

Re-defining 'Can. Lit.' or 'Indian Writing in English'? English Writings and the Indian Diaspora in Canada

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Abstract: International travel and migration are a global development since the 1970s. That was the period when Indian writing in English began to emerge as a literary category. Though the term 'Indian writing in English' denotes mainly the use of English language as the medium of expression, in most of these works what was experienced was an interaction of the central characters between two socio-cultural environments, at times resulting in disillusionment in both 'here' and 'abroad'. Since the 1990s, most writings in English were centred on the Indian diaspora spread across the globe, preferably in the United States and the United Kingdom. The 70s was the time when Canadian Literature also witnessed the emergence of a body of texts written by 'immigrant' writers that is writers originating from the South Asian countries. This article would concentrate on the English writings of the Indian diaspora in Canada and try to locate their body of works – that is to say whether diasporic literature is a part of Indian Literature or whether they are considered to be a part of Canadian Literature and as a result whether the category and the boundaries of Indian writing in English have been re-defined by the Indian diaspora.

Keywords: Diaspora, Indo-Canadian Literature, SACLIT, community, ethnicity.

Introduction

"So what is it like to be a woman, a South Asian, and a feminist in North America?
What is it like to be a Canadian writer who was born and educated in India?" (Parameswaran 351)

This question was once raised by Dr. Uma Parameswaran, one of the pioneer writers of Indian origin in Canada. Most writers hailing originally from India and settled in some First World country choose English as their medium of expression. Are diasporic writings considered to be a part of 'Indian Writing in English'? Indian diaspora will quite naturally opt to write in the English language, but do their works fall under the category of 'Indian' literature? The question is not easy to answer. Even if the Indian diaspora ceases to be a part of India socially or politically, emotionally it often remains attached to the original homeland. Another question that arises is that, if the works of the Indian diaspora are not part of Indian literature, under which category should they be placed? Are they part of the literature of the place which they presently inhabit? For example, in the context of Canada, are they considered to be part of Canadian Literature, or do they remain tagged as works by 'writers of Indian origin'?

In this article, I shall focus on the English writings of the Indian diaspora in Canada, in particular, since that has been my area of interest and research for quite some time now, and seek answers to these queries. To answer the question whether the works of the Indian diasporic writers are considered to be a part of Canadian literature, we must seek first the answer to the question what is Canadian literature?

What is Can. Lit.?

Can. Lit. is the abbreviated form of Canadian Literature, made famous by the poem "Can. Lit." (1962) by Earle Birney. In that exemplary sixteen-line poem, Birney laments the lack of a proper identity of Canadian Literature which prevents it from getting recognized as one of the prominent literatures of the world, and it is shoved under the abbreviated term 'Can. Lit.' As a nation, historically, i.e. since European contact in the late fifteenth century, Canada has grappled with the crisis of a definite identity of her own. The famous Canadian critic Northrop Frye has pointed out in his seminal work *The Bush Garden – Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (1971) that the famous Canadian problem of identity is "primarily a cultural and imaginative question" (Frye i). The vastness, emptiness and ruggedness of the Canadian landscape and its bitter cold climate had left the white settlers bewildered. They were in awe of the terrain and everything associated with it – wild beasts and 'uncivilized', 'barbaric' 'Red Indians' and 'Eskimos', and that got reflected in the literature of white Canada. Before 1825, Canadian literary activities were restricted mostly to the publication of various journals on travel and exploration, and missionary activities. A few amateur poets published their works in journals such as the *Halifax Gazette* (1752) and the *Quebec Gazette* (1764) which published literary pieces. The first Canadian anthology of poems was published in 1864 under the name of *Selections from Canadian Poets* edited by Edward Hartley Dewart. By 1867, that is, the year marking the Confederation of Canada, other genres apart of poetry began to gain popularity. The notable among them were satires such as Thomas McCulloch's *Letters of Mephibosheth Stepsure* (1821-22), Haliburton's *Sam Slick's Wise Saws and Modern Instances* (1853), etc (New 34-60). By the first half of the 20th century, there was no dearth of fiction in the form of novels, short stories and plays in Canada. However, Canadian critics as well as the writers themselves continuously pointed towards a crisis which has historically prevented 'Can. Lit.' from becoming 'Canadian Literature'. The root of this crisis lay in Canada's cultural history.

The cultural history of Canada has systematically and deliberately omitted and denied the non-Anglophone presence. Thus, the crisis which is being discussed is a predominant Anglophone crisis. The dominant English Canada has denied not just the indigenous population but even the presence of the French and their literature in Canada. The Francophone community in Canada has always alleged of being marginalized and forced to remain restricted to the particular province of Québec in Eastern Canada. The rise of Québécois nationalism and political unrest demanding better treatment of the French language and culture has dominated the 19th-century Canadian history. Such was the extent of unrest that the slogan for the 1860 *Mouvement littéraire du Canada* was <<vivez pour arracher le Canada à l'odieuse tyrannie anglaise>> (Live for snatching Canada from the odious tyranny of the English). [New 66]

As a result of this English supremacy, Canada has always remained a part of something – first, of the wilderness, then of the British Empire and North America, and finally of the global world. She could never establish a tradition of her own, she never had the time or the inclination to build up a 'social imagination' which would be purely 'Canadian'. When the British set their feet on the soil of Canada, they brought with them their civilization in the form of their culture, custom, habits, and technological advancements. None of these were purely 'Canadian' leading to the sense of insecurity – 'What is meant by Canadian?' The sense of rootedness to a space, the sense of community and leisure lead to the birth of community narratives such as epics, and drama. Canada

had no leisure for either of them. In Canada, the movie came too soon to let theatre flourish as a medium of entertainment. Canada became busy in building railways, highways, bridges and canals as her mind was obsessed with the idea of living up to the expectation. She was trying to meet a standard set by Great Britain, the motherland, on the one hand, and by the United States, with whom she was competing, on the other. Her literature, written in English, struggled to compete with the literatures of Great Britain and United States and imitated a prescribed model, and in the process ended up being termed as 'Can. Lit.' The only characteristic feature or prominent marker of 'Canadianness' was struggle against nature to survive. *Anne of Green Gables* (by Lucy Maud Montgomery published in 1908) stood out as a popular children's text, distinctly Canadian as it was a pastoral myth which established kinship with the animal and the vegetable world.

So far, I have tried to establish the point that Canadian literature itself is a problematic category. Nevertheless, within this category distinction exists between the writings of the 'Canadians' and the 'non-Canadians'. In this context, I am reminded of an incident about Bharati Mukherjee who was once told that since she did not grow up playing in the snow, she could not become a Canadian writer. (Parameswaran 86). The reason made little sense because hundreds of native Canadian writers born and brought up in the snow were never considered to be writers enough simply because they were not white. It is obvious then that racism alone determines and classifies authors into categories such as 'Canadians' and 'non-Canadians.'

The non-Canadian Can. Lit.

It has always been a controversial topic – what prompts 'ethnic' writers in Canada to write and what do they write about. Critic Kristjana Gunnars' essay 'Ethnicity and Canadian Women Writers' talks at length on this issue. An ethnic writer is someone who identifies himself/herself with his/her ethnicity. Then, what does being ethnic mean to the person? Whom does he or she represent and for whom is he or she writing? If these three are determined, then the next step is the subject matter of the writer. Of these four, the most difficult part is the answer to the first question – what does being ethnic mean to the writer himself/herself? As the Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian writer Neil Bissoondath says

...to recognize the complexity, to acknowledge the wild variance within ethnic groups, would be to render multiculturalism and its aims absurd. The individuals who form a group, the 'ethnics' who create a community, are frequently people of vastly varying composition. Shared ethnicity does not entail unanimity of vision. If the individual is not to be betrayed, a larger humanity must prevail over the narrowness of ethnicity. (107)

Native Canadian writer Janice Kulyuk Keefer in her article "From Mosaic to Kaleidoscope" echoes the same idea when she says

...It is the task of the writer to situate herself off-centre from her own community in order to be able to critique as well as communicate what she knows of it...No writer, no matter how passionately she identifies with a particular community, ethnic or otherwise, can transparently and comprehensively project the views and voices of that community in her writing (228).

This leads to the conclusion that too much involvement with his/her community is detrimental to the interests of the ethnic writer because that creates a lack of objectivity and writing suffers as a result. An ethnic writer is always an object of curiosity and interest to the mainstream society. This precarious position has both advantages as well

as disadvantages. On the one hand such a writer can go a long way by writing anything as it is his/her exoticism that will sell. To look at it from another perspective, the community to which the writer belongs might feel betrayed. Controversial writer Bharati Mukherjee has exclaimed in several of her writings that in Canada she was always made to feel 'different'. In her essay "An Invisible Woman", Mukherjee expressed her anguish by stating that, "I cannot describe the agony and the betrayal one feels, herein oneself spoken of by one's own country as being somehow exotic to the nature"(33). By "one's own country" what Mukherjee meant is obviously not India (the land of her birth) but Canada (the place where she had migrated with her husband after marriage). The problem aggravated for her as she refused to be categorized as an ethnic writer. This is the basic problem for all writers originating from outside Canada. The question of acceptability in the mainstream society leads to the formation of these categories such as 'Canadian' and 'non-Canadian'. In the anthology *The Coloured Woman: Women of Colour in Contemporary Canadian Literature* (1994), Saloni Mathur recounted an anecdote that she was once encouraged by a Canadian journal to send "Anything, and we'll be pleased to publish it." (279). This is what Keefer feels to be a staged play where the ethnic writer plays a prescribed part, she is bound to exoticize her ethnicity in return for getting published and being accepted as a writer.

Even if there may be compulsions, it is a serious question whether a writer of non-Canadian origin does not have any desire to speak on his or her own ethnicity voluntarily. Several writers would say, "Yes". Otherwise, the term SACLIT would not have come into existence.

Why SACLIT?

SACLIT is not just a term but a community itself. It is also the name of a book published in 1996 edited by Uma Parameswaran. The term originated in the 1980s. In 1982, *Canadian Ethnic Studies* brought out a special issue devoted to "the fictional remembrances of the Chinese, the Japanese, the Greeks, the Finns, the Ukrainians, to name only a few...." (iv). South Asian Canadian Literature did not feature anywhere. The response was the publication of *A Meeting of Streams* (1985) in whose introduction M.G. Vassanji stated – "The term South Asian is a self-definition of the kind just introduced. It implies much. It refers to people who trace their ancestry to the Indian subcontinent...South Asian Canadian Literature is perhaps best understood as a term of contrast – with 'mainstream literature'" (4)

Then came out anthologies such as *Shakti's Words* (1990) and *The Geography of Voice* (1992) featuring the works of writers of South Asian origin by clarifying

In the Canadian context, the term South Asian Literature denotes the writings of Canadians who trace their origins from one of the following countries – India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. It includes writers who have come directly to Canada from one of the South Asian countries, or indirectly by way of Britain or other erstwhile British colonies such as those in Eastern and Southern Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific Islands. (McGifford & Kearns i).

In her study, "South Asian Poetry in Canada – In Search of a Place", Arun Prabha Mukherjee observes, "It is interesting to note that the South Asian poet does not remain confined by national boundaries but seems to identify with the entire Third World, reflecting the sense of solidarity the Third World countries have come to share because

of their history" (Vassanji10). This sense of solidarity gives rise to a pattern which she defines as follows:

In so far as South Asian Canadian writers trace their origins to the Indian subcontinent, their works, if studied together, may yield certain recurring themes and patterns. What I am resisting here is the tendency in contemporary critical theory to categorize these writers a priori as resistant postcolonials, as subalterns and marginals. (30)

As a matter of fact, a South-Asian writer's text is bound to be 'different'. Himani Bannerji feels that a South-Asian text is "A text with holes for the Western reader. It needs extensive footnotes, glossaries, comments, etc – otherwise it has gaps in meaning, missing edges" (33). There is actually a latent desire to speak for one's own community and make it audible to others. This desire to be heard is not confined either to the community itself or to the others, but the diaspora wants to reach out to everybody all at once. Gunnars says, "It seems essential to human nature to maintain a culture: A spiritual, mythological, ideological, emotional, communal territory, if not a geographical one" (24). This is exactly the psychology of the Indian diaspora, which is always willing to retain contact with the 'homeland' and its culture. In fact, it prefers to be the spokesperson for the Indian community in Canada as well as the torch bearer of Indian culture there, initiating and carrying on a dialogue within it and projecting it to the mainstream Canadian community (Sharma 161-62).

The dilemmas of the diasporic writers are actually not to be solved. When they concentrate solely on their community, they are regarded as Indo-Canadian writers, and promptly placed inside a ghetto. Their creative work is not judged in terms of creative or artistic excellence. Again, it is true that despite knowing all these, diasporic writers tend to seek a kind of security within the ghetto of their own community. Uma Parameswaran says that "there seems to be something in Canadian structure that perpetuates ghettoization rather than co-existence" (143). In order to strengthen themselves, the South Asian diaspora, of which Indian diaspora forms the majority, tends to overlook its internal heterogeneity. For example, twice-migrants such as Shani Mootoo, Ramabai Espinet and Yasmin Ladha are not considered to be on a par with the 'authentic' Indians who have directly migrated to Canada from India. What I intend to say is that within the ghetto called South Asia, there is another distinction between dominant Indians and the twice migrants who originate from India but have spent a considerable time outside India before migrating to Canada. The language employed by Mootoo and Ladha speaks of the 'otherization' within the Indian diaspora in Canada. Shani Mootoo's "Out on Main Street" is a powerful short story which demonstrates how the twice migrants are made to feel inferior and doubly alienated than those who have directly migrated from the motherland and are considered to be the authentic bearers of Indian culture. The Indo-Caribbeans' and the Indo-Africans' cultural baggage prevent them from becoming enough Indians to assimilate within the Indian diaspora in Canada.

Indo-Canadian Literature

From the discussion so far, we can form the idea that the position of the diasporic writers within Canadian Literature is peculiar. They share a relationship with their readers who are not only a part of the Indian community in Canada but at the same time Indians residing in India as well as the white Canadians of Canada. Hence whatever they write, they have to keep in mind the dynamics of the market and the question of saleability of

their books. As a result, the task becomes more and more difficult to be acceptable to a global audience while at the same time giving them enough fodder to feed on. Consequently, the diasporic writer has to pick and choose certain common themes that will appeal to the reader – nostalgia, sense of alienation, racism and discrimination faced in the adopted land. For women writers, gender discrimination and violence against women both within and outside the community becomes a common theme and it falls within the ‘horizon of expectation’ of the readers. Talking about the Indian culture, tradition and practices keeps the mainstream Canadian reader entertained while at the same time it allows the community itself to identify with the fictional characters. In this regard, what Rohinton Mistry says about the ‘immigrant’ writer’s subject matter in “Swimming Lessons” is the reality

Father said if he continues to write about such things he will become popular because I am sure they are interested there in reading about life through the eyes of an immigrant, it provides a different viewpoint; the only danger is if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them and lose the important difference. (249)

We can, then, assume that it was Mistry’s conscious decision to stick to the Parsi community of Bombay and the Emergency period in India (1975-77) as the backdrop of so many of his works including *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), *Such A Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), etc. Mistry has also said in one of his interviews

I think they (Canadians) feel that when a person arrives here from a different culture, if that person is a writer, he must have some profound observations about the meeting of the two cultures. And he must write about racism. He must write about multiculturalism. He has an area of expertise foisted on him that he may not necessarily want, or which may not really interest him. He may not want to be an expert in race relations. (Kamboureli 253)

For writers without any cultural baggage, the choice of his/her subject matter depends on the individual’s will but for someone who has a cultural baggage portraying any character is difficult. He/she has to always keep in mind that he/she is representing an entire culture. In her essay “I See the Glass as Half-full”, Uma Parameswaransays that academia must draw a line somewhere to define the term ethnicity. Otherwise portrayal of stock characters, stock situations and stock emotions will lead to the formation of a formula within which all diasporic works can be accommodated. In one of her interviews on the eve of the release of her book *Tell It to the Trees* (2011), Anita Rau Badami had said

Actually, when I was writing the book, I was just writing for the sheer pleasure of writing. Because I had a story that I wanted to explore, I had a bunch of characters I wanted to play with, and that’s why I wrote the book. I wasn’t thinking about an audience. It’s only after a book is done that I start wondering about who is likely to read it. Because you’re right, an audience here in North America is going to react to the book differently. And an audience in India will look at it differently. (i)

This shows that diasporic writers are well aware of two kinds of readers and two sets of responses to the same text. One response comes from the community situated in Canada and the other set comes from the original homeland, i.e., India. That is why the diaspora ultimately remains an extension of Indian Writing in English, no matter whether the writer is a ‘Canadian’ citizen or not. The characters they portray are mostly middle class/upper middle class non-resident Indians who aspire to become rich and successful in the new land. In this way, the Indian diaspora actually serves as the connecting link between the two lands and plays a crucial role in the development of both the nations – the

homeland as well as the host nation. Basically, in today's globalized world, it is really difficult for the diaspora to remain detached from its homeland. What the Indian diaspora does is to physically move between "here" and "there" quite frequently and without much restriction. Most often they do not want to return and try to compensate that loss in terms of financial aid. In this way, the diaspora has actually sponsored and fanned sentimentalism to the extent leading to fanaticism and religious terrorism with its financial support and nostalgic zeal to do something for the motherland.¹

Conclusion

Unlike the pioneer writers of the Indian diaspora in Canada such as Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran or Vassanji whose works were not much available to readers in India, in today's globalized world, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Rau Badami or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are widely known, read and popular even in India. The readership and the class of readers for whom the books are written actually determine the subject matter of the writer. In the 1960s and 1970s, the diasporic writers used to write solely for the diasporic community settled in the adopted land as the need was to focus on the community vis-à-vis the mainstream society. They need not pay any attention to the effect of their writings back home. However, Anita Rau Badami's or Jhumpa Lahiri's novels and stories clearly spell out that they are not only aware of the presence of a class of readers who are acquainted with their works but they write keeping in mind the possibility of sale back in India as well. Their markets have been created on the basis of their identities as writers of Indian origin and by this identity, they have definitely re-defined the boundaries of Indian writing in English. They are simultaneously the representatives of a particular community in their adopted homes and members of the Indian diaspora back home.

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Notes

¹In the context of Canada, the Punjabis founded the Ghadar Party in Vancouver in the early 1900s and sponsored revolutionary activities back in India. Since then, militant and extremist activities in Punjab have been sponsored by the Sikh diaspora in Canada culminating in the 1981 Air India Tragedy on the issue of Khalistan. There are several literary works also on this topic including Bharati Mukherjee's *The Sorrow and The Terror – The Haunting Legacy of The Air India Tragedy* (Ontario: Penguin Books, 1987)

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