

Diasporic and Transitional Identity in Contemporary South-Asian Canadian Writing

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Canada's ethnic composition has changed dramatically over the past two centuries due to immigrants. Among the non-white immigrants, the contributions of South Asian to literature are remarkable in Canada. The term "South Asian" is a bureaucratic term. The writers who have come to Canada from Indian sub-continent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan) and writers from Fiji, East African and Caribbean who trace their ancestry to the Indian sub-continent are known as South Asian Canadian Writers.

Almost all immigrants from South Asian countries suffered from the prevalent racial prejudices forcing them to live a life of isolation. Though the writers of South Asian origin are silenced by the majority and not included in the Canadian canon, they write about themselves in terms of up rootedness, identity crisis and racial conflict. These writings illustrate Canada's diversity giving a new notion of nationhood in globalised world. These writings have shaped Canada and Canadian literary imagination. The key issues of these writings reveal that the writers of this body of literature mediate between two worlds: Canada and the countries of their heritage. Therefore, they claim two cultures, two worldviews, two languages, two mindsets, two different kinds of experiences from two different worlds. On the basis of these kinds of doubleness, the writers are sub-consciously or unconsciously double-conscious. In 1903, Black American author, W.E.B. Du Bois defined the term double-consciousness' in **The Souls of Black** as:

it is a peculiar sensation, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others... One ever feels his (sic) twoness... two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one... body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being from torn asunder. (8-9)

Due Boisian double consciousness is a type of double awareness. One indeed reads closely Du Bois's description of double consciousness with Hegalian concept of unhappy consciousness. Du Bois suggests the lack of reciprocal acknowledgment of selfhood that precedes an unhappy consciousness. In case of unhappy consciousness an individual negotiate with internal division or self division, instead of establishing selfhood intention with another/ different self. Internal division results in a false self as well as trues self. This true is identified with perfection while the false self is distortion created out of one's lack of contrast with an external world. Therefore, this process of selfhood consists into internal consciousness: a false or debilitating consciousness and a self determined true consciousness. Due to false self one is always at one's self through the eyes of others. This false consciousness is derived from the first world in which we find distorted images of immigrants that allow this world to refuse to acknowledge another self.

The term 'diaspora' originally used for the Jewish extermment from his home land is not applied as a metaphoric designation for expatriates, refugees, exiles and immigrants. Thus, the word diaspora has to come to mean any deterritorialise population that is seeking to reterritorialise itself. The main purpose of this research is to study and analyze the concept of double consciousness in the context of South Asian Canadian experiences. Focusing upon the experiences of South Asian immigrants in terms of their community life, culture, voices

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and language, the researcher is trying to theorize the literature of South Asian Diaspora in Canada.

The following South Asian Canadian Writers and texts have been selected with a view to delve into the issues related to the narratives of double-consciousness:

	Author	Title of the Text
Male	M.G. Vassanji	<u>No New Land</u>
Female	Uma Parameswaran	<u>What Was Always Hers</u>
Male	Rohinton Mistry	<u>Such a Long Journey</u>
Female	Anita Rau Badami	<u>Tamarind Mem</u>
Male	Michael Ondaatje	<u>Anil's Ghost</u>

The selection of the above texts is on the basis of those writers who have come to Canada directly from Indian subcontinent and also those who have migrated from East Africa but trace their ancestry to Indian subcontinent. All these text belong to a body of postcolonial literature.

M.G. Vassanji's novel **No New Land** is an attempt to tell stories of the South Asian immigrants to Canada. The major objective of the writer is to show in what ways the South immigrants do and can come to terms with new reality. M.G. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 and raised in Tanzania. His family was part of a community of Indians who had immigrated to Africa and from there he immigrated to Canada.

Uma Parameswaran's novel **What was Always Hers** comprises of a novella and several stories is an enlightened compassionate and often humorous exploration of relationships and the Indian immigrants experience in Canada. She was born in Madras and grew up in Jabalpur, India. At present, she lives in Winnipeg. She is professor of English at the University of Winnipeg.

Rohinton Mistry's novel **Such a Long Journey** with its typically contemporary Indian style is set in Mumbai against the back drop of war in the Indian subcontinent and birth of Bangladesh. **Such a Long Journey** is an exploration of variety of characters and relations. Rohinton Mistry was born in Mumbai in 1952 and has lived in Canada since 1975.

Anita Rau Badami is one of the newest writers of Indian sub-continent literature. Her novel, **Tamarind Mem** is a provocative novel about the ties of love and resentment that bind mothers and daughters. **Tamarind Mem** contains many aspects similar to author's own life. However, Badami claims that this story is not an autobiography. She simply began writing this novel through memories of her past and moved into a fictional story. Anita Rau Badami was born in the town of Rourkela in the eastern state of Orissa in India. Today Ms. Badami and her family live in Vancouver.

Michael Ondaatje's novel **Anil's Ghost** is a fictional work set in the period from 1988 to 1993, during which many people were killed in a paroxysm of mindless violence. Ondaatje captures the atmosphere of fear that prevailed during that time. Anil is a Sinhalese woman who, like Ondaatje himself, left Sri Lanka in her teens and has made her home in the West Canada. She is trained as a Forensic Scientist and is commissioned by a Human Rights Organisation to investigate the mass killing, which had occurred in Sri Lanka. Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka and immigrated in Canada in 1962.

Methodology:

In this study, the theory of post-colonialism has been used in two contexts:

- (I) Post colonialism and South Asian Canadian experiences

(II) Post colonialism and Feminism.

Post colonialism is an elusive and contested term. It designates at one and the same time a political movement and intellectual activity. Today more than two third of the people living in the world have been influenced by the forces of colonialism and imperialism. This multiple experience of colonialism finds its expression through literature. The political independence achieved through years of long and continued struggle in the newer countries of Africa and Asia, has led to a literary explosion, witnessed in the flowering of many different writers coming from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds who have helped in the growth of a new writing called postcolonial literature.

Postcolonial feminist criticism analyses a wide range of representations of women in once colonized countries and in western countries. At the level of theory, post-colonial feminist critics have raised a number of conceptual, methodological and political problems involved in the study of representations of gender, some of which are mentioned in this study in the context of the South Asian Canadian Women's Writings. These problems are at once specific to feminist concerns, such as the possibility of finding an international cross-cultural sisterhood between First world and Third World women, as well as more general problems concerning who has the right to speak for whom, and the relationship between the critic and their object of analysis. In terms of post-colonialism and feminism, the phrase 'first world' feminism is not a transparent term. Yet the naming of a First world feminism has proved a productive means of acknowledging and questioning the limits of feminist scholarship in the west particularly its relations with 'Third World Women.'

In this study, the following characteristic features of the theory of post colonialism have been used in the context of Canadian diasporic writing:

(1) Decolonization:

Postcolonial writing refers to a process of dismantling of colonial discourses along with their value system. For a country to become truly postcolonial, it has to shed its colonial hangover along with its inherited socio-cultural values. Regarding this, Donna Bennet remarks in the book, **English Canada's Postcolonial complexities that:** "Colonial identity has to be decreated for postcolonial identity to flourish" (168).

Ashcroft has pointed out in **The Empire Writes Back,** "the study of national traditions is the first and most vital stage in the process of rejecting the claims of centre (imperial) to exclusivity" (17).

Many writers and critics were fully involved in the process of writing literary history. The singular task of writing a national literary history has become an important ingredient in the fostering of an independent national or cultural identity. This certainly helped the writers to disentangle themselves from the forces of imperial centre.

South Asian Canadian writers reveal their experience and cultural movement on the lives of the characters in their novels. The writers try to relate past with present by reviewing the cultural history. Canada, specially since 1960's has witnessed the flowering of many different ethnic voices. Heterogeneous ethnic voices as revealed in the immigrant writings reflected the rooted identity, origin and heritage. Heterogeneous ethnic groups are sustained through multiculturalism in Canadian Society.

(2) Hybrid Identity

Several of issues and ideas raised in south Asian Canadian novels are rooted in postcolonial theories of identity. In particular, the in-between positions of the migrant, and his or her errant, impartial perceptions of the world, have been used as the starting point for creating new, dynamic way of notions which go beyond older national identity and the

notions of rootedness. For Bhabha and Spivak, identity is a discursive product. Since subjectivity is discursively produced, it is possible for it to be remade and remodeled in new and innovative ways. Hybrid identities are never total and complete in themselves; it is a way of thinking beyond exclusionary, fixed binary notions of identity based on ideas of rootedness, cultural, racial and national purity. In talking of diasporic writing, in terms of hybrid identities, the researcher is going to examine the literacy texts in the context of two basic concepts:

- a) **The Concept of home:** It tells us where originated and where we belong. Home acts, as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. However, the concept of home for the migrant is different. Migrants envision their home in fragments and fissures, full of gaps with a sense of displacement.
- b) **The Searching of Civil Space:** It tells us about the secondary space adopted by the immigrant. The quest for identity is not only a Canadian problem. It is a fate that Canada shares with other postcolonial nations, South Asian immigrant writers try to identify their space in the adopted country with specific attention to theme of recognition.

3) The Emphasis on Collectivity and Community:

The emphasis on collectivity and community is very important as is the sense of living in one country but looking across time and space to another. Robin Cohen states in **Global Diaspora** that “a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background” (ix). These writers portray the struggle and hardship faced by the immigrants in another country against the mainstream culture. Though, Canada officially encourages multiculturalism still minority groups are under severe threat by the majority or mainstream. Thus, **In New Ethnicities**, Stuart Hall describes diasporic communities as the “Communities of resistance” (411). Resistance is one of the most important aspects of postcolonial theory.

4) Cultural Difference:

Phrases like “cultural diversity”, ‘Pluralism’ and ‘multiculturalism’ are frequently used these days to bear witness to the fact that Western Countries like Canada, Britain, America have variety of different diaspora communities whose values, cultural practices or religious beliefs differ from those of the majority.

There are a number of different cultural groups present in one place, each confined to its own ‘cell’ with little communication between different ethnic groups. However in **The Location of Culture**, Homi Bhabha attacks this concept as giving the false impression that cultures are holistic, separated and static with “pre- given cultural contents and customs”(34). Instead we must recognize the porous borders between cultures, the fact that they are always leaking into each other. For Homi Bhabha, the subscription to a notion of culture as interactive, constantly composed from a wide variety of possible sources becomes an important political act. In South Asian Women writing, the porous borders between two cultural are vividly observed.

(5) Loss and Nostalgia:

The bonding of culture, religion literature and language is strong in a Diasporic situation, but where it provides ethnic identity and a sense of self, it can alienate from the

host culture. It is this displacement which gives diasporic writing its peculiar qualities of loss and nostalgia. Due to these qualities of loss and nostalgia in diaphoric writing, the pattern of isolation is revealed. Isolation is caused by land, nature, silence, as well as by the disintegration of family.

(6) The Double Decolonisation of Women

Kristen Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford have used the phrase 'a double decolonisation' in 'forward' to their edited collection, **A double colonization: Colonial and Postcolonial Women's Writing**, to refer to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonization and patriarchy. Thus, the phrase, a double decolonisation refers to the fact that women are twice colonized – by colonialist realities and representative and by patriarchal ones too. Much postcolonial feminist criticism has attended to the representations of women created by double colonization and questioned the extent to which both postcolonial and feminist discourse offer the means to change these representations.

(7) Can the Subaltern speak?

In attempting to register the heterogeneity of the post colonization subject, Gayatri Spivak insists most particularly on the importance of attention to the female subject as a distinct category of analysis and her work is always scrupulous in differentiating between postcolonial subjects according to gender.

The category of 'Third World' woman is an effect of discourse rather than an existent, identifiable reality to any stable collective body. Similarly the singular 'Third World' women are an ideological construct wholly produced within 'First World' intellectual debates, and not an individual subject.

Analysis:

The researcher has explored the narrative of South Asian Writers on the following grounds:

1. To explore the heterogeneity of ethnic voices and multiculturalism. The immigrant writers search for ethnic roots to connect their present with the past in terms of double consciousness.
2. To identify the question of self in diasporic double consciousness:
 - i). Living in Between- from roots to routes
 - ii). The pattern of Isolation and fear of survival
3. To identify a sense of community

1. The Heterogeneity of Ethnic Voices and Multiculturalism.

The behavior of different ethnic groups and how these ethnic differences are sustained through multiculturalism in the background of Canadian Society.

The word 'ethnic' is derived from the Greek word 'ethnos', meaning 'people'. Ethnic group refers to a group that is socially defined on the basis of its cultural characteristics. Ethnicity – the sense of belonging to a particular group – thus implies the existence of a distinct culture or sub-culture in which group members feel themselves bound together by a common history, values, attitude and behaviours. Other members of the society also regard them as distinctive.

It has been observed that Rohinton Mistry like Salman Rushdie has made extensive use of historical events. However, he has used historical events for literary effects as well as to relate the events to the personal lives of individuals. His main intention is to discover the socio-political background which is to be found in history. To understand ethnic relations, we need to know historical specificity. This is one of the approaches to predict the ethnic relations. Rohinton Mistry is successful in creating a space to establish his ethnic identity, which is quite prominent by itself, in Canada's multicultural society. For instance, In **Such a**

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Long Journey, Gustad comes under the soothing and gentle sway of the death time prayers and listens to them reverently, though he is not able to understand a word. Thus religion is no nonsense and Parsi should think twice before throwing the baby with the bath-water in the name of modernity and unorthodoxy. The Tower of silence is, rightly or wrongly, the central symbol of the Parsi culture. Ascension to higher intellectual echelons is a Parsi obsession and pursuit.

Anil's Ghost: the novel is set in the period 1988 to 1993, during which many people were killed. The novel is a story of human rights and human treachery. Ondaatje captures exactly the atmosphere of fear which prevailed during that time. The vast majority of these killings were not racially motivated; it was a case of Sinhalese killing Sinhalese. This was the socio-political background of the novel under which people had to live.

Thus, **Anil's Ghost** is a political novel. A deeply disturbing portrayal of a country at war with itself, it is also a profoundly moving study of people forced to line as best they can while driven to the very edge of human capacity and feeling. Even in the face of death and the worst duplicity of Governments, it holds up in the acts of individual beings, the possibility that people can love and out of that love make a world worth living in.

The author has projected Sri Lanka's socio-political conditions through this novel. His purpose is to present the background of the inhabitants of Sri Lanka. He purposely creates a space for his own ethnic identity in the multicultural society in Canada. Anil has come from United States to Sri Lanka to investigate mass political murders on behalf of a human right. Like Micheal Ondaatje, she has also left Sri Lanka at her early age. Anil returns to Sri Lanka, where she was born, but to which she no longer has any real ties, her parents died in a car accident after she left. However, her concern for Sri Lanka's civil war is very much present. Therefore, it has been noticed that on one hand, her sense of patriotism is revealed and on the other hand, she is away from her own country and thus, she is not directly affected.

Vassanji's **No New Land** deals with Indian living in East Africa. Some members of this immigrant community later undergo a second migration to Canada, or the United States. Vassanji is concerned with how these migrations affect the lives and identities of the people. This is an issue that is personal to him as well. He says in an interview with Chelva:

[The Indian diaspora] is very important. Once I went to the U.S., suddenly the Indian connection became very important: the sense of origins, trying to understand the roots of India that we had inside us. (21).

The unending search for ethnic identity in terms of self identity, cultural identity and national identity has resulted in the emergence of a new trend witnessed in Canadian writing. The work produced by South Asian writers is perhaps the richest and the most rapidly growing into new component of Canadian literature. This new wave of immigrant writers of South Asian diaspora does not look upon their culture as opposed to the main stream Canadian culture or see as a threat. Canadian multicultural mosaic has allowed the writers to maintain their cultural identity.

2. The question of self in diasporic double consciousness

i) Living in between: from roots to routes:

Writers who have moved from one culture to another are caught between two cultures and are often engaged either in a process of self recovery or in a process of self preservation through an act of transformation. Locating the site has become a narcissistic preoccupation with the postcolonial writer, especially the postcolonial immigrant writer. Exiled by choice or circumstance, the immigrant finds himself displaced from his roots. He sheds his monolithic national and regional identity and becomes a repository of dualities and multiplicities. His position as the outsider in the country of his adoption leads him to create a distinct geographical and textual social and psychological space.

South Asian writers in Canada have often been caught in such an experimental ambience. Writers like Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, M.G. Vassaji, Anita Rau Badami have consciously created a space that is rooted in the history and culture of the countries to which they belong. However, some of other writers like Uma Parameswaran and Yasmin Ladha have not dealt with heritage culture in their texts, they try to create a new space in the adopted country.

ii) The pattern of Isolation and Fear of Survival:

The major characteristics of all Canadian Writings are the recurrence of the pattern of isolation and fear of survival. Both these characteristics are the geophysical characteristics of the landscape and the historical forces which have been operating in the land. The term survival and isolation are not unrelated. They are often mutually inclusive. Both, Isolation and survival are due to the displacement from the original country to the adopted country in terms of land, home, environment and culture.

Exile apart, the politics of survival becomes the most prominent characteristic in the immigrant writing because of his/her recognition in the new environment which is 'now his/her'. Thus an immigrant suffers from a sense of dislocation, alienation, a feeling of nostalgia and loss of identity. All these factors, together with a variety of experiences in Canada make immigrant a new identity – South Asian Canadian identity. In this category, women suffer on yet another account that of their gender. The question of their identity, especially in women's writings, assumes particularly significance as they are out to create a rupture in the tradition of male writing, that too, in a still dominantly patriarchal world. If nature causes isolation, there is another kind of isolation in their life which embitters them that is the one caused by the disintegration of the family. Silence is also associated with isolation. There is always a savage silence around immigrants. Therefore, survival is a big question under this environment.

In Such a Long Journey, Rohinton Mistry emphasizes the problem of human loneliness in the modern world. The protagonist, Gustad's suffering and struggle with fortitude and humility in life re-echoes the classical tragic hero's life and sufferings. No New Lands foregrounds the voices of the margins without apology. Silence around them is the reason for loneliness and Vassanji suggests ways to overcome despondency and finds a way to survive. In Anil's Ghost, Ondaatje reveals that Anil is glad to be alone. There is a scattering of relatives in Colombo, but she has not contacted them to let them know she is returning. Uma Parameswaran and Anita Rau Badami have delineated isolation based on the disintegration of the family and the environment of a new country.

Thus, the influence of Diaspora and that of the land of origin on the lives, thoughts and creativity of the writers has been all pervasive. In their personal and professional lives, they have to make innumerable adjustments in terms of alienation, racism and changing value systems.

Focusing upon the immigrants experiences in terms of their community life, culture and language, the researcher has tried to analyse the South Asian immigrant writers' perspectives from the view-point of double consciousness. Caught between two worlds; the immigrants negotiate a new space, caught between two cultures and often languages, the writers negotiate a new literary space. On one hand, the writers are conscious of their ancestral roots and identity and on the other, they are creating a new, dynamic way of thinking about identity. They create new metaphors to write their personal heritage. All these writers indulge in an exploration of multiplicity and erosion of the stereotypes. Their perspectives are charged with a double vision.

3. A Sense of Community.

The thematic content of contemporary South Asian Canadian Writing reflects collective consciousness of the community. Even when the narrator is an individual, he is representative of the collective voices of the immigrant community.

Generally, immigrant community incorporates two basic features; one is composite and other transitional. Regarding community, Avtar Brah says in **Cartographics of Diaspora: Contesting Identities**: "Distinct diaspora communities are created out of the confluence of narratives of different journeys from the old country to new which create like sense of a shared history" (183). Yet one must not forget that all diasporas are distinguishable, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common "we".

The transnational community generally implies migration of people across the borders of one or more nations. The past decade has witnessed a phenomenal dynamism among diaspora communities, made possible by the recent advancement in technologies for travel, transport and communication. Not only these developments could bring the diaspora communities and their motherland closer but has also facilitated in bringing together the members of their community dispersed around the world.

In this study male writers like M.G. Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry and Michael Ondaatje have dealt with Khoja, Parsi, Tamil and Sinhalese community respectively in their works. All the novels have been written in the background of their home country. They have consciously created a theme that is rooted in a kaleidoscopic projection of the history and culture of the countries to which they belong. However their thinking is also chained to the paradigms of western thinking caught within a system of binary opposition that label them as the outsider and the other, they tend to highlight differences.

Women writers like Anita Rau and Uma Parameswaran, have given birth to a new type of writing regarding their community. They have not mentioned about any particular community in their works. With their positive attitude to life in Canada, they claim that they are Canadian. They choose to completely assimilate themselves into the new culture. However, these writers are also projecting feelings about their communities.

In both cases, male and female writers, on one hand they discuss about composite community and on the other, transitional community. Therefore, a dual tendency is observed; sometimes they discuss about their culture, place and tradition and sometimes they shift from their own to the adopted culture. Thus, these writers travel both the worlds: their heritage as well as adopted world.

Conclusion:

The diasporic writing is the work of the exile that has experienced unsettlement at the existential political and metaphysical levels. To-day, in postcolonial literatures the Diasporas sensibility has been accepted as a legitimate literary term. This impulse to take the literacy journey home, towards "history", towards "memory", towards past is the result of the

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diasporic long journey from home. Faced with rejection, the immigrant writer clings to his/her ethnic identity. Caught between two worlds, the immigrant writer negotiate a new space, caught between two cultures and often languages, the immigrant writer negotiate a new literacy space. Therefore, an anxious sense of dislocation is the characteristic of immigrant writings. The shifting designation of home and the attendant anxieties for homelessness and the impossibilities of going back are perennial themes in these stories.

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