious after the questioning and asked to use the bathroom; Randeep was able to direct him to it. After the inspectors



left, Randeep asked Narinder if he could continue staying in the house, promising he would pay rent. Narinder questioned whether or not Randeep knew the marriage was fake. Randeep left and Narinder thinks to herself that he had rifled through her room and that he was unusual. She resolved to text her fiancé, Karam, in the morning and agree to meet.

Analysis

Gurpreet's admittance that he would kill Avtar embodies one of the novel's major thematic claims: over time, consistently brutal conditions wear down optimism into pragmatism, and eventually result in evil. The boundaries between what is necessary and what is choice become blurrier and blurrier. Sahota does not reveal Gurpreet's background or his personal life; Gurpreet therefore serves as an image of potential futures for Avtar and Randeep, after they have been worn away by the constant pressures of work. "If it helped me, I would throw you over [the building]. And, one day, you'll say the same," (225), Gurpreet says, bitterly acknowledging the effects of time. The division between Avtar and Gurpreet's mindsets is further emphasized when Avtar says "you play the cards you dealt" (225) and Gurpreet responds "Or you tear up the game. You get rid of the players" (225). Avtar still feels bound by honor and buoyed by optimism, while Gurpreet worries only about the most effective means of advancement and survival.

The theme of prejudice is further emphasized in this section, and its scope widens from prejudice against specific castes to prejudice against immigrants as a whole. When the drunken men spit on Avtar, they destroy part of his optimistic outlook by attacking his dignity. Avtar's focus on honor extends to this situation; "perhaps even worse than the spitting was the quietness in [Kirsty's] voice, the sense of someone being embarrassed for him" (228). Kirsty's sympathy for Avtar is also an implicit attack on his honor, so he resents it.

Randeep's attempts to reach out to Narinder are now seen in a different light after the revelation of his actions with Jaytha. Randeep desperately craves intimacy and views relationships as a method of escape. Like many other actions in the novel—Harbhajan's drug abuse, Gurpreet's threats—his actions are motivated out of a mixture of despair at his situation and desire to escape. This concept of escapism is further emphasized during the inspection visit, when Randeep details his desire for two children—as Narinder suspects, Randeep is unwilling to fully admit to himself that the marriage is fake. His fantasy of a true shared life with Narinder leaks into his actual actions.

When Randeep rifles through Narinder's bras, we see in the both the actions and the graphic language an echo of his attack on Jaytha, indicating that the same problems which resulted in the sexual assault have not been fully resolved. Furthermore, Sahota depicts Randeep's guilt over the actions and his acknowledgement that Narinder would not approve—Randeep dashes back to the room to turn off the lights at the last minute—to show that Randeep is conscious of the fact that his behavior is problematic.



Narinder's motivations, on the other hand, remain mysterious. She is relieved when Randeep leaves, but it is a "guilty sense of relief" (247). Sahota intentionally withholds her backstory because at this point in the novel her narrative has received less text; by placing her backstory later on in the novel, he forms a clearer picture of her current actions and gives more context to her backstory. When Randeep leaves, she feels relieved, and Sahota reveals that she knew, or at least guessed at, his rummage through her clothing.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast David and Katie.

Discussion Question 2

Why might Narinder be reluctant to talk to Randeep?

Discussion Question 3

What effect does Gurpreet have on Avtar?

Vocabulary

tethered, perimeter, mesh, pattered, Criminology, jangling, suede, spousal, settee, tentatively, discernible, quivered, satiated, incorporated, coherent

Chapter 6

Summary

Narinder and her family lived in London but visited India every summer. Her earliest memory was being struck by a reverend's car while attempting to cross the street, late for the gurdwara. Narinder's mother, Bibi Jeet Kaur, was an extremely devout woman. Narinder received her first turban at age six and was eager to wear it so she could look more like her mother. One summer in India when Narinder was nine, she asked for roti (bread) to feed birds in her backyard and noticed one was injured. Although she and her mother cared for the bird and gave it milk, it died. Narinder cried for days and wondered why God would allow this to happen. Upon returning to London, Narinder's mother bought her a bird table and was erecting it when she suddenly died of a blood clot.

The narrative jumped forward in time: Narinder was now a young adult and visiting her father, who was 65 years old and had had a stroke two years ago. In honor of her mother, Narinder read the paat for three consecutive days and nights, pausing only to sip water. She slept for most of the next day. Then she began volunteering at the gurdwara. One young woman entered the gurdwara, and when Narinder offered her assistance, the woman yelled that the gurdwara was not truly charitable. Later, Narinder asked her father if she could tutor children and he did not allow her. Disappointed, she went to her room and listened to music to feel better.

The hostile woman visited the gurdwara again, and Narinder followed her home. The woman said that her daughter has ran away, and Narinder promised to try to find her. Her father said he did not want her to become involved. Narinder called an employment agency who referred her to the factory where the daughter, Savraj, had worked. Narinder called the factory, and the owner cursed at her and gave her no information. After morning service at the gurdwara, she went to the factory, and was told that Savraj and other girls lived illegally in a nearby alley. She went to the building in the alley, knocked, and a woman led her to Savraj's room. Savraj told Narinder that she was working as prostitute and that her mother only wanted her to send money and did not care about her wellbeing. Narinder returned home and her brother, Tejpal, told her she was thinking too much. This comment made Narinder wonder if he knew she was helping Savraj, but she decided that was impossible.

Narinder visited Savraj again, he told her to leave but accepted a tube of lipstick that Narinder had brought. Narinder then began bringing Savraj food once or twice a week. Savraj began speaking to her family again and told Narinder she had never met anyone as pious as her. Narinder invited Savraj to the gurdwara to hear her sing, and Savraj responded that some of the men in the gurdwara were her clients. When Narinder returned home, Tejpal hit her and asked her. Narinder threw a CD remote at his face and told him he could not stop her from helping others. Their father ended the fight.



Several weeks passed, and Narinder was decorating the dining room table when Savraj appeared and asked for money, adding that she had found Narinder's address through the gurdwara. Narinder responded that she had never been as angry as when her family forbade her from visiting Savraj; she gave Savraj one hundred pounds withdrawn from a checking account Narinder's father had started for her wedding. Tejpal saw Savraj leaving and threatened to hurt Narinder again.

Two weeks later, Narinder returned to the alley but was told that Savraj no longer lived there. She went to the local real estate agent's office and saw Savraj there. She was now employed cleaning offices for a former client. She said she needed more money because her mother had cancer. Narinder prayed and told her father about Savraj's situation; he said that Narinder must help without Tejpal finding out. Narinder continued to bring Savraj food and Savraj said they might have enough money for an operation to help cure her mother soon. Narinder said she would visit Savraj's mother when she went to India that summer.

In India, Narinder found Savraj's house and met Savraj's brother, Kavi, who she began seeing frequently during her visit. Savraj's mother told Narinder that they needed much more money, and talked about her treatment. As she walked in the yard, Narinder saw Kavi having sex with a girl but did not understand what they were doing and watched. She ended her visit early because the family told her there was nothing she could do to help. While leaving, Kavi stopped her and told her that the family was lying about the mother having cancer. They wanted Narinder to pity them so she would marry Kavi and give him a visa.

The narrative resumed the next year. Narinder had been unable to return to India that summer because she had to meet suitors; she had met five so far and her family had found none of them suitable. Then she met Karam, who her family said was a good match. After Karam visited her house the first time, Savraj arrived begged for help, but Narinder refused. She met Karam two more times, once with relatives and once at a secrete picnic in Hyde Park, during which he awkwardly kissed her. After the picnic, Savraj visited again and informed Narinder that Kavi had died in Russia while trying to cross into Europe. Narinder decided that she would enter in a visa marriage with another person because she felt guilty about Kavi's death. She visited many lawyers and one finally helped her. The chapter ended with her waiting to meet Randeep.

Analysis

Sahota uses the dead bird as a parallel anecdote to present a serious event that altered the course of Narinder's life: the death of her mother. This technique is more than just foreshadowing—it creates a thematic thread in Narinder's story, emphasizing the meaning behind the two unexpected deaths. The bird is Narinder's first introduction to senselessness; prior to the event, she had faith that God punished and rewarded according to one's faith and actions, thus imposing a moral order on the world. When the bird died, Narinder was forced to question this belief. The bird, however, served as a subtle introduction to such a way of thinking. The death of her mother, infinitely more



consequential for Narinder, firmly implanted it into her brain. However, Sahota deliberately skips forward in the narrative rather than depicting Narinder's immediate reaction.

Narinder's decision to read the paat for three days, considered drastic by her family members and even religious leaders, is her attempt to retain the religious thinking that had previously guided her and had formed her initial introduction to the world—her highly pious mother had ingrained the importance of religion into her daughter. As Sahota emphasized through the text, Narinder prized the reaction of others that “she really was her mother's daughter” (254). Narinder is therefore torn between remaining pious, and thus true to her mother's memory, or considering her doubts about God motivated by the death of her mother. Her mother is the key factor in both of these competing emotions, and thus serves a dual narrative purpose: her piousness motivates Narinder's faith, and her untimely death motivates Narinder's religious doubts. This dual purpose underscores her importance to Narinder's character development.

Narinder's doubts do not just apply to her faith: she also questions her role in society. Tejpal attempts to control her actions so they align more closely with how he believes women should act. Baba, while less controlling, makes no attempt to stop Tejpal.

Narinder's relationship with Savraj reveals another key facet of her character: her attraction to danger, which arises from conflicting motivations. Savraj represents the opposite of the life Narinder has led—she has complete independence and scoffs religious values. To Narinder, she is an emblem of danger, and yet she is drawn to her. Narinder's competing motivations come into play here: she wants to help Savraj because she feels it is her religious duty, yet her questions

Discussion Question 1

How does Sahota use physical detail to emphasize the difference between Narinder and Savraj?

Discussion Question 2

What is the relationship between piety and honor for Narinder?

Discussion Question 3

Describe any spiritual conflicts you feel Narinder faces. How do the principles of her faith manifest themselves in her society?

Vocabulary

triangulating, distributing, mahogany, hostel, dwindled, intervening, retaliate, emaciated, vital, aslant, ravishing, interlocked, squandered, clackety, scuttled, chaste, tweaked, conviction, tatted

Chapter 7

Summary

The narrative returned to Tochi, Avtar, and Randeep. The drainage system, electricians, and other workers were late joining their most recent construction project, and the workers worried that Vinny had taken too high a percentage of pay. Vinny ignored their concerns and gave them two days off. Later, Randeep asked Avtar if he was going to take his exams. Avtar responded that he probably would not because he did not want to miss work—he would have to travel to London to take the tests—but he reflected that Dr. Cheema had said his visa would probably be renewed if he went to the exams, even if he didn't pass. Avtar asked his employer at the shop for extra shifts and to guarantee that he would still have his job when he came back from London, but the employer said no to both.

At his other job, Tochi received a letter from his potential wife but was unable to read English. Randeep translated. The letter said that the woman, named Ruby, did not mind that Tochi was illegal but would prefer to stay in her neighborhood because she had a child, Santish, and did not want to interrupt his schooling. Tochi told Randeep that he had lied to his family about his caste, and if they found out they would end the marriage. He said that although the marriage with Ruby would solve his visa problem, it would be impossible. Tochi left the group house and when he returned home, the other men had learned about his potential marriage and taunted him. Randeep apologized and said they overheard him telling Avtar, whom he thought could help. Tochi fought Randeep and attempted to strangle him, but they were torn apart. Later, Tochi also fought Avtar. Then Tochi went to his aunt and uncle's house to meet Ruby. The meeting was going well when Ruby's father became suspicious that Tochi spoke differently and didn't know details about the area he said was his homeland. Tochi admitted he was a chamaar and his aunt angrily kicked him out of the house.

After a few days, Vinny still hadn't told the workers if the construction project would proceed or not. Avtar called Lahkpreet but felt that he had nothing to say to her. He left to London for his examinations. As soon as he left, Tochi went to the shop where Avtar worked, offered to do his job for lower payment, and was hired. He also began squatting in the empty flat beneath Narinder's. Randeep called Avtar and told him that his job had been stolen. In London, Avtar met with his loaners and told them he would be behind on payment. They sprayed high-pressure water into his throat and threatened to hurt his family. Avtar stayed with Dr. Cheema, whose wife told him that Dr. Cheema felt dissatisfied with life and was always at the gurdwara. Meanwhile, Randeep waited for Avtar to return so they could both move to a new flat in case there was an immigration raid at the group home. Gurpreet was becoming more controlling of the other workers and refused to pay his turn for the electricity bill.

Analysis

The problems with the construction crew demonstrate how little control the characters have over their own circumstances. The boys immigrated with the implicit assumption that they could succeed if they worked hard enough, but they are discovering that they often don't even have the opportunity to work hard. Vinny gives them a day off, which for many would be a happy surprise—but, for the boys, it derails their plans and brings them closer to the cliff of financial peril. The structural flaws in the work system are further emphasized by Avtar's plight of choosing between work and school. Avtar knows his student visa is pivotal for his long-term success in the country, yet he feels forced to prioritize immediate financial survival over the examinations. His employer's unsympathetic attitude towards his problem demonstrates how little support the boys' receive in the country.

Avtar is not the only character who faces a serious obstacle in regards to his long-term success and his ability to remain in England. Tochi knows that his marriage to Ruby would greatly reduce his problems, yet his caste status prevents such a marriage from occurring. Similarly, Ruby is in a desperate situation and is willing to marry Tochi only because her society demands that she be in a marriage. Ruby's realistic and practical attitude echoes the boys' forced pragmatism – they are willing to do whatever necessary to ensure their survival and success, even if it works against what they desire.

Sahota again demonstrates that Tochi isolates himself in order to protect himself. When Tochi finally reaches out to Randee about his problems, he is making an important symbolic step towards re-forming attachments. Yet when the other boys discover his secret, the sense of betrayal is so strong that Tochi isolates himself further in response. By the end of the chapter, Tochi is isolated from both his family and his fellow workers. The sudden and dramatic change in his aunt's attitude towards him—prompted only by the discovery of his caste—emphasizes the baselessness of prejudice. None of Tochi's actions or words showed inadequacy in any way and his aunt and uncle valued him until they learned of his caste. This simple label dictates their actions without any respect to logic.

Sahota introduces conflict in each realm of the characters' lives to create a mood of resounding tension and suspense. The boys' employment is in question and rumors about a raid circulate, threatening the most vital and stable aspect of their lives in England. Avtar loses his second job and is threatened by his creditors, escalating the stakes of his precarious employment situation even more. Gurpreet exercises yet more control over the other migrant workers, adding another force of unwanted authority in their lives. And the worthiness of their pursuit is even called into question –Dr. Cheema, who represents success for the characters, still feels unsatisfied with his life, causing Avtar to doubt if a truly successful life in England is even possible.

After explaining Narinder's background, Sahota does not return to her present-day story in the following section. In doing this, Sahota allows the reader to more fully understand how her backstory contrasts with the other characters. Narinder is the only character

who is truly British, and she avoids the economic problems that they face. By focusing solely on the migrant characters, Sahota emphasizes their unique challenges.

Discussion Question 1

How would you characterize the migrant workers' attitudes towards Vinny?

Discussion Question 2

Do you feel that Tochi was justified in stealing Avtar's job?

Discussion Question 3

Do you feel that Avtar's boss was justified in giving Tochi the job?

Vocabulary

mortise, revoked, twanged, discerned, vigorously, turmeric, resignedly, prise, nostalgia, invigilator, decadence, confrontational

Chapter 8

Summary

Narinder met Karam at a train station. She told him that she would still marry him after a year had passed, but did not tell him about her visa marriage to Randeep; he agreed not to tell her family where she was. Narinder returned home and questioned God. She called home but hung up before the call went through. She began hearing strange noises downstairs and stayed awake one night to determine their source. She saw Tochi, who did not say his name but identified himself as a friend of Randeep's and begged her not to call the police. Narinder allowed him to stay in the flat; one day, he forgot his screwdriver and borrowed Narinder's pin to pick the lock on the door.

Meanwhile, Avtar and Randeep searched for a job. Gurpreet asked them if he could borrow money but they were unable to give him any; Avtar thought that Gurpreet looked pale and sick. Avtar received notice that he had failed his exams; he told his family that his visa had been renewed but added that he had passed his exams. He called Lahkpreet but she didn't answer; she called back later and said she had been at the movies, causing Avtar to ask if she thought about how hard he was working while she enjoyed herself. After hanging up, Avtar regretted the conversation.

Randeep gave Narinder the month's rent and told her that Tochi was not his friend and "not a good person" (p. 328), adding that Tochi was a chamaar. When he returned, Gurpreet told him that he had found a job and the two walked to it, but Gurpreet only took him to a bar, where Gurpreet said that he had killed people in the past. Avtar and Gurpreet climbed a fence and Gurpreet pulled out a knife, but laughed and said he was only joking.

At the gurdwara, Narinder befriended an older woman named Vidya, who said she disliked her husband. The friend encouraged Narinder to get a job.

Avtar stole a chicken from the shop he used to work at, and he and Randeep were able to eat three meals for three days using it. They then stole a crate full of chickens and began selling them to other workers. Randeep gave Narinder the monthly rent money early, and told her that he had gotten into business. Narinder told him that she had started swimming; she went to a woman-only pool with Vidya. One day, Narinder ate dinner with Vidya and her husband told her to stay away from the house.

Avtar kept the unsold chickens in Randeep's room. When the two boys went to steal more chickens, they were caught, and Malhkeet did not demand his money back but said he would call the police if he caught them again.

Analysis

The return to Narinder's narrative continues her thematic strain of questioning God. Despite mounting difficulties, she also remains kind and nonjudgmental. Narinder increasingly serves as a counterpoint to the three other characters' perspectives: her situation is relatively stable compared to theirs, and she makes progress towards solidifying a future. Since Narinder is not an illegal immigrant, Sahota gives her a secondary thematic purpose of emphasizing the benefits that citizenship provides. This also imbues Narinder with power: as a visa wife, she provides a valuable service for Randeep by allowing him to stay in the country and pursue his goals.

Gurpreet' takes on a new, sinister dimension in this chapter. He represents many of the dangers that the characters had hoped to escape by immigrating: he is prejudiced, untrustworthy and has a predilection for violence. Avtar recognizes the same signs of drug abuse that he saw in Harbhajan in Gurpreet – he is pale, shaking, and unpredictable—yet again refuses to act on it, although this time he is motivated more out of a desire for self-preservation than for honor. Gurpreet represents the flaws and corruptions of immigrant life, and the characters' attempt to avoid him is symbolic of their attempt to avoid these issues.

The boys also feel alienated not just from the world they live in, but now from their homes and families. With each new experience, they become further removed from the worlds they had known. Avtar's fight with Lahkpreet is representative of this – the boys are becoming bitter over the service they are forced to perform for their family, and demand respect for their sacrifices. Without a clear purpose for their struggles, it is difficult for them to maintain the motivation to fight for survival and employment.

More insidious forms of prejudice become apparent in this chapter. Sahota continues his narrative choice to highlight not only serve or violent forms of prejudice, but the daily discrimination that wears away a character's dignity. When Randeep tells Narinder that Tochi is a chammaar, however, he is not directly insulting Tochi, and he is even confused by his own prejudice. This sentiment echoes the guilt of Tochi's rich passengers like Madame—members of higher castes can be prejudiced towards those of lower castes, without saying so outright. This subtle discrimination perpetuates a cycle of mistreatment towards the chammaars.

Avtar intentionally does not tell his family that he failed his examination, again motivated to preserve the family's honor. Honor equates to concealment in any unpleasant situation. Avtar's actions demonstrate that he is still bound by the code of honor even when separate from his family and their value system. The characters' choices to conceal their suffering whenever possible only amplifies it, and the problem grows more serious as their situation grows direr.

Discussion Question 1

What does Vidya represent to Narinder?



Discussion Question 2

Do you think the boys' were justified in stealing the chickens? How do the chickens influence the boys?

Discussion Question 3

How does morality relate to economic security? Would you steal food for a family member or a friend who really needed it?

Vocabulary

exasperated, clarity, metallic, modules, installments, frosted, striking, flaring, detached, ceasing, remortgage, seethed

Chapter 9

Summary

Narinder did not see Vidya again, but continued swimming at the pool. Narinder also began making roti for Tochi. Avtar's cousin offered him three days of work as a security guard and Avtar told Randeep to stop being so clingy when Randeep tried to follow him to work. Gurpreet said he was leaving to Southampton next week to look for work, and Randeep noted that he was shaking hard.

Avtar and Randeep were walking home together when they saw their building being raided. They walked away and Gurpreet joined them, saying he had hid in the bushes. Randeep agreed to ask Narinder if they could stay with her, but she refused. After Avtar confronted her and said she was not truly religious, she allowed them to stay. While they were moving in, Gurpreet went inside her room, and she yelled at him to leave and slammed the door. Randeep thought he saw Lahkpreet's name on Avtar's phone at night but decided he had imagined it. Over the next week, the three boys were unable to find work, and Avtar and Randeep asked Narinder to hide their money, fearing that Gurpreet would take it. When Gurpreet and Narinder happened to be alone in the flat, he sexually harassed her. When Randeep returned, Narinder left and said that Gurpreet had to leave before she came back. Randeep fell asleep and awoke to find Gurpreet overturning furniture, looking for money. Gurpreet found the love letter Randeep had written for Narinder and began mocking him. The two fought and Gurpreet began strangling Randeep, who seized Gurpreet's knife and stabbed him. Avtar returned some time later and found Gurpreet bandaged but bleeding heavily. He had begged Randeep not to call an ambulance, fearing deportation. Avtar and Randeep cleaned Narinder's flat and hid Gurpreet in the bathroom of Tochi's flat. Narinder returned, and they waited for her to go to bed before dragging Gurpreet to the surgery door of the local hospital and leaving him there.

The next day, David arrived at the flat. Randeep told him that Avtar was just a friend; when David noticed that there were two blankets on the ground, Randeep told him that Avtar was cold. He also said the wedding photos had been taken down because they were redecorating.

Avtar and Randeep looked for work at a supermarket, and the owner told them that a man driving a van would arrive the next morning and give them jobs. They returned early next morning and it was already very crowded with others seeking work. Avtar got on the van first and Randeep reached out his hand for him to drag him on to it, but Avtar didn't take it. The door slammed and Avtar was driven away.

Analysis

This chapter serves as a dramatic climax in which Sahota seeks to severely escalate the action and potential consequences for the characters. Until this point, the conflict (within the central England narrative) was contained, building towards the specific emergences of tension in this chapter. Furthermore, as the title suggests, Sahota draws the characters' together to emphasize their increasing interdependency and to create new lines of tension and dramatic motion.

For Avtar and Randeep, it becomes increasingly difficult to retain a relationship in a deeply isolated world. Even the connection between the two, which was depicted as strong in each of the other chapters, begins to crumble as Avtar seeks independence from Randeep. Randeep's continued commitment to Avtar is not paralleled by Avtar, who throughout the novel has felt a sense of responsibility towards Randeep only because he is Lahkpreet's brother. Now that Avtar's own situation is becoming more desperate, his sense of responsibility crumbles and he begins to resent Randeep for the additional challenges that he presents. The rift between these characters grows exponentially within this single chapter. At the outset, the tension is only verbal. By the chapter's end, Avtar makes the drastic and physical decision to exclude Randeep from potential work, physically separating the characters. This also signifies a deep betrayal for Randeep, who craves intimacy and has repeatedly failed to gain independence. Sahota's choice makes the relationship between Randeep and Avtar more complex and realistic—the power balance between the two has shifted, irrevocably altering their connection.

The explosion of physical violence in this chapter also signifies a sharp turning point in the emotional weight of the story. The characters have driven beyond the point of emotional despair to a place where they feel forced to physically defend themselves. Sahota also seeks to explore the moral decisions that illegal immigration creates. Gurpreet demands that the boys do not take him to a hospital, fearing deportation even on the edge of death. This creates a moral ambiguity—should Avtar and Randeep follow his wishes, potentially risking his life but protecting all three of them from discovery, or should they bring him to the hospital and guarantee his medical treatment? This is the most extreme example of the moral complications that immigration presents that Sahota has presented thus far. He utilizes the severity of this moral judgment to emphasize how challenging the situations that illegality produces are.

David represents another set of mounting pressures; Sahota seeks to create conflict from multiple angles to escalate the dramatic stakes. David symbolizes yet another encroaching problem and his threatening visit at the conclusion of the chapter demonstrates that the characters' problems are far from resolved and may only continue to grow.

Discussion Question 1

How does Gurpreet's significance as a character change in this chapter?

Discussion Question 2

What would you have done if you were in Avtar and Randeep's situation--left Gurpreet outside the hospital door or carry him inside?

Discussion Question 3

What is Narinder's role in this chapter? Does she contribute to the conflict?

Vocabulary

imperceptibly, tantalizing, mesh, apropos, oblique, succumbing, intimation, hilarity, gutted, lychee

Chapter 10

Summary

Next month, Randeep did not return to give Narinder the rent money, so she was forced to get a job. She tried the gurdwara and then the local job center, where a woman helped her make a resume. After several unsuccessful attempts, she was hired as a library assistant, to start in two weeks. The landlord, Mr. Greatrix, arrived and she paid him using her savings. Later, her brother broke into the house with a group of men and fought his sister. He eventually dragged her out of the flat screaming. Tochi heard the fight but did not intervene.

Analysis

This chapter serves as a continuation of the previous in that it also represents a dramatic climax. The tensions that have hovered in the subtext of the novel are brought to the forefront when Narinder is discovered by her brother. However, this chapter also reverses the thematic concept of the previous chapter in that it separates the characters rather than bring them closer together. The characters are now the most isolated as they have been at any point in the novel; Tochi even chooses not to intervene when he hears Narinder being attacked, emphasizing the characters' complete isolation and self-reliance.

While the previous chapter focused on challenges faced by the migrant laborers, this chapter demonstrates the consequences for Narinder and how her visa marriage has impacted her. Ironically, after achieving autonomy and even finding employment, she is literally dragged away from her accomplishments by her brother. This extreme altercation represents the endless pressures of Narinder's society. As soon as she has gained a measure of independence on her own terms, her progress is reversed by her brother, who represents the traditional and repressive aspects of her faith and society.

Discussion Question 1

Examine the language used to describe Narinder and Tejpal's fight. How does Sahota emphasize the stakes of the argument?

Discussion Question 2

What does employment represent for Narinder?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss Tochi's actions in this chapter. What are potential motivations for them?

Vocabulary

palmful, glazed, defaulted, arrears, auburn, insistently, competency, taxing, discretion, elasticated, lozenges

Chapter 11

Summary

Randeep went to the gurdwara but was told that he should live under the bridge with other young men looking for work. Avtar's new job was in the pipe system of a plant; he and his partner, Romy, sprayed walls and cleaned the sewer-like pipe system. Their contractor, Jagdish, told them that their contract expired next week and only the best workers would be kept for the next job. At the end of the week, Romy was one of the workers not kept on. Avtar begged Jagdish to let him stay, but when Jagdish said he could only stay if he and Avtar split one wage, Avtar took back his request.

Narinder was living with her family again. Her father, Baba, defended her actions, but Tejpal said that she had destroyed the family's honor. Narinder apologized to Baba and asked him what he knew about chamaars. He responded that a chamaar had worked on his farm and had to eat handfuls of the family's half-eaten leftovers. Narinder asked Baba again if she could get a job, but he forbid her because Tejpal was so angry. She met with Karam again, with her family, and as he was leaving she heard Tejpal apologizing for her behavior and thanking Karam for continuing with the marriage.

Avtar complained to Jagdish about his low pay. He tried to leave but Jagdish did not give him his passport back. As the other workers slept in the back of the van and after Jagdish had left, Avtar stole a pole. One day, Jagdish and his daughter-in-law went to a wedding and left the workers with cold roti in a bucket. Once Jagdish had left, Avtar used the pole to pry open the van door and escape. Police noticed him and raided the van, and he ran away.

Narinder received a call from David about a second inspection: she told him that Randeep would give him details and that she no longer lived in the flat. The landlord had already informed David that she had suddenly left the house and that the front door sustained damages. Narinder begged Baba to allow her to return, although she still did not tell him about the visa marriage. He kneeled in front of her and removed his turban, telling her that his children represented his honor and asking her not to step on his honor, but allowing her to leave. Narinder went to the shop where Tochi worked. For a fee, he took her to the old group house. For an additional fee, he agreed to help her find Randeep.

A seyadari from the gurdwara collected clothes from Avtar and the other men under the bridge and gave them generators to charge their phones. Avtar was now working as a male prostitute for an old woman. He tried to call his mother and could not get through to her. He was contemplating the river when he fell in, although he later thought that he may have purposely jumped. The men under the bridge saw him and pulled him out. He went back under the bridge and tried to sleep, and was soon covered by a layer of fall leaves.



Analysis

This chapter represents a pivotal shift in Avtar and Randeep's social situations. Prior to this chapter, they were scraping by. They have move into truly dangerous territory and are fighting for their lives. Sahota emphasizes the bleakness of their situations by putting rich details into the physical texture of their current lives—for example, he devotes much of the text to descriptions of Avtar's new job cleaning sewers. The narrative pace of this chapter is both more thoroughly detailed and tightly structured; Sahota does this in order to create a sense of both chaos and impatience in the characters' lives. By separating the characters in this section, Sahota also allows the reader to fully visualize their respective changes. Examining the four main characters separately also provides another layer of insight into the way they interact with each other, advancing the novel's technique of interweaving separate stories to create a fuller picture of immigration.

Randeep, in particular, has reached a new low—he is living under a bridge and requires assistance from the gurdwara for food and shelter. Randeep's lack of self-sufficiency has resulted in serious consequences and he now faces a shift in which he must choose between changing his behavior or being truly harmed. He has lost dignity and feels encroaching despair—his empathetic nature has caused him to become perceived as weak, harming him even further. This chapter also allows the reader to gain a clearer picture of Randeep's character separate from Avtar. Sahota splits their narratives in order to establish each of their characters more fully.

Accordingly, this chapter also explores Avtar's newly established perspective. Sahota emphasizes the consequences of Avtar's decision to abandon Randeep in his search for work. Without Randeep to provide an anchor and a counterbalance to Avtar's personality, Avtar loses both another connection to his homeland and another positive influence on his character. He responds to this helplessness with even more self-generated isolation and his morality is further eroded. His actions towards Romy echo those towards Randeep—Avtar has reached a point of ethical regression in which he sees no choice but to deny both Randeep and Romy work. He knows that his success and survival hinge on his ability to help only himself; the lack of employment opportunities create the impression that every person is a direct competitor. Avtar's actions echo Gurpreet's foreshadowing when he said that he would kill someone to get ahead. Sahota uses both characters to depict the results of repeated hardship and mistrust on a person's attitude.

In contrast, Narinder is continuing a process of growth and is becoming more independent. Although Tejpal attempts to restrict her actions, she now faces her social duties with a new sense of skepticism. She demands to be allowed to get a job, and is willing to break away entirely when her goals are denied. Her conversation with her father also further reveals her criticism of the ingrained system of prejudice towards chammaars. Through these actions and thoughts, Sahota demonstrates that social codes are not necessary – despite the challenges that they characters face, they do have the capacity to deviate from cultural norms that they consider unfair. Coupled with



Narinder's increasing doubtfulness towards social structures is a growing mistrust in her faith, which poses an identity crisis for her.

Discussion Question 1

What does Jagdish represent as a character? How does he influence both the plot and the meaning of the chapter?

Discussion Question 2

How does Sahota describe Avtar's escape attempt? What literary tools does he use in this description?

Discussion Question 3

What do the falling leaves at the close of the chapter symbolize?

Vocabulary

deliberation, congregation, ruse, strikingly, gelatinous, unspooling, writhing, tycoon, materialized, cakewalk, tunefully, ardent, indistinct, sustained, quivered, fugitive

Chapter 12

Summary

Narinder began her job as a library assistant. She called Randeep every day but received no response. She went to the gurdwara and saw her old friend Vishna, who warned her that a man had been in the gurdwara showing people her pictures. Narinder didn't eat for two days and tried to pray but felt uneasy. She found an unnecessary second milk carton in the fridge and wrote Tochi a note but two more times he bought an extra milk carton. She yelled at Tochi and shoved him. He told her that there had been a raid at the group home and that was why Randeep and Avtar no longer lived there.

Tochi lost his second shift at Crunchy Fried Chicken and accidentally scalded himself while working. At home, Narinder bandaged his wound and told him that he didn't have to take a longer route to work because what he thought was a police car was a 'lollipop lady.' The next afternoon, Tochi asked his boss to translate the notes Narinder had written. When Narinder returned from work that evening she found only one milk carton in the refrigerator and smiled.

Avtar found work cleaning a club called Parachute. He felt a burning pain when urinating. He went to London to register for classes at the college but was unable to because it required his passport, which he had left behind while escaping from the van. He stayed with Dr. Cheera, who was now divorced. Later, he met with Bal and gave him all of his money, which was still not enough. He climbed a bridge, tore up his notes and schoolwork, and threw them into the water.

Analysis

Sahota switches perspectives between Narinder and Tochi to illustrate the slow build of trust between them from both of their perspectives. This use of alternating perspectives gives the reader a more complete understanding of their relationship. However, Sahota also reflects Tochi's recalcitrant nature through Tochi's passages, which are sparse and offer minimal emotional insight. The incident over the milk is a turning point in Narinder and Tochi's relationship—the fact that Tochi took the initiative to understand Narinder about the milk shows that he is more willing to accept her point of view in general.

Narinder gains more independence and self-reliance in this section than in any previously; she is successfully employed, pushes Tochi when she feels frustrated by him, and is managing the rent. Sahota, however, reveals that the closer Narinder gets to true independence the more challenges she must face, illustrating the challenges of defying social structures. Her brother frequents the gurdwara—a symbol of traditional values—and looks for her, which serves to push her further away from tradition and towards an independent lifestyle. Narinder continues to question in her faith in these



chapters as well, becoming more disillusioned with the principles that had once provided her with purpose. This spiritual and personal crisis is extremely draining; Narinder is even affected physically, losing her appetite and feeling frequently nauseous.

In this chapter, Sahota utilizes Avtar to demonstrate that a hardened, selfish mindset may help one survive but is eventually unsustainable. In this chapter, Avtar faces the moral consequences of his decisions as well as the painful severity of his situation. Each aspect of Avtar's life contains a separate facet of his decline; his physical deterioration contributes to his emotional and mental frustration. Even his mentor, Dr. Cheema, is suffering and no longer represents a model of success for Avtar. With looming debts and a lack of motivation, Avtar is no longer to uphold his relentless, emotionless façade, and his frustration culminates with the destruction of his schoolwork. When Avtar throws away his schoolwork, he is symbolically giving up his pursuit of wealth and success in England.

Discussion Question 1

Why are Tochi and Randeep largely absent from this chapter?

Discussion Question 2

What is the symbolic significance of Tochi burning himself at Crunchy Fried Chicken? Why did Sahota choose a burn and not a different type of injury?

Discussion Question 3

"A phrase from somewhere came to him: reaching beyond his dreams" (420). This quote comes from Avtar at the end of the chapter. What is its significance? Why did Sahota choose to place it at the end of the chapter?

Vocabulary

guffawed, camomile, glimmering, beseeching, infinitesimal, scaffolding

Chapter 13

Summary

Tochi hurried home from work to find Narinder making chick peas. She was not hungry and gave him her leftovers, then recoiled in disgust at herself although he was not offended. Tochi told Narinder that he was a chamaar and she reacted warmly; he then told her that his family had died. After dinner, he told her his life story, from his childhood to his journey to England. The next week, they made dinner together. Another day, Narinder tried to convince Tochi to be more religious. The next week, Ardashir called Tochi and offered him a lucrative construction job in Spain, but Tochi declined. Tochi went to the gurdwara to hear Narinder sing but was harassed by Ruby's father and left. That night, Tochi questioned God openly to Narinder, and the two held each other and wept.

Analysis

When Narinder gives her leftover chick peas to Tochi, she is reminded of her father's anecdote about the extreme prejudice with which he treated chamaars in his youth. Narinder's sensitivity to this incident indicates her growing disgust with the prejudiced social system. Narinder's empathetic nature forces her to come to terms not only with her own moral transgressions—due to her complicities in the system—but the flaws of those that she looks up to, such as her father.

For perhaps the first time in his life, Tochi is treated with respect and kindness when he reveals his caste. Tochi responds to this empathy with kindness himself, demonstrating that he is still capable of trust and kindness when these emotions are reciprocated. A product of a deeply prejudiced environment, Tochi has difficulty recognizing when others are being truly altruistic or when they eventually plan to harm him. As Tochi learns to trust Narinder, their relationship strengthens, which is demonstrated by Tochi's decision not to take the job he is offered. Narinder serves as a vivid reminder that life is not solely about the next employment opportunity.

Narinder and Tochi's flat serves as a haven from the still-constant pressures and disappointments of the outside world. Yet discrimination is clearly still present, as demonstrated by Tochi's attempt to go to the gurdwara. The frustration caused by the mismatch between Tochi's now-welcoming home life and the cruel society it exists within prompts Tochi's breakdown—now that he has a point of reference of kindness, he finds it harder to cope with the relentless discrimination that has shaped his life.

The final section of the chapter represents a turning point in both Narinder's faith and Tochi and Narinder's relationship. Horrified by the cruelties that Tochi has experienced, Narinder finds it even more difficult to maintain her faith in a benevolent god. In the crux

of this spiritual crisis, she turns to Tochi for comfort, who needs her support as well, thus strengthening their partnership.

Discussion Question 1

What does Ruby's father represent symbolically?

Discussion Question 2

How is the passage of time presented this novel? How does time function symbolically?

Discussion Question 3

This chapter is divided into short, frequent sections. Did you find this structure to be effective in advancing the content of this chapter? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

aubergines, diversion, retracting, recalibration, suitable, engulfed, absorbing, tapered, uncoiling

Chapter 14

Summary

Avtar continued to experience burning pains in his stomach. He attempted to visit the doctor, but ran out of the office when he was asked to fill out a form with his medical card number, address, and other information. He called Lahkpreet and told her that Randeep was sleeping, then realized he had nothing to say to her. While cleaning the club, he became frustrated and destroyed the furniture and mirrors.

Narinder stopped wearing her turban. At dinner, she asked Tochi where he would most like to live and he said the coast of India, while she said she would go home to be with her family. Later, Tochi tried to convince her to stay and told her to be courageous, but she responded that her sacrifice would be courageous.

Unable to find new work, Avtar reunited with Randeep with the intent to ask Narinder if they could stay with her. They returned to Narinder's flat, and Avtar told Randeep that he was in a relationship with Lahkpreet. Randeep gave him his blessing. The next day, Avtar was too sick to get out of bed and collapsed on the stairs. Tochi called Malkeet, who brought a doctor, and Narinder paid for the treatment. The boys continued looking for work and found nothing; they talked about selling things but realized they had nothing to sell. Avtar learned that his creditors had attacked his family because he was behind on payments; he stole Tochi's money and paid off his debts in full. Tochi attacked Avtar who, still weak from his illness, was taken to the hospital and operated on. Tochi decided to take the job in Spain and Randeep immediately applied for his divorce papers from Narinder, realizing that they had been married a year.

Analysis

This chapter demonstrates how being illegal affects every aspect of the immigrant's lives. It calls attention to another serious drawback of immigration that the reader may not have considered. When Avtar is unable to go to the hospital, the reader witnesses how fully he is isolated from the benefits of society that he immigrated in order to receive. Forced to the outskirts of this society, he is unable to even maintain his physical health.

Narinder and Tochi's conversation is highly significant thematically because it explores the relationship between duty and courage. Narinder feels that remaining loyal to one's family (and social status, gender role, and church) is a form of sacrifice that requires great courage. Although she desires to escape from the constrictions of her society, she feels that her adherence to them shows her valuable attributes. Tochi, however, believes that she lacks courage when she chooses to remain within her place in society—he sees a rejection of societal norms as an act that requires the highest form of courage. Although both characters want to be with each other, they are unable to rectify



this difference in their perspectives. Narinder has certainly lost a significant portion of her once-strong faith—she has even stopped wearing her turban—yet she is unable to fully withdraw from her position in society.

Sahota ties together the narrative threads abruptly at the end of the chapter, representing how quickly the entire fabric of immigrants' lives can shift. Each character embarks on a separate path, linked solely by their shared experiences as new immigrants.

Discussion Question 1

What is the symbolic significance of Narinder and Tochi's discussion about the places they would most like to live?

Discussion Question 2

How does dialogue function in the conversation between Avtar and his parents?

Discussion Question 3

What is significant about this chapter's structure?

Vocabulary

disarmed, momentarily, disinfectants, enamel, amplified, thwarted, turnstile

Epilogue

Summary

Ten years have passed since the conclusion of the novel. Narinder had spent these years tending for her father, who had had a stroke after she announced that she would never marry anyone. She lived with Tejpal and his wife of four years, Sabrina. At the start of the epilogue, her father had just passed away and she was traveling to India to scatter his ashes. She had not seen Randeep since they signed the divorce papers at the end of the year but was visiting him before she left.

Randeep, living in a large brick home, prepared a large lunch for her, but her visit was short and awkward. As she was leaving, Randeep thanked her and said he did not consider what she was risking when she agreed to marry him. Randeep now worked as an assistant manager for a company. His father was in a home for the mentally ill, although Avtar insinuated that he did not want to be there.

Avtar and Lahkpreet were now married, although Avtar suspected that Lahkpreet had married him partially out of pity. He still walked with a limp and suffered pains from his illness. Avtar still did not have steady employment, but Lahkpreet worked as a nurse. Avtar's parents lived with him and Lahkpreet and spent most of their time watching Indian soap operas.

Tochi now lived on the shore of India, where he had told Narinder he would most like to live. He sold souvenirs. After Narinder scattered her father's ashes, she travelled to a hotel near where Tochi worked. The novel ends with Narinder entering a theater and seeing Tochi in the front row, sitting with his wife and children.

Analysis

Sahota uses the epilogue to make several thematic statements. Narinder's outcome reveals that she never escaped the social structures that confined her, as she spent ten years caring for her father and living with her abusive brother. She never changed her view from her conversation with Tochi that commitment to one's family is a sacrifice worth making. She did deny her societal role in one way however—she refused to marry. Yet this act of rebellion had serious consequences, as it resulted in her father's stroke. Thus Sahota demonstrates that responsibility to family is an extremely important tenant to hold to.

Randeep and Avtar's career conditions are virtually reversed from where they were at the end of the novel: Randeep has achieved success while Avtar is still struggling to find employment. However, in terms of emotional maturity, Randeep still does not have the relationship he craves while Avtar is married to Lahkpreet as planned. The epilogue introduces a measure of subtlety by introducing a possible motive for this marriage—

pity. Neither Avtar nor Randeep have found a relationship that truly satisfies their isolation.

In many ways the characters were unable to change the personalities they possessed at the beginning of the novel—in fact, the general relationships between the characters remained unchanged. Avtar and Randeep have retained their relatively close relationship while all other relationship between characters have faded or severed completely. The epilogue continues the novel's realism—not everything is resolved cleanly, but not everything is disastrous for the characters.

Discussion Question 1

How does Narinder's situation differ from Randeep's? What does this difference reveal about their personalities?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the final scene?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Sahota chose to include a epilogue?

Vocabulary

receding, pussyfooting, inevitable, bloated, precarious, truncated, vermilion

Characters

Avtar

Avtar is a mature character who is consumed by the challenges he faces throughout the novel. He is motivated to immigrate to England out of a desire to prove himself to his girlfriend and exceed others' expectations. This attitude results in his hardworking and pragmatic mindset; he is constantly looking for opportunities to better himself and earn more money. This is demonstrated by his habit of studying for an hour a day while all others are sleeping. Although he faces perhaps the most challenging financial circumstances of any of the characters – he even sold his kidney to pay for his lawyer's fees – he is tenacious in his pursuit of earning the money back.

However, Avtar's personality also allows him to be quickly corrupted and influenced by the pressures of immigrant life. He also allows the characters to witness the various effects of the challenging immigrant life: of each of the four main characters, Avtar is the most noticeably affected by his surroundings in terms of temperament. Avtar becomes progressively dissatisfied with life in England and questions in his role in society. Separated from his girlfriend Lahkpreet, his family, and his life at home, he feels constrained by economic necessity and family honor. He attempts to study in order to improve his prospects, but this long-term pursuit is limited by various short-term necessities. As injustices against him accumulate, he becomes more cynical: his change in perspective after Tochi steals his job is particularly noticeable.

Avtar's progression is made particularly clear by the novel's closing chapters, when his emotional scarring becomes physical. The epilogue demonstrates that his illness and subsequent physical injury is baggage that links him to the struggles of early immigrant life even after he escapes it.

Randeep

Randeep is a young Indian immigrant who goes to Sheffield, England in order to earn money for his family after his father develops severe dementia. While in England, Randeep spends much of his time looking for a job and attempting to form a relationship with his visa-wife, Narinder. He eventually finds a job on a migrant worker crew and works there for several months; he also moves in with Narinder before their immigration inspection, then moves out once they pass it. He later loses his job and is forced to live under a bridge. By the epilogue, however, he has become an assistant manager at a company and lives in a large brick home.

Throughout the novel, Randeep struggles with navigating adulthood and the challenges of mature responsibilities; he feels emotionally unequipped to deal with the various pressures of immigration. Beyond being unable to find employment, he is unable to secure autonomy and develop his own voice. This uneasiness manifests itself in

virtually all facets of his life, but primarily in his sexual actions. Sahota creates a parallel between Randeep's actions towards Jaytha (his crush at college in India) and Narinder. In regards to both women, Randeep does not regulate his sexual desires and becomes obsessed; this perversion is a result of his deep loneliness and desire for intimacy. Avtar also feels that Randeep is too reliant on him and attempts to escape from his influence throughout the novel. Randeep also has trouble regulating his emotions; he attacks Gurpreet and beats him heavily when Gurpreet discovers a note that Randeep had written to Narinder.

However, Randeep's emotional nature lends humanism to a bleak novel. Of the four main characters, he is the least fully affected by the novel's main events; he retains his caring outlook and his empathy for others, which is a difficult feat in such a bleak environment. Most of Randeep's actions are well-intentioned—for example, when Avtar is frustrated that Randeep calls him about the labor job, Randeep is only trying to help his friend. Although he has trouble balancing his inherent innocent nature with the adult demands of his world, his innocence is also one of his strengths, as it allows him to preserve his openness towards others.

Tochi

Tochi is a 'chamaar,' or member of the lowest caste in Indian society. He began working at a young age and had to travel to a different province because employment opportunities were virtually nonexistent in his home region of Panjab. After his father was crippled in an accident, Tochi returned to Panjab and found work as a rickshaw driver. During a riot, his family was doused with gasoline and burned alive. He then worked for two years in a brick factory and earned enough money to be smuggled to Paris by plane and truck, and went to England after two months without finding a job.

Tochi serves as a primary vehicle for exploring prejudices that exist in both England and India. He suffers from extreme discrimination; verbal and physical, implicit and explicit. Sahota uses Tochi to demonstrate the extreme unfairness of the caste system and how its implications transcend geographical distance. Sahota chooses to portray insidious acts of discrimination—such as a shopkeeper that turns Tochi away as soon as he hears his name—alongside explosive acts of discrimination, such as the burning of Tochi's family. This strategy reveals the omnipresence of discrimination throughout Tochi's environment.

Tochi struggles with cynicism and despair throughout the novel. All of the major events in his life have spawned a sense of mistrust and hopelessness that he is repeatedly unable to cope with. Many of Tochi's actions in the novel are unsympathetic, yet he is motivated out of an inability to rectify the cruelty he has experienced with a rational world. For Tochi, dangers are omnipresent and much of the novel is his attempt to succeed or even survive in such volatile conditions.

Narinder

Narinder is one of the four main characters, but is differentiated from the other three in many aspects—she is the only character who has lived in England for the majority of her life, she is the only female, and she is the only devoutly religious major character. These characteristics give Narinder her unique and essential thematic function—she allows Sahota to explore religion and morality in a highly competitive and relentless atmosphere. Sahota examines the effect of

When Narinder was young, her mother died, which had a profound effect on her emotional outlook. Narinder's firm commitment to her Sikh faith, as well as the cultural roles it entails, partially stems from this experience. She is also a highly empathetic and morally pure character with an inherent desire to help others, which prompts her to volunteer much of her time at the local gurdwara. She is an altruistic character whom often lends the bleak novel a layer of moral clarity.

However, Narinder's altruism also leads her to increasingly question her faith throughout the novel; she becomes more independent and skeptical as she grows more accustomed to witnessing morally ambiguous acts. Her relationships with Savraj and Tochi are responsible for this growth to a large extent, and her character arc can be represented as a loss of innocence. Her growth embodies the theme of religion versus morality: she finds it difficult to rectify her religious beliefs with the immoral acts that she consistently witnesses or experiences.

Gurpreet

Gurpreet is an immigrant laborer who works with Avtar and Randeep for much of the novel, eventually being taken to the hospital after a fistfight with Randeep. He is a highly cynical character who represents the moral and emotional effects of prolonged exposure to a relentless and competitive environment. Sahota deliberately refrains from exploring Gurpreet's life prior to his introduction to Avtar and Tochi, thus creating a range of potential possibilities for Gurpreet's original personality. Sahota does provide evidence, however, that Gurpreet has become more cynical throughout his time in England. He once believed in the tenants of hard work and perseverance, but now doubts their importance in the context of an illegal labor market. Gurpreet has made the moral decision to care only about himself and his objectives; he is not necessarily a villain in the novel, but his instinct for self-preservation leads him to commit desperate and violent acts. Furthermore, his cynical personality causes him to frequently intimidate the other characters and predict that they will become more like him.

Tejpal

Tejpal, Narinder's brother, is highly concerned with traditional values and determined to ensure his father's honor by controlling Narinder's actions. He tells Narinder not to think too much, believing that a woman's role is to blindly obey the men in her life. The



epilogue demonstrates that he never adapts his views despite living in a society with more flexible gender roles.

Lahkpreet

Lahkpreet is Randeep's sister and Avtar's girlfriend and eventually wife. She is depicted as distant and demanding, and more concerned with superficial values than internal qualities.

Dr. Cheema

In many ways, Dr. Cheema represents the pinnacle of intellectual and career success which the immigrants aim for. A British citizen, he works as an advisor in the London university which Avtar attends. However, Dr. Cheema suffers from identity issues and feels that he is unable to rectify his Indian heritage with his British existence. This essential contradiction creates extreme personal issues in Dr. Cheema's life and eventually results in his divorce.

Malkeet

First Avtar's, then Tochi's boss, Malkeet runs Crunchy Fried Chicken. Like Gurpreet, he believes in self-preservation at all costs.

Kishen

Kishen is the tailor in Tochi's village.

Dalbir

Dalbir is Tochi's brother. Rioters burn him.

Palvinder

Palvinder is Tochi's sister. She marries Susheel and is pregnant when rioters kill her.

Susheel

Susheel is one of Tochi's fellow rickshaw drivers and Palvinder's husband.



Tochi's father

Tochi's father is an alcoholic who loses both legs in a machinery accident. Rioters kill him.

Annie

Annie is a smuggler who helps Tochi cross into Europe, but overcharges him.

Babaji

Babaji is a wealthy man who once employed Tochi's father. He serves as a father figure for Tochi and provides him with advice, but he is unwilling to break away from the established social structure in terms of both discrimination and gender roles, as he does not help Tochi gain employment or Narinder escape her arranged marriage.

Deniz

Deniz is a smuggler who assists Tochi in his journey from Paris to England.

Marat

Marat is Tochi's first boss.

Mr. Greatrix

Mr. Greatrix is Narinder's landlord. He is unsympathetic but Narinder convinces him to be more lenient.

Munna

Munna is a mentally disabled youth who works at a store with Tochi.

Chico

Chico is a sarcastic youth who works in a store with Tochi.

Ardashir

Ardashir helps Tochi gain employment when he first comes to England, and later offers him a job in Spain.

Navjoht

Navjoht is Avtar's brother. He is skilled at mathematics and his parents hope for him to attend university.

Harbhajan

Harbhajan works for his father's railway system. He becomes addicted to drugs and steals company funds to pay for his addiction, eventually crashing a stolen car and becoming extremely weak and ill from his abuse.

Harbhajan's father

Harbhajans' father, the manager of a profitable railway system, attempts to overlook his son's wrongdoings, consistent with the emphasis placed on family by his culture.

Randeep's father

Randeep's father suffers from dementia and mental illness. As he enters a downward spiral, his family struggles to provide him with the assistance he needs. His character allows Sahota to explore mental illness in Indian society. He also provides a partial motivation for Randeep's immigration, since he hopes to earn money to provide for him.

Randeep's mother

Randeep's mother represents traditional social values. She adheres strictly to gender roles and is highly concerned with her family's 'honor' as opposed to its wellbeing. Randeep's father's mental decline frustrates her for how it relates to their family, and by the narrative's close she has pressured him into a home for the mentally ill.

Jaytha

Jaytha is a student at Randeep's college in India. Randeep becomes obsessed with her and eventually sexually assaults her. The reader does not witness Jaytha's reaction to this event beyond her decision to lodge a sexual complaint against Randeep, resulting in his expulsion.

Abhijeet

Abhijeet is Randeep's roommate at college in India. He witnesses Randeep raping Jaytha.



Pocket Bhai

Pocket Bhai is a ruthless creditor whom Avtar owes money. He utilizes tactics of violence and intimidation and overcharges Avtar in order to make a profit. He serves as a secondary source of tension throughout the novel and represents the relentless economic pressures of immigrant life.

Massi

Massi is Randeep's relative. She is well-intentioned but largely unconcerned with Randeep and Avtar's success and safety.

Jimmy

Jimmy is Massi's son. He takes a paternalistic view towards the immigrants and attempts to give them advice. He has absorbed himself completely into British society, even going by an Anglicized name.

Pehn

Pehn is Massi's daughter. She is virtually completely integrated into British society and has no sympathy for her Indian relatives. She has a negative view of immigration, yet in some ways she represents the ideal which the new immigrants struggle to attain--she is wealthy and well-cared for.

Vinny

Vinny is the boss of the immigrant labor crew. He is demanding and crooked, seeking to capitalize off of the immigrants' ignorance of many facets of British society, as well as their lack of legal immigration papers. He represents the many people that seek to oppress immigrants and prevent them from contributing societally.

Ruby

Ruby is Tochi's potential fiancée. Their marriage is cancelled after Ruby's family learns of Tochi's caste.

Savraj

Savraj works as a prostitute in Sheffield. She exposes Narinder to a more cynical, guarded world outlook.

Katie

Katie is a kind immigration officer who inspects Randeep and Narinder's marriage.

David

David is a mistrustful immigration officer who also inspects Randeep and Narinder's marriage.

Symbols and Symbolism

Winter

Seasons are extremely important to the novel both structurally and symbolically. Titled "The Year of the Runaways," the novel is divided into sections according to the seasons, and each season plays a specific role not just structurally but symbolically.

The novel begins with "Winter," and builds off of concepts associated with winter. Thus, winter serves as a symbol in the novel. Primarily, Sahota chose to begin the novel with winter because it contains the new year and symbolizes new beginnings and fresh starts. Accordingly, the narrative contains new relationships between characters as well as the reader's initial introduction to these characters.

Snow works as an additional symbol within this. When the men see snow from the bus window, they are fascinated because they are unaccustomed to it. Innocuous symbols like snow represent the unfamiliarity of England.

Roti

Each of the four main characters eat roti, a type of flatbread that is a food staple in India, frequently throughout the novel. Roti represents one of the few physical links to their culture that they can still easily obtain. Although the characters feel isolated from England as a whole, roti symbolizes the way they have continued to maintain connections to their culture even in a foreign environment. Sahota includes roti in the characters' backstories in India in order to emphasize this link.

Roti also functions as a connecting factor between the characters. When they eat roti together, they are strengthening their relationships through conversation and a shared food. Despite the frequent conflicts between the characters, roti reminds them of their fundamental connections to each other due to their shared backgrounds.

Spring

Spring, the title of the second section of the novel, is symbolically important for its connotations of new growth and flourishing. In accordance with the season that this section is placed in, the characters' relationships grow and strengthen. Their work lives flourish (as this is the only section in which their employment is relatively stable), but sources of tension also begin to develop. As the section proceeds, these tenuously established relations move closer to implosion, represented by the progressive growth of spring.

Gurdwara

In one way, the gurdwara—the Sikh place of worship and a major social hub—functions in a similar manner as roti: is a symbol of the characters' original culture in a world that feels unfamiliar. Yet the gurdwara more expressly symbolizes social constrictions and traditional values. For example, when Tochi attempts to enter the gurdwara he is immediately discriminated against, while he is able to avoid discrimination at many points in the outside world.

For Narinder, the meaning of the gurdwara shifts significantly throughout the novel. At the outset of the novel, the gurdwara represents comfort and familiarity; it reaffirms her faith in the world and her connection to her family, particularly her mother. However, Narinder becomes progressively disillusioned with the gurdwara and loses the comfort that it provides her. By the novel's final chapters, she is no longer able to sing at the gurdwara and feels only hypocrisy when she is there.

The gurdwara also represents charity and hope for the immigrants—it provides them with food and shelter when they are at their lowest. Yet, by urging Randeep to live under a bridge with the other workers, the gurdwara also serves as a reminder of the character's need to thrive within the society and brings them shame.

Visa

The visa is, literally, a mechanism for immigration. Yet for the immigrants, it also represents power and a removal from worries. Visas are perhaps the biggest concern of the characters throughout the novel; their sustenance as well as their success depends on the continuation of their visas. The characters admire Randeep for his marriage visa, which is depicted as a high status symbol and a removal from many primary concerns. The visa provides an opportunity to escape from a lower status to a higher one—it symbolizes the social mobility that the characters had lacked in India.

Education

While a visa symbolizes connection to wealth and prosperity, education is virtually equated to it. The character simultaneously place a high value on education and disregard it in favor of employment. The college in London that Avtar attends represents the ways in which the immigrants are prevented from fully integrating themselves into society and succeeding. There is virtually no way for the characters to obtain education while in England, and they resent this fact as they understand the many limitations that it places on them. The main characters' families also highly value education--Avtar's mother drills his brother on mathematics so that he can place higher in school, while Randeep's mother is determined that he should attend NIT. However, it is worth noting that the education itself--the pure acquisition of knowledge--is not necessarily valuable to the characters. Education is more important for the opportunities associated with it.

Autumn

The Autumn section of the novel concludes the plot and is symbolically reinforced by autumnal imagery. As leaves fall and weather grows cooler, the intensity of conflict in the previous section cools into a newly established order of character relationships. The gradual movement towards the end of the year reflects the book's movement towards conclusion.

Summer

The "Summer" section contains the narrative's climax and the most pivotal action.

Roads

Roads and traffic are important symbols throughout the novel. Avtar notes that England has organized and straight roads, symbolizing its efficiency and industriousness. He also has trouble crossing a road and feels bewildered by it, representing the difficulty of capitalizing off of this industriousness. Roads are also a major symbol of the characters' separation from British society.

The Rickshaw

The rickshaw allows Tochi to elevate himself about his social status in many ways. As a major source of income, it is a symbol of salvation for Tochi and his family. Obtaining the rickshaw allowed Tochi to maximize his limited social mobility and assist his family significantly. Therefore, the rickshaw symbolizes success in one capacity.

However, since Tochi is still completely separated from his passengers, the rickshaw also symbolizes his social isolation and the prejudice he continues to face. Passengers like Madame attempt to rationalize and rectify their guilt over this prejudice, and the rickshaw symbolically represents the conflict between their moral sense and the society they are accustomed to. Yet the rickshaw is also a symbol of danger. Tochi's job requires him to navigate through potentially dangerous situations. The day of the floods, it quite literally draws him into danger. Thus, the rickshaw as a whole symbolically reinforces the theme that sacrifice is necessary for opportunity.

Settings

Sheffield, England

Sheffield is the primary setting in the novel—virtually all of the chronological action occurs there. Narinder's flat is located in Sheffield, as is the laborers' group home. Sheffield is a metropolitan area known for its steel production; it is symbolically significant as a center of productivity and industriousness. Yet the characters are largely unable to access the benefits of such a constructive society due to their illegality. They aspire to contribute to the bustling economy, yet find themselves shut out from it. Therefore, Sheffield becomes a paradoxical status symbol and a source of discontent for the characters. Beyond their purely geographical confusion regarding the area, they also feel culturally isolated from it. Everything from the constant rain to the busy, neat roads is a reminder that the characters are separated from their homeland.

Tochi's village and Patna

Tochi's village, which goes unnamed, and the closest city, Patna, serve as the location for Tochi's backstory and the main events of his life before immigrating. Tochi's village primarily consists of other chamaars and is highly impoverished—employment opportunities are virtually nonexistent. The village does have the advantage of allowing its inhabitants to be largely self-sufficient by farming and raising livestock. To Tochi, the village is a key symbol of loss and pain—his home was destroyed by outside rioters, and with it his family. Therefore, the village becomes representative of the damage that Tochi has endured. It also represents a low social and economic baseline which Tochi seeks to rise above. Having lived in poverty, he hopes that immigration will allow him to become more socially mobile and rise above his original circumstances. Yet, as his original home, the village is also a nostalgic place of joy and family belonging. Cumulatively, the village plays a paradoxical symbolic role and brings Tochi both pain and happiness.

Narinder's flat

Narinder's flat is introduced at the beginning of the novel, when Randeep welcomes her to it. At that point, it serves as a mechanism for gathering the characters, and it retains this role throughout the novel. The characters periodically gather at her flat and two sources of extreme conflict—Randeep and Gurpreet's fight and Avtar and Tochi's fight—occur there.

Narinder's flat also enables Narinder and Tochi to develop their relationship. It would have been infeasible without the flat, as it protects them from the restrictive outside society and serves as a figurative shield behind which they can behave freely.

The laborers' group home

The group home is a house shared by twelve workers employed on the same labor crew. The house represents a significant source of conflict for Tochi, Avtar, Randeep, and Gurpreet. In close conditions and with very little sleep, the laborers experience growing tension and conflicts are frequent. Yet the group home also represents a communal space in which the workers grow closer together and develop stronger relations.

Panjab

Panjab is a province of India that is Avtar and Randeep's home. Throughout the novel, it serves as a symbol of the culture they have left behind. When calling home, the characters feel increasingly disconnected from Panjab and all that it represents. However, Panjab has left an indelible mark on their attitudes--they prioritize their family's honor and objectives throughout the novel. In some ways, it also represents the mistakes that have driven the characters from their home, and thus the memory of Panjab causes conflicted feelings of pain and desire within Avtar and Randeep.

London

For the main characters, London is a pinnacle of intellectual development. Avtar's college is located there, as is Dr. Cheema. However, the main characters are separated not just physically but economically and culturally from London.

Themes and Motifs

Honor

The concept of honor serves as the basis for many of the characters' actions throughout the book. To be honorable is to be considered superior by one's social circle and to adhere to all of society's principles. For Narinder's father, honor entails having a daughter who is submissive and powerless. For Avtar and Randeep, honor consists of financial success and general approval. For Tochi, in India, honor means representing his family, while in England it means obscuring his caste. Both Avtar and Randeep witness parallel episodes of someone close to them losing his honor—Avtar's friend Harbhajan is caught stealing company funds and Randeep's father is publicly witnessed battling dementia. These issues are considered problematic not because of the pain that they cause the people involved, but because of the shame they bring upon the families of the suffering.

In the novel, honor serves as a code of action that dictates priorities – for the main characters, it is more important to be perceived as successful than to be successful in reality. When the characters call home, they present a façade of success even when they are literally struggling to survive. Avtar lies about his examinations and Randeep about his finances; both boys do not even consider telling their families about their flaws. Randeep does not tell his parents about his removal from the college because it would destroy the family honor as well as his personal honor; he does not tell Narinder that he was living on the streets out of shame. Avtar's family even refuses to admit that they were attacked by his creditors. Image trumps reality.

Relatedly, honor implies commitment to one's family at all costs. Avtar, Tochi and Randeep are expected to sacrifice their lives at home in order to support their families. Paradoxically, in order to gain their families' approval, they must be separated from their family members for long periods of time with highly limited contact. Similarly, Narinder is expected to dedicate her life to serving her father, brother, and church. She is discouraged from any outside interests and forbidden to obtain employment. For Narinder (and women in general) honor serves as a mechanism to prevent independence.

Avtar, Tochi and Randeep implicitly accept this system even when they recognize its flaws. The epilogue demonstrates that none of the three were able to eventually pursue individual goals or realize individual desires, but remain subservient to the desires of the family. Narinder, however, does deny her commitment to honor and chooses to exercise her independence by continuing with the visa marriage and her job at the library. However, the epilogue demonstrates that the social code was too strong for her to remove herself from completely, as she spent ten years caring for her father and living with her brother. Because of honor, individuals face a conflict between the goals of the family and their own goals, a conflict that can become virtually impossible to rectify.

Sacrifice and Opportunity

Through his consistent and thorough portrayal of the daily struggles that immigrants face, Sahota clearly makes an argument about both the necessity and dangers of personal sacrifice. For the four main characters, success is equivalent to sacrifice, and opportunities can only be found at personal expense. The clearest example of this theme is the constant job search that the characters must endure throughout the novel—a large portion of the text is devoted solely to portraying the endless quest for employment and its emotional effects on the characters. When work is extremely scarce, the characters feel forced to make a choice between maintaining friendships and loyalties and pursuing personal gain. This choice wears away at their moral fiber, clearly demonstrated by the contrast between Avtar's actions at the beginning of the book, when he turns down a better job in order to work with Randeep, and the end, when he deliberately refuses to allow Randeep on the van with him leading to a new job.

Sahota demonstrates that this sacrifice is directly related to the pursuit of opportunities. Randeep, Avtar, and Tochi were motivated to immigrate out of a desire for such opportunity. Each felt that they had exhausted their opportunities in India due to the lack of upward mobility, and immigrated in order to help themselves and their families. Other characters—such as Savraj and Gurpreet—become disillusioned by the lack of available opportunities even at the expense of great sacrifice.

The line between sacrifice that is beneficial or necessary and sacrifice that is harmful or unnecessary becomes increasingly blurred as the novel proceeds—each character feels justified in their own moral decisions. For example, Avtar felt that he had truly no choice but to reject Randeep from climbing on the van and choose not to assist Romy. The characters' environment creates this moral ambiguity, and circumstances often play a large role in determining their standards.

By the novel's close, there is no direct linkage established between sacrifice and opportunity. One can argue that Avtar, who now walks with a limp and still suffers physically from Tochi's attack and his former illness, sacrificed the most for his family. Yet he did not gain the most from immigration, and did not bring the most honor to his family. The epilogue reinforces the theme of the blurry, complex web of factors that produce success, which Sahota emphasized throughout the novel.

Religion and Morality

Religion is most thoroughly explored through the character of Narinder, who defines herself based off of her religion and begins the novel as an extremely devout Sikh. Narinder's commitment to faith stems from both her altruism and her commitment to the memory of her devout mother. Others in the community recognize Narinder as highly religious, further increasing her piety. She stands for many in the Sikh society as a whole whose entire lives adhere to the tenants of their religion.

For Narinder, however, religion is also valuable for its ability to confirm her desire for the world to adhere to a moral order. She therefore struggles to maintain her faith when presented with a world which seemingly does not apply to the moral order which her religion and her personal beliefs have established. Sahota injects Narinder's experience throughout the novel with senseless acts of pain and violence to demonstrate how such acts can erode one's faith in a benevolent God. Accordingly, each successive act of evil that Narinder witnesses removes her further from her faith, until she finally removes her turban and violates her society's standards by refusing to marry.

Savraj serves as an introduction to this point of view; Narinder's fascination with Savraj stems from her statements against the gurdwara and her sarcastic, embittered attitude towards religion. Savraj mocks Narinder for her piety, and instead of responding with anger Narinder becomes further absorbed by her. Sahota utilizes Savraj to foreshadow Tochi's situation. Tochi has the same effect on Narinder, but in a much more impactful manner. Narinder's doubts are solidified by Tochi's experiences—she is horrified by the discrimination that he has suffered from and by the murder of his family. The movement away from firm piety and towards a shakier world foundation is also encouraged by Tochi's words themselves—Tochi lacks faith and attempts to convince Narinder that religion is not a viable explanation for what they have suffered.

Furthermore, Narinder's religious beliefs are corrupted by the daily pressures of society. Ironically, it is her strong moral sense that eventually leads her to reject her faith. She feels constricted by her duties towards her father and her brother, and her independence is consistently stifled. Although Narinder is empathetic towards others, she is also self-sufficient and craves the ability to direct her own actions. Thus, her rejection of faith also stems from her vision of a morally fair society.

Although Sahota depicts Narinder's religious decline, this does not necessarily translate to a statement against religious thought or Sikhism in general. Narinder rarely questions the actual tenants of the belief system, only her own relation to them.

Empathy and Competition

From the novel's beginning, Sahota foreshadows the potential effects of the competitive immigrant-labor environment on Avtar, Randeep, and Tochi. He does this largely through Gurpreet, whose primary narrative function is to represent a potential model for the immigrants after they have been consistently exposed to a biased and cutthroat system. According to Gurpreet, to thrive in the British immigrant society is to renounce commitment to one's friends and families. This directly undercuts the principle of honor which has firmly governed the characters' lives: paradoxically, in order to succeed and satisfy their family's demands, they must behave by a moral code that rejects the traditional values their family has instilled in them.

Avtar, arguably the least empathetic character at the outset of the novel, becomes even less so and adheres to Gurpreet's prediction that the young men would become more and more self-involved as their time in the country progressed. After an endlessly



disappointing job search, Avtar begins to perceive the job market as a man-vs-man competition, where one person's gain is another's loss. Accordingly, Avtar denies work to Rony and even to Randeep, his closest ally. Through the cutthroat nature of the competition that he depicts, Sahota demonstrates that this viewpoint is indeed largely accurate—however, Avtar's descent indicates that visualizing the job market in this way does not lead to positive outcomes. Avtar ends the novel out of work and crippled, beaten by the competitive system.

The frequent conflicts between the immigrant laborers also demonstrate how the competitive environment they live in erodes their sense of empathy. There are frequent physical fights in the novel that represent implosions of frustration, not just of one character towards another but of one character towards their entire situation. These conflicts culminate in Tochi's attack on Avtar, which results in Avtar becoming crippled for life. Such a violent act is firmly indicative of the characters' desperation.

Other, less violent but equally non-empathetic acts also occur throughout the novel. Tochi steals Avtar's job, robbing him of his livelihood for pure self-gain, an act which clearly indicates his focus on ensuring his success at the expense of others. In response, Avtar steals all of Tochi's money, an act that is equally culpable. The boys' also steal chickens and overcome their initial moral resistance at the promise of financial benefits.

Prejudice

The theme of prejudice is largely explored through Tochi's experiences. Sahota makes a firmly negative statement about prejudice and discrimination and depicts its prevalence and harmful effects throughout the novel.

Tochi's entire life has been defined by his status as a 'chamaar,' a member of an extremely low caste. It limits his employment and marriage opportunities; he has little to no social mobility and cannot expect to rise above menial labor. These basic facets of discrimination are a part of his life, and yet prejudice against him grows stronger and stronger until it results in the death of his entire family. Sahota escalates the discrimination quickly—in the beginning of Chapter 2, a mother removes her son from Tochi's presence, yet by the end rioters are imposing extreme violence upon his family members. Such an escalation demonstrates how quickly prejudice can grow from mild to deadly in a short period of time.

Even after immigrating, Tochi continues to experience intense discrimination within the self-contained world of Indian immigrants in Britain. These immigrants, despite being geographically separated from the caste system, still adhere to its principles. Tochi again faces an additional layer of difficulty in finding employment and is forced to lie about his identity. He is unable to secure a marriage visa because of his caste, permanently damaging his prospects in the country.

Tochi experiences specific prejudice due to his caste, but each of the characters experiences prejudice on a general level from the society they are part of. In many parts of the novel—such as when Avtar attempts to sign up for classes— the characters are misunderstood and misinterpreted by their British counterparts. This is perhaps not borne out of prejudice, but it contributes to that effect, and many other instances of pure discrimination combine with these innocent problems to create an oppositional environment.

Sahota interweaves casual, minor acts of discrimination with incredibly violent outbursts of prejudice to create an effect of widespread suffering, a tapestry that indicates how problematic prejudice is for the immigrants as they attempt to achieve their goals.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is told in close third person, alternating between four characters--Tochi, Randeep, Avtar and Narinder. Sahota frequently alternates perspectives between these characters, even within the same chapter. This technique enables the reader to gain insight into each of the characters without focusing too specifically on a single one. The point of view is essential to achieving Sahota's goal of creating a comprehensive tapestry of voices and narratives in order to create a clear picture of immigration.

Language and Meaning

One of Sahota's primary goals in the novel is to create a comprehensive picture of the daily lives of the characters--the challenges they face, the dreams and hopes they possess, the gritty details of their existence. The linguistic mechanisms in this novel are chosen with this goal in mind. Dialogue is one of the primary tools that helps Sahota achieve this--the dialogue is frequent, natural, and varied. Sahota attempts to capture the rhythm and language of daily life, so his characters' dialogue is crafted with this in mind and works to reveal the inner states of the characters in a realistic fashion.

Continuing with this objective, the tone of the novel is matter-of-fact and practical. Sahota continually represents shocking events and even physical altercations in a way that is both vivid and unstrained. Although he provides a wealth of physical detail, he refrains from using language that is charged or opinionated -- he focuses instead on the concrete realities of the situation, allowing the reader to place themselves within the action and form their own judgments.

Sahota balances descriptive scenes and emotional commentary throughout the novel, but he focuses largely on physical details in order to create a rich and thorough image of the characters' lives. He rarely skims over descriptions of labor or home conditions, instead depicting them in vivid detail to emphasize their importance to the reader. Much of the novel's language focuses on settings that could easily be misconstrued as mundane, but cumulatively result in a realistic effect,

Structure

The novel is structured into four sections, titled after each of the four seasons and proceeding chronologically according to these seasons. This structure is highly effective and is in accordance with the basic tenant of the novel-- the year of the runaways-- as it allows the reader to witness the growth of the main characters in a straightforward fashion. Thus, the structure is inextricable from the novel's meaning as a whole and is an essential framework for the plot.

The four sections are divided into three or four chapters per section. Each chapter serves to advance a concrete aspect of the plot—for example, Chapter 1: Arrivals, establishes the personality and basic situation of each character. These chapters organize the complex events of the plot into discrete steps, further allowing the reader to visualize the character growth clearly.

Three chapters--two in the first section (Winter) and one in the second (Spring)--deviate from this chronological structure to provide in-depth novella-length backstories on the four main characters. These chapters are also essential for the novel's functioning as a whole. They create a richer picture of the characters and strengthen the readers' connections to them. The placement of these chapters—early in the novel, separated by the typical chronological chapters—give the reader crucial context without removing the storyline's tension. In fact, they increase the dramatic tension in the novel by removing the reader from the plotline for significant amounts of text.

Quotes

But it wasn't pride, either. Or not just pride. It was a desire to be allowed a say in his life. He wondered if this was selfish; whether, in fact, they were right and he should simply recognize his place in this world."

-- Tochi (chapter 2 paragraph 7)

Importance: This quote is in reference to Tochi's desire to work even under dangerous conditions, when there are rioters on the street. His thought express his intense desire to escape from the restrictive conditions of his world and establish autonomy for himself. He wants to feel measure of control over his actions, as opposed to a sense of being controlled by an exterior social structure. However, such thinking is so antithetical to the structure that has dictated his life up to his point that he feels guilty for thinking this.

So what do we do? For the first time in history are the women of this house to go and find work? Shall I start offering my services to clean my neighbours' latrines?

-- Mrs. Sanghera (chapter 4 paragraph 9)

Importance: Mrs. Sanghera's dramatic opposition to even the prospect of employment demonstrates how rigid the societal gender roles she is accustomed to are. This theme, while stated directly in this quote, is implicit throughout the novel. The search for employment dominates Avtar, Randeep and Tochi's lives, and they feel intense pressure to be employed. Yet Narinder feels pressure not to get a job, and Mrs. Sanghera is horrified at the prospect. Men are expected to provide for the family and women are not.

He imagined impossibly clever people in spectacles behind each of those doors, being groomed for a rich and employed future. And here he was, amongst them.

-- Avtar (Chapter 4 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote represents both optimism on Avtar's part and provides key insight into the immigrants' mindsets upon arrival in the country. Thus, the quote reveals a key facet of Avtar's character -- his intense hopefulness. Although Avtar is often represented as bitter and focused on profits, it is important to remember that this attitude emerged from his deep longing for success in the country. Each of the boys immigrated in order to improve the prospects of themselves and their families, and they each believed that the system would allow them to do this, a concept that Sahota challenges throughout the novel.

Something had sounded wrong, and because Randeep was [Lahkpreet's] brother, and younger than him, weaker than him, and because they'd come across together and stayed with Randeep's aunt that first month - all this seemed to have conferred on Avtar an exaggerated sense of responsibility towards the boy. He smiled ruefully. Funny how God offers you everything you've asked for, only to force you to turn it away.

-- Avtar (Chapter 4 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote demonstrates an important concept in the novel -- the conflict

between duty and individual desire. Avtar feels extremely frustrated by his forced loyalty to Randeep and would rather pursue his own agenda, yet is restricted by a sense of family honor. A major motivation for his immigration was to satisfy his girlfriend Lahkpreet, and he continues to allow her desires to dictate his actions. This quote signifies Avtar's frustration with the system of honor and foreshadows his future decision to prioritize his individual success over that of Randeep's.

Do you think I'd have got anywhere in this country if I made promises like that?
-- Malkeet (chapter 7 paragraph 10)

Importance: In this quote, Malkeet is referring to a promise to Avtar that he would still have his job when he returned from London. Malkeet is voicing a sentiment expressed by many characters throughout the novel--that ruthless self-interest is the only method of persevering in a society that discourages compassion and teamwork. This uncharitable yet effective strategy will eventually influence Avtar himself; therefore, the quote also serves as foreshadowing.

His heart was thick in his chest. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't know this place. He didn't know this country. He spotted a payphone and dialed his mamma. He couldn't get through. He tried four, five times. He bang-banged the receiver down and looked up. Their faces were in the glass. Jaytha. Rishi. Gurpreet. What he'd done to them. He'd done. He looked down at himself as if for the first time seeing the violence inside him. He was terrified. He didn't mean to do it.

-- Randeep (chapter 11 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote exposes the core conflict of Randeep's character. Randeep perceives himself --and others perceive him -- as childlike and innocent. Yet he also perpetrates acts of incredible violence. This contrast creates a deep uncertainty on Randeep's part and he lacks a sense of identity. This quote represents the moment at which he is forced to recognize the deeply violent aspects of his character and the realization that he must come to terms with his actions in order to begin changing.

All I wanted was one year. A few months now. Why can't you give me that? I've given my whole life to you. For you. I've thrown my life aside so you can walk with your head held high and you can't even give me this? How is that right? How is that fair?

-- Narinder (chapter 12 paragraph 13)

Importance: In this quote, Narinder explicitly states the belief that has been materializing throughout the novel -- that the societally established gender roles which have dictated her behavior for much of her life are unfair. By stating this to her father -- who represents not only a major source of power in Narinder's life but also a traditionalist who firmly believes in such roles -- Narinder is breaking from her place in society and beginning to carve out a position.

Luckily for me, guilt's a luxury I can't afford."

-- Avtar (chapter 11 paragraph 17)

Importance: This quote echoes the theme that terrible circumstances merit extreme behavior. For Avtar, morals are suspended in the quest for survival. He must gain employment at any cost, and the ethical consequences of his actions are largely unimportant.

The others were still reciting, beautifully, tunefully; their faces lifted and ardent. She knew what they were feeling and knew she no longer felt it herself. Something had gone wrong.

-- Narinder (chapter 11 paragraph 9)

Importance: This quote symbolizes Narinder's lack of faith in the religion that had once sustained her. She is disillusioned and the symbols that had carried significant meaning for her are now rendered unfamiliar and invisible. Even singing-- which she is passionate about -- no longer gives her any spiritual or emotional sustenance.

This life. It makes everything a competition. A fight. For work, for money. There's no peace. Ever. Just fighting for the next job. Fight fight fight.

-- Gurpreet (chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: In this quote, Gurpreet is affirming a theme that appears several times throughout the novel: the cruel and relentless conditions of immigration produces a ruthless mindset. The unethical practices of many immigrants is not an inherent feature of their personalities but a product of their environment--Gurpreet was likely less hard-hearted before immigrating.

Someone once said to her that when she spoke she made people feel naked against the world.

-- Narinder (chapter 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote emphasizes Narinder's gentle nature and her role as a counterpoint to the brutality of many of the characters that the reader encounters. It also reveals her inherent skepticism about many facets of her society.

He nodded, though perhaps worse than the spitting was the quietness in her voice, the sense of someone being embarrassed for him.

-- Avtar (chapter 5 paragraph 12)

Importance: This quote occurred after Kirsty apologized to Avtar for the demeaning words that the bar's patrons said to him. His reaction stresses the importance of honor and dignity to the immigrants. One's reaction to an event is not determined by the event itself but by others' reaction to it. Avtar's desire to preserve a strong image of himself is more important than anything else to him.