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South Asian Literature in Canada

Is there a South Asian Canadian Literature? Let us first consider what is called 'South Asian Canadian Literature,' that is, the body of work to which this term is sometimes applied, and then, consider the question as to whether such a literature in fact exists: to what extent does it have a unity, a self awareness as South Asian, as Canadian, literature.

First the nomenclature. The term South Asian is perhaps a little unfortunate: a scholar's disinfected, neutered shorthand, definitely not a literary term. In fact it is a painful term from the literary point of view, for behind its whitewash lurk memories, the pain and anguish of separation, partition. South Asia refers to the Subcontinent — India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. South Asians have come to Canada from these countries, but more recently also from East and South Africa, the Caribbean countries, Fiji, and elsewhere. Many speak only English or an Indian dialect, some speak both and perhaps a third language like Kiswahili. Most come from a former British Colony.

Elsewhere I have called this meeting of cultures here in Canada, and more specifically, of literatures, "A Meeting of Streams."¹ But this meeting did not begin with the arrival of plane-loads of refugees to Canada in the 1970s. Before that there were plane-loads to Britain, in the 1960s. This meeting is the prologue to our colonial past, it began with the presence of the British in our countries. Going to London was an important pilgrimage in the colonies. It brought status. There were many Dick Whittingtons where and when I was growing up. Knowing English brought status. (One is reminded of the terms 'black Englishman,' or 'brown Englishman' that were used pejoratively then.) Knowing English still brings status, of course, but now the role of the U.S. must also be considered. For many South Asians, therefore, at least for those who grew up in the colonies, this arrival in Canada, or the U.S., or the U.K., was a tryst with destiny (to turn around

1 M.G. Vassanji, ed. *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature* (Toronto: TSAR 1985).

Nehru's phrase). Not only for the potential Dick Whittingtons with dreams of London and New York and Canada nurtured by schools and libraries, but also for those who left *en masse* after independence because the expectations and dreams and attitudes, even the identities which their former rulers left them with now put them at odds with their new governments. Where else to go but London, or failing that, Canada, the U.S., Australia? Most of the Asians expelled from Uganda chose not India or Pakistan but these Western countries to go to; and many of those who did choose the land of their ancestors fled from it as soon as they could. And once these Ugandan Asians had broken ground in Canada, the rest of the East African Asians followed. Toronto, Don Mills became household words.

I have indulged in this bit of history to emphasize that the world of the South Asian — here I mean the immigrant — is a large one, a geopolitical world, and national boundaries are sometimes less real and more arbitrary for him than for someone reared within them. A trivial point, perhaps, but one often overlooked by patriots new and old, and one that has important consequences when one comes to discuss the audience of a writer, and his or her literary identity. The point is essential to me in this discussion because we are considering a national boundary, Canada. Within that boundary the writing of South Asians raises the question: can a body of writing be naturalized together with the writer?

We can try to answer this question from the evidence of the writing. Instead of asking how this writing views itself in the world, one could ask how it is viewed from the outside, not by the politicians or the citizenship judges but by the literary establishment. One answer may be provided by the *Canadian Encyclopedia* which relegates most Asian writers to the ghettoized category 'Ethnic.'

In Canada literary writing by South Asians is extensive. It falls broadly into three main categories: Punjabi, Urdu, and English. Although there are some attempts at translation, these three groups are essentially independent with minimal and only formal interaction. According to a survey conducted a few years ago, more than 3,000 poems had been written in Punjabi by seventy-five poets. Plays have been written and successfully performed, short story collections and novels have appeared. From a formalist or high literary point of view the quality of these works varies from simple emotional outbursts to the kind of works taught in colleges and universities in Panjab. The other side to this issue is that Punjabi has a very strong oral tradition and this gives the Punjabi writer, and especially the poet, a size of audience that an English poet in Canada may well envy.²

2 See the discussion of Punjabi literature by Surjeet Kalsey in *A Meeting of Streams*, cited above.

A dominant thematic strain in the poetry is what may be described as the Punjabi-Canadian theme — the response of Punjabi writers to life in Canada, beginning with a look at the reasons for the immigration and the relationship that develops between the immigrant and his homeland on one hand and his new country on the other. For example, in one poem the emigration of a young working-class man is compared, ironically, to the exile of the Buddha. Unlike the Buddha, who left the splendour of a princely life in search of spiritual enlightenment, the young immigrant *abandons* a life of poverty in search of livelihood and thus reverses the Buddha theme. The hermits he meets on the way (the Buddha met hermits and other characters on his way, from whom he learned in one way or another) are the contractors in British Columbia who take him in wagons to pick berries, and the enlightenment at the end of the road is only too transitory and short-lived: the meagre paycheck.

I'll come home very soon
or apply for your immigration
very soon
so that with your own eyes
you can touch that holy tree
under which doing penance
I've found the path to salvation
from hunger.³

The world of the poet is bleak, cold, technological, impersonal, racist. The image of the new world is often dystopian,

We
like machines
ring like alarm clocks.⁴

At other times it is fragmented and alienated,

A waxen horse
with one leg broken
.....
A wooden owl
in a crowded city.⁵

3 From "Siddhartha Does Penance Again," by Surjeet Kalsey in *A Meeting of Streams*.

4 From "This Is the West," by Sukhinder.

5 From "Wooden Owl, Waxen Horse," by Ravinder Ravi.

There is a good deal of protest poetry — protest at the conditions back home, and at the conditions here: poverty, racism, working conditions. An interesting development is the protest against technology, seen as cold, impersonal, equated with the climate and the white Anglo-Saxon culture here. For many poets the incident of the Komagata Maru, in which a shipload of Punjabi immigrants was turned back for reasons that appear to be mostly racist, and which came to a conclusion in a clash with the police near Calcutta when many of the passengers died, has become a symbol of their position here: a symbol that is both Canadian and Punjabi; and since the incident took place in 1914 it has acquired the force of myth.

There is also feminist writing, and experimental writing: concrete poems to bring out the cold and technological, absurdist fiction to show the meaninglessness of it all.

Unlike Punjabi, whose early literature is oral, religious, and mystical, Urdu literature comes from a courtly tradition. Literary Urdu, with infusions of Persian and Arabic, was traditionally accessible to the educated, the rich, the ruling classes. Today, with public education more readily available, and national identity and cultural survival very much in the public consciousness, Urdu is more accessible, especially in Pakistan. Even so the first language of many Urdu speakers is often Punjabi or something else. Thus, Urdu keeps the status it has always had — a cultured, polished, literary, official language. Prominent Urdu poets in Pakistan are national heroes.

One can imagine, then, the plight of a few, isolated Urdu poets in Canada. They belong more to a global Urdu literary world. Many important Urdu poets have left their homelands and gone abroad into exile, so the literary public in Pakistan and India is used to hearing from writers living overseas. In this international context an Urdu-Canadian writer is a very lonely figure.⁶

There are two points that should be emphasized about Urdu and Punjabi writing in Canada: First, the writers retain identities as Punjabi or Urdu writers, seeking legitimacy, when they can, from their homelands. Second, they are all from the older, or first generation of immigrants. The second generation among the South Asian communities, as far as we can tell, has no interest in learning the language, much less in writing it. Given this situation, Punjabi literature — fascinating and alive as it is — does not have much chance of making it into the following generations. Of course, if large numbers of fresh immigrants keep coming, interesting, perhaps unpredictable, things could happen. But barring that unlikely possibility, it seems to me that this episode of Punjabi and Canadian literature will end. It is

6 Urdu literature in Canada is discussed by Nuzrat Khan in *A Meeting of Streams*, cited above.

fascinating, worth preserving, but a closed book. This is not to say that it will not have any influence on the Punjabi-English writing of the future.

Writing in English is obviously what will have the greatest and most direct impact on what is most often meant by Canadian literature — the mainstream. There is a considerable quantity of work in this area. Fiction writers like Mukherjee, Bissoondath and Mistry have all been published by big publishing houses. In addition, there are writers published by the small presses, with mostly poetry and short story collections, and there are individual pieces in small magazines.

Many writers have no choice but to write in English since they speak only English or have been brought up to be literate only in English. Other writers, like those in India and Africa are able to make a choice. There is also the important choice of audience — these authors write primarily for the English-speaking world. Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer, in a recent interview⁷, complained that Ngugi, the Kenyan writer, was doing him, Soyinka, and others like him, a disservice by writing in Kikuyu, which is used by a relatively small number of people. Soyinka has a point, but Ngugi also has a point, and he does translate his work. The writer working in English is aware, or makes himself aware, of the English tradition in writing. Even the title of Achebe's celebrated *Things Fall Apart*, a very African novel, is a famous line from an English poem by Yeats. We can see that the world of many of today's writers is a large one. Even the examples of African writing in a discussion of Asian writing in Canada illustrates the international nature of this literary system. Ultimately, of course, we all have a particular world we write about — be it Dublin, Manawaka, Port of Spain, Limuru outside Nairobi, or Bombay. Ultimately, the writer manifests his/her trust in the readership and expresses a certain expectation of it.

Understandably, fiction and poetry address two different aspects of the South Asian Canadian experience that might be called the public and the private. Concerning fiction I would like to focus very briefly on one theme, that of the writer as preserver of the collective tradition, which I have previously amplified in an article called "The Postcolonial Writer as Mythmaker and Folk Historian": Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* is an account of the writer's return to Sri Lanka and his encounters with his past.⁸ Ismail Dewji's short piece "From a Wayfarer's Notebook," similarly consists of real and legendary accounts of early Indian settlers in East Africa. Ladoo's novels recreate the lives of the first Indian indentured labourers in the West Indies. In these examples from Canadian writing it can be argued that the writer as mythmaker creates Adam and stipulates a year zero, the

7 *Third World Book Review* 2.7 (1987).

8 *A Meeting of Streams*.

events leading from which give meaning and coherence to his life and time. Rushdie's Adam Sinai and Achebe's Okonkwo are surely two famous postcolonial examples of such Adam-figures. In other works, however, the past is evoked in specific historical events (as in Ngugi's recreation of the Mau Mau struggle) or in evocative scenery and imagery, as in the stories of Cyril Dabydeen and Clyde Hosenet.

This need to recreate, mythify, and explain can be traced to two not unrelated factors: the rapid disappearance of a way of life, which was often held, in place, and static, by the colonial government; and the rapid and continuing modernization of the Third World. Whether the writer stays in his homeland or emigrates, his life has been renewed, and he attempts to understand the past, and from it the present. Of course, it is often his own childhood (and private mythology) that the writer first recreates; but so rapidly has his world transformed that he cannot but reflect larger geopolitical movements. The main factor in these changes in recent years was of course independence from colonial rule, and it lurks in the background in numerous postcolonial novels.

Poetry is more personal, of course. It shows a strong identification with *otherness*, *alienation*, and *difference*, as Rienzi Cruz's persona the Sun-Man and the title of his book, *Elephant and Ice*, illustrate. That there is no naive longing for the physical homeland indicates the sophisticated level of this poetry. The case of Uma Parameswaran's long poem, *Trishanku*,⁹ illustrates how the poet sees herself in Canada. A line in the *Bhagavata Purana* reads,

Slowly passes the lovely night in winter
embellished by the moon, decorated with three watches
and ornaments with the constellation Trishanku.

In Indian mythology Trishanku, the constellation Orion, is a king elevated by the sage, Vishvamitra, to heaven in his mortal body. The gods reject him and attempted to cast him back to earth. As a compromise, Trishanku is left suspended, head downwards, between heaven and earth, a constellation ornamenting the winter skies.

As an analogy to the myth, the poem, *Trishanku*, is a constellation of voices, organized around a principal configuration of three. It weaves, by means of these narratives, a network of lives that retain ineradicably the elements of their past in Madras, but which are committed to a Canada uncertain about its reception of them. The result is a moving poetic description of South Asian Canadian mental states in a quintessential South

Asian Canadian poem, in which the writer consciously makes use of the elements of both traditions.

The writers I have discussed here are united by being South Asian immigrants in Canada and coming from a former British colony. All of these facts are reflected in their writing. But does this sharing of common themes from the post-colonial experience and from immigration mean that we have an identifiable literature?

In Punjabi writing, it seems to me, we do have a literature, or are close to having one. There is a mythology, a history in Canada; there is a large number of writers and an audience responsive to them. Writers share a tradition and follow paradigms, and also practice experimental writing, but will this continue? In my opinion, this writing will soon come to an end with this generation of immigrants. It will influence Punjabi writers of the future who adopt English as their literary medium.

In English writing, particularly fiction, there is as yet no such thing as South Asian Canadian literature. We suffer from the Canadian problem — sparseness of population and isolation. There appears to be no cross-cultural movement in the writing; no borrowing, no cross-reference as South Asian and as Canadian. The world of the fiction writer is larger than national boundaries. Thus Dabydeen is more aware of Naipaul and Selvon in his fiction than of national identities. He appears in an anthology of Caribbean literature published in English, and in Canada is included in two official bibliographies, as a black and as a South Asian Canadian writer.¹⁰ Dabydeen illustrated the flexible attitude towards boundaries.

In poetry the situation is different. Canada is ever present and more immediate. Most of the poets — Cruz, Dabydeen, Parameswaran, Weerasinghe, Sugunasingh, Bannerji, and others — do make use of their backgrounds, their memories, and in some cases literary traditions. Dabydeen feels comfortable referring to Cruz. And Cruz has such a powerful and haunting voice that he has influenced others. Nevertheless I do not think that this is enough to continue this literary development. The Sun-Man of Rienzi Cruz could have more impact on Sri Lanka, and is less likely to influence the next generation of hockey-playing South Asian Canadians.

To conclude, in English we have many individual Canadian writers of South Asian origin plying their individual trades, but no South Asian Canadian literature in the sense I have defined it.

Toronto

10 Lorris Elliott, ed. *The Bibliography of Literary Writings by Blacks in Canada* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace 1986); and Suwanda H.J. Sugunasingh, ed. *The Search for Meaning: The Literature of Canadians of South Asian Origin* (Ottawa: Secretary of State 1988).

9 Uma Parameswaran, *Trishanku* (Toronto: TSAR 1987).

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Ethnic or National (?): Polish Literature in Canada

Let us start with some basic methodological clarifications. The proposed examination of minority writing in Canada¹ is to take place within the theoretical framework of what is often defined by scholars as the literary institution. This concept, however, when applied to Canadian cultural conditions, has a somewhat specific meaning. It is clear, for example, that the writings of Cz. Mifosz or V.P. Aksenov, who live in the United States, are not considered to be a part of American literature. They are viewed there as emigré writers of Polish and Russian literature, respectively. Yet their compatriots living across the border in Canada have acquired a different status and are often discussed as Canadian writers. True, this status is 'hyphenated,' by such qualifications as Ukrainian-Canadian, German-Canadian, Italian-Canadian, but it is not to be denied. It is interesting to ask the question: what makes this treatment of writers in two neighbouring countries so different? To answer it, one should move from the level of strictly literary-critical considerations to a wider notion of cultural policy. It seems to be obvious that the idea of multiculturalism adopted by the Canadian government as part of its internal policy, opened the possibility of including into its cultural space the activities of ethnic groups other than English and French. In the Western world this probably constitutes a unique example of government intervention which has its immediate repercussions in the sphere of culture. The adjective 'Canadian' (for example, 'writer,' 'artist') is no longer reserved, so to speak, for those who function in two official languages, but can also be used in relation to the representatives of

1 What I am referring to is the collective project of writing a history of the literary institution in Canada, initiated by Professor M.V. Dimić, Director of the Research Institute for Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta. The other members of the initial group are Professors E.D. Blodgett, I.S. MacLaren, S.C. Neuman and A. Purdy. The project intends to attract and involve scholars from universities throughout Canada.