**Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)**
***A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal***
Impact Factor 6.8992 (ICI) http://www.rjelal.com;
Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com ISSN:2395-2636 (P); 2321-3108(O)

**Vol.5.Issue 4. 2017**
**(Oct-Dec.)**

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

# COMBATING RACE AND GENDER: DIASPORIC WRITERS IN CANADA

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**ABSTRACT**
Canada is usually designated as a multi-cultural mosaic. It is the country of immigrants and their presence is pronounced so much so in Canadian multi-cultural mosaic that the native population itself has been relegated to the background. Diaspora and its complex literary issues while receiving modern scholarly attention are not of course entirely new. A number of South-Asian writers have made their presence felt in Canadian multi-cultural life. This article apart from dwelling on the immigrant writers from the South-East Asia in general and India in particular, seeks to examine the attitude of the 'Canadians' towards the immigrants' towards their race and the immigrants' attempt for cultural assimilation and adjustment to the cultural mosaic of Canada. This article also proposes to analyse 'South-Asian immigrant writers' predicament in general and women writers in particular in Canadian cultural mosaic. This is so because immigrant writings despite powerful literary and aesthetic appeal still remains a Cinderella in free enjoyment of her kitchen delight. In other words, it has not found a place in the mainstream Canadian literature.
Keywords: Soth East Asian , immigrant, race , gender

**Discussion**

Before taking up the question of race and gender and Canadian's attitude to immigrants, it is essential to give a brief introduction of the South-Asian immigrant writers in Canada. South Asian refers to a range of people of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan background — Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Parsi, Christian — from East-Africa, Fiji, and the Caribbean as well as from the Indian subcontinent. Among noteworthy contemporary writers in Canada who have cultural links with South Asia are Ven Begamudre , Uma Parameswaran (b.1938) Michael Ondatjee, Rienzi Crusz (b.1925), Nazneen Sadiq (b.1944), Cyril Dabydeen, Bharati Mukherjee, Shyam Selvadurai, Rohinton Mistry, Suniti Namjoshi (b.1941 ), Hiro (Mcllwraith) Boga (b.1949) Shani Mootoo (b.1957), M.G. Vassanji and Neil Bisoondath.While a critical literature about diasporic writing could apply to all, these writers particular experiences of emigration and exile spell out radically different experiences of home. Parekh (1993) argues that regional, linguistic, caste and religious variations from the countries of origin contribute to the diversity of the Indian abroad. For decades, overseas Indian had little or no contact with each other, contributing to vast differences in both their character as well as achievements.

Diasporic writers express their predicament in various ways. For Selvadurai, Namjoshi, Mootoo, questions of sexuality are as important as those of authenticity, for Boga, in *Shahnaz* (2000), emphasis falls on opportunities for women's education. Bisoondath challenges the 'divisiveness' of the idea of multiculturalism, as does Mukherjee, who through works such as *Jasmine* (1989) went on to

position herself within the social contexts of American iconography. Begamudre and Ondatjee sought wider frames of reference than South Asia alone, while Parameswaran, Crusz, Vassanji (the creative force behind *TSAR* publication and *Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad),* and Dabydeen returned repeatedly to the binaries that divide Canada from, respectively, their native India, Sri Lanka, Kenya and Guyana. The divisions are not clear-cut. In some of his stories for example, Dabydeen (born in Guyana) records how in India he discovers the degree to which he has become Canadian..But cultural binaries do nonetheless have a continuing force; they are also the inheritance of a second generation writer such as Danielle Lagah (b.1977), whose poems evocatively confront the limits and possibilities of language in place (her own Canada) and the inconstant temptations of the unknown (her father's India).

Of all South Asian Canadian writings those of Rohinton Mistry won the most widespread attention, garnering national and international awards (Commonwealth Prize in 1991 and 1995, Booker Shortlist in 1991, Giller Prize in 1995, Kiriyama Prize in 2002); *A Fine Balance* then became an 'Oprah Pick of the Month' (celebrated on Oprah Winfrey's popular television program), and the author's sales soared. Mistry came to attention twelve years after he had emigrated from India, when *Tales From Firozsha Baag* (1987) was shortlisted for a Governor's General Award. A collection of linked tales set in a Bombay Baag (or apartment complex). It records the sour-sweet lives of the largely Parsi families who live there. These issues recur in the novels that Mistry subsequently published — *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* (2002) — as did his primary focus on India, its social traumas and the 'bonbeur d' occasion' for which individual strive.

In view of many celebrated diaspora voices both creative and critical, it becomes necessary to examine the Canadian nationalist ideology, which according to critics is racist and sexist. In an essay, 'Canadian Nationalism, Canadian Literature and Racial Minority Women', Arun P. Mukherjee has argued how the nationalist agenda of Canada has relegated the minorities and immigrants to the margin.

Canadian literature created, published, taught, and critiqued under the aegis of Canadian nationalism, promotes the settler-colonial view of Canada. Nationalist critics such as Northrop Frye, Margaret Atwood, D. G. Jones, and John Moss produced an essentialized Canadian character that, according to them, was discoverable in the literary texts of canonical Canadian writers. Canadians, these revered critics have told us, suffered from a garrison mentality because of their intimidating physical environment. They developed a victim complex, aiming only for survival rather than grandiose achievements, unlike their neighbours to the South. (1995:83).

On the white racism, which is also prevalent in academics Arun P. Mukherjee states that too many immigrant writers had their work turn downed by Canadian publishers because either it was not Canadian or they felt that Canadian readers would not identify with it. She states:

> "The construction of 'Canadian Literature', by powerful professors, bureaucrats, editors, publishers and reviewers, the majority.of them white male, has been carried out under the aegis of nineteenth century European notions of nationhood, which proposed that a nation was racially and culturally different from other nations and uniform at home. A nation's literature, according to such theories, has to reflect the 'soul' of the nation, its history and traditions, which are also conceived in terms of a nation's unified 'spirit'. Canadian literature was constructed in the service of a Canadian nation conceptualised in term of these ethnocultural theories of nationhood. These critics believed that reading Canadian writing would help Canadian readers develop into a distinctive national type, discover the 'soul' of the country, become united as Canadians". (1995:87)

Arun P. Mukherjee quotes the opinion of several minority and immigrant writers and reaches the conclusion that Canadian nationalism augments

racist ideology and excludes the non-whites .Following Brand we can say that, ideological 'State Apparatuses', a term covered by Italian Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser; promote Canadian racist ideology. These ideologies define and determine Canadian canon and promote books by white writers.The White experience, more often than not, is equated with Canadian experience. Other experiences, if they get noticed, are dubbed "black" or "ethnic" or immigrant experience. However, as Mukherjee points out:

> "The work of the immigrants writers has challenged these construction in several ways, by positioning themselves as South Asian and by writing from the specificity of their location, as members of racial minority communities, they have called into question "the universalist stance adopted by White Canadian writers." (1995:90)

Commenting on the role played by immigrant writers in the canon of Canadian literature, Arun P. Mukherjee states:

> "The old Canadian nationalism/s, founded on racial purity and cultural duality are being challenged by those who have long been excluded from the tables of deal makers and dice rollers. Canada needs a new nationalism, one whose grounding premise will be Canada's heterogeneity". (1995:92)

Mukherjee also holds that the racist policy is also evident in White Canadian literature, which undermines the concept of a 'just society' and 'cultural pluralism'. It is because of this, immigrant writers along with racial minority have expressed negative views about Canada. For example -Dionne Brand's in her short story 'At the Lisbon Plate' (1998) describes herself as "A woman in enemy territory?"(97). Himani Bannerji's trope of "prison" in her long prose poem *Doing Time* similarly challenge the notion of Canada as an "imagined community" as the work as a whole depicts Canada as a prison house for those who are "not white and also women" (9). And in a untitled poem in *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* (1984), Brand uses the tropeof homelessness to describe her relationship with Canada:

> I am not a refugee,
> I have my papers,
> I was born in the Caribbean,
> practically in the sea,
> fifteen degrees above the equator,
> I have a Canadian passport,
> I have lived here all my adult life,
> I am stateless anyway. (70)

Such alienation from a national entity called "Canada" and "Canadian" is quite commonplace in the writing of aboriginal and racial minority Canadian women. If Canada is "enemy territory" for Brand's black female narrator and a "prison" for Bannerji's poetic persona, it is occupied territory in the writings of Aboriginal women. Mukherjee argues that because of racist biases even some best writings of First Nations and Immigrants do not find a place in mainstream Canadian literature. Bharati Mukherjee was told by an eminent Canadian critic that she could not be a Canadian writer because she "didn't grow up playing in snow" (qtd. in Mukherjee, 'Canadian Nationalism', 85).

Similarly Atwood, explaining why she had excluded some writers in her discussion of Canadian literature, says:

> "It seems to me dangerous to talk about 'Canadian' pattern of sensibility in the work of the people who entered and / or entered - and left the country at a developmentally late stage of their live". (qtd. in Metcalf, II) .

Uma Parameswaran's useful metaphor for displaced people is the mythical figure Trishanku, a king who floats between heaven and earth rejected by both. Uma is a university professor, poet and critic. Her summary of the immigrants disadvantaged position, is not unlike that of Metis writer. Malashri Lai in her article 'Women's Advocacy' puts forward her views:

> "In the immigrant context, one might say that minorities, especially non-whites, have to fight for both the erasure of a negative identity pre- given by the power group and the forging a positive identity. In the process, they are often transformed into an uneasy hybrid condition of non-belonging in both homelands". (1995:55)

As the titles indicate, an amazing number of works problematize the transitions of homeless: Rohinton

Mistry's *Such a Long Journey,* M.G.Vassanji's *No New Land,* Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories,* Cyril Dabydeen's *Exiles.* The topographical instability of the immigrant and the concommitant deferrals of identity formation are expressed in the TSAR anthology *The Geography of Voice: Canadian Literature of the South Asian Diaspora* (1992). Diane McGifford's 'Introduction' emphasizes the voices rather than the place:

> "Immigrant writers understand the intricasies of power, its methods of manipulation, colonization, silencing and exclusion. The upheavals of relocating and reshaping their lives, the advantages of untutored vision, the shock of racism and bigotry mean personally won knowledge, mean having something to say". (xiii)

Passing beyond the aesthetics of poetry and fiction, Indian protest now expresses its rhetoric publicly on the stage in the drama companies called *Montreal Serai* and *Teesri Duniya.* Rana Bose, founder of an inter-cultural troupe prefers "improvisational experimental theatre" for his message bearing. Bose's depersonalised characters and themes focus on the issue and reflect Montreal and Canadian reality. The play *'On the Double'* (published in *The Geography of Voice)* for instance, debates woman's multiple identities as single woman, wife, mother of three, sister, further complicated by a hostile, alien environment.

Rahul Varma's *Teesri Duniya* troupe prefers agit-prop to stylisation and tackles subjects like equal wages, crimes against women and environmental degradation. *'Isolated Incident' (pub\\shed* in *The Geography of Voice)* written by Varma and Stephen Orlov won several awards at the 1988 Quebec Drama Festival. Ustad, a woman performer, controls a "show", which depicts racial killings. Lakshmi Gill registers her disillusionment in a *'Letter to prospective Immigrant':*

> Here the body must deny nature
> stay virginal or abort, no womb issues
> Houswhores are mad, in league with perverse
> witches, cripples and wild dogs
> Make no mistake: divided you fall. (75)

In the light of the remarks detailed above the Canadian nationalist ideology is fraught with racist agenda. This racist ideology dismisses immigrant writings as 'nostalgic' because it refers to the root of the writers of their origin, if it has Canadian content, it is automatically considered to be about an immigrant's struggle to adjust to new realities. As Vassanji points out that white immigrant writers have not had their writing branded in this way. Their works are judged according to universalist criteria of merit and quickly find their place in Canadian literature anthologies. The immigrant label, then, is coded racially. The danger of such labelling, according to Vassanji, is that the writing deemed immigrant experience" begins to "seem irrelevant to the ongoing dialectic.

With the advent of diasporic writings, a new canon formation is taking place in Canada. In the same article Malashri Lai (1995) further argues that, the First Nations People and the new immigrant people are "equally exposingthe myth of multiculturalism" and are resisting the overt and subtle pressures of assimilation with the dominant culture. He asserts:

> "While the contentions are out in the open and free debate is a healthy activity leading to conflict resolution, the literary world is making its own attempt at mapping a common territory". (28)

After having stated the predicament of South Asian in general, women immigrants in particular, it is essential to examine the question of gender. This is so because a review of literature on immigrant groups reveals that women have been left out of many studies, as is the case in other areas of Humanities and Social Science research in which women experiences have generally been subsumed under those of men. Several studies (Jacobson 1979, Dumon 1981 etc.) point out that women have been treated as 'migrant wives' rather than as 'female migrants'. As Morokvasik (1984) points out that 'birds of passage are also women', and their experiences are unique and sometimes quite different from those of male counterpart and therefore they deserve greater attention. Unfortunately, however scholars studying immigrants lives have considered 'uniquely female

or private familial events' less important. Hence we need to rectify this omission in the immigration literature and also to see the connection between domestic and public sphere. While many studies document changes in immigrant women's lives, at least marginally, they do not place gender roles in a meaningful context. Sydney Stahl Weinberg in a review essay on immigrant women in history, point out that what has been left unexamined in many of these studies are:

> "what women thought of their own authority, their attitudes toward acculturation, changes in women's status between the old country and new, and perhaps even significant differences between the attitudes of first generation men and women... Thus we do not learn about the texture of women's lives: how did they see themselves, socialise their children, participate in neighbourhood life, maintain kinship relationships, establish sex linked ties and create their own sense of values and neighbourhood?" (1992:33-34).

However, Indian women often serve as the transmitters of tradition and the immigrant women take on this mantle. In her article on the 'Indian immigrant bourgeoisie' and the construction of 'Indianness', Anannya Bhattacharjee (1902) critically examines the way in which the immigrant community creates a model of a woman who is a representative of the pure 'nation'. She says that the construction of woman is always 'pure', in the image of ancient Hindu Goddesses and there is a systematic indifference toward anything that challenges the prototype of the Indian woman. Issues such as domestic violence and lesbianism are, often, therefore, ignored by the Indian immigrants.

Female Indian immigrants in Canada and Britain have certainly received greater attention from scholar than their counterparts in the U.S. Many of the studies on Asian Indian women in those countries focused on immigrant women in the labour market (Wilson 1978; Arnopoulos 1979; Silvera 1981; Bhachu 1986). Armit Wilson's (1978) book on Asian women's lives in Britain, for example, while providing a fascinating experimental account, concentrated mostly on immigrant women workers caught between two different cultures. Religion and larger questions of culture were not accorded importance. A number of Canadian studies dealt with women and ethnic issues or the problem of identity in an alien culture, reflecting governmental concerns about multiculturalism (Ghosh 1981, 1983; Naidoo 1985; Dasgupta 1986). Ratna Ghosh pointed out:

> "maintenance of cultural identity is an important concern, for. Indian women in Canada and they, more than men, are 'custodians of religious and cultural convictions'. However, this cultural role does not mean that these women are largely 'traditional' in their value system". (1983:24-25)

Helen Ralston (1988) explored the dynamics of cultural issue, and gender as experienced by South Asian women in Metro Halifax, Canada. This study was useful as a preliminary guide to research among the Indians in Pittsburgh. The experiences of the South Asian women were examined in the domestic sphere, in the labour market, and in the social and religious spheres. Ralston found that gender relations inside and outside the home gave women the responsibility of maintaining ethnic identity for themselves and their children through everyday religious, cultural and social activities. Since most of these women had arranged marriage they had 'theoretically agreed to the man's control over gender relations' and accepted cultural defined gender roles including the responsibility for transmission of culture (1988:71).

In a survey on ethnic cultural generation Hindu immigrants retention among first in Canada, Vanaja Dhruvarajan (1993) compares the gender ideologies of men and women, using such variables as religiosity, occupation, education and length of stay in Canada. She found that the practical values that the Indian immigrants brought with them from India are perpetuated to a considerable extent in the Canadian context. South Asian immigrant women writers in Canada have made their voices heard by articulating women's experience of gender, race and class in Canada. It is necessary to record their voices as Srivastava and Ames says:

Most research on immigrants has tended to focus on historical, demographic and economic data, in which women are invisible and the norms is assumed to be male. (1993:123)

Srivastava and Ames argues that South Asian women have not been recognised as independent entity because of biases in Canadian immigrant policy which first banned them from "entering the country at all regardless of educational or professional qualifications" (1993:123).

Many critics have made an indepth analysis of South Asian immigrant women's predicament in Canadian Society from a number of different perspectives. Naidoo in her perspective studies has nicely brought out the perceptions of South Asian women in Canadian context from socio-psychological point of view. Examining the stressful and facilitaliary life experiences of South Asian women in the Canadian mosaic, She points out that Canada's immigration history, and the cultural, economic and social differences between the areas of the country, create notable differences in the experiences of the women living there. Naidoo is a social psychologist and she has compared cross-culturally the individual attitudes, values, aspirations and images of self and other. Naidoo in an essay on 'Stressful and Facilitating Life Experiences for South Asian Women in Canada' focuses her concern on "community leaders and educators centred around the isolation, alienation, and cultural stress allegedly experienced by South Asian Women" (1984:90).

These studies reduce the women to passive actors with limited voices, attempt to take into account the women's backgrounds, their response to her questionnaire and the social organisation of work and life in Canada. Several women expressed succinctly the contradictions they experienced in their lives, the unequal work load. The most difficult thing is that husbands are busy and the .responsibility of raising the children is wholly on the mother. At home there are extended families; there are aunts and grandmother helping to teach them their religious values and their cultural values. Here, all this is on the mother. In this statement there is a clear expression of "the lived reality of being a woman and the transfer of gender myths of the home culture to domestic life in Canada" (Ralston, 1988:69).

First the social organisation of child care and domestic labour in Canada creates more work for South Asian wives and mothers. The combination of this heavier workload and the spatial isolation caused by apartment living contributes for feelings of loneliness and imprisonment. Finally, the practical difficulties of getting around in a large Canadian city in a Canadian winter discourage activities outside of home.

Naidoo discusses the white Canadians attitudes to multiculturalism and suggests that immigrants may be confused and disappointed when their "expectation of retaining cultural identity with dignity" meets up with the reality of white Canadian resistance, negativity and hostility (1978:3).

Most researchers considered ethnicity an individual attribute rooted in "identity" and assimilation an individual psychological process rooted in changes in 'values'. For Ghosh (1981), "South Asians consciously share some aspects of a common culture" (61), and their "integration and adjustment into a society.is a personal and individual process involving decision* making opportunities and life options" (1984: 145-146).

Disturbingly Ghosh in her article 'Minority within a Minority' (1981) concludes that the only South Asian women who will succeed (as opposed to merely survive) in the Canadian economic environment are "those who are intellectually gifted, have attractive personalities and are extraordinarily motivated" (1981: 424). Bolaria and Li points out that some versions of ethnicity / assimilation theory have social Darwinist overtones (1985:15). To be fair to Ghosh, however, she does balance her discussion of ethnicity with the recognition of racial and gender oppression. Naidoo believes that individual South Asian women select aspects of Canadian culture for "emulation", while "adamantly" retaining "some forms of expression (which) are considered integral parts of cultural identity" (1987:47). She considers South Asian women as more autonomous than many of the stereotypes of them permit; on the other hand, a

woman experiencing conflict or difficulty apparently has only herself to blame.

According to Khosla, racism is responsible for inflicting pain and humiliation on immigrants. In case of women, sexism is also a factor, which leads to their subjugation and marginalisation. These twin factors led to the formation of the India Mahila Association:

> "Many of us have lived through years of pain, isolation and humiliation with minimal or no hope of change. Some of us have spoken out against the sexism of our communities and the racism of the larger Canadian society from the time we set foot here. The India Mahila association... is one such group of women... What initially brought us together was the realization that there was no organised voice for women in the Indian community: that cultural, religious and political events in the community were male dominated and monopolized... Since none of us really had post-secondary education in either our countries of birth or in Canada we were limited in our knowledge and utilisation of existing services. This is not to mention the fact that approaching agencies to help resolve domestic problems is an alien concept in itself for most Indian women". (Khosla, 1982:18-19).

The lived experience of Canadian South Asian women is remarkably short term and disengaged. Our brief view of the literature on personal expressions suggests that in the everyday lives of South Asian women, gender, race and class are as important as the question of ethnicity, an that they seek those forms of economic and political integration that do not demand the abandonment of their cultural identities. This literature, which not only recognises the qualitative experience of South Asian women immigrants (rather than merely subsuming them under statistical categories and simplified questionnaire surveys) but also allows them to express their own language and concepts, and is furthermore responsive to their needs and interests. Even the categories "South Asian" and "East Indian" are problematic, being outsider terms that do not equate with the identities and lives of those so labelled.

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