

**COMPARATIVE DIASPORIC LITERATURE:
SOUTH ASIAN CANADIAN MALE AND FEMALE WRITING**

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Abstract

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. 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.

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.

Key Words: *Rootedness, Double Decolonisation, Patriarchal, Impartial perceptions, Colonialist realities*

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South Asian Canadian Diaspora understandably went into silence for quite a long time. Only during the last two decades or so that silence was turned into words, meanings and a voice. As borders of nations began to be more fluid and post independence era also began to make their appearance; scholars began to study from a fresh perspective. It was perhaps in the 1980s, that the word 'Diaspora' also became more popular. This is not to say that the diaspora had not been studied earlier. In the past, however, Diasporic studies focused primarily on political and economic aspects. Thus, the Diaspora was analyzed in terms of immigration, immigration policies and controls, as well as in statistical terms – i.e. how many, from where the different level of migration took place in terms of the socio-political context? From the Canadian perspective, it has been pointed out that ethnic identity has been the main focus of research. Canadian studies have also focused on migrant workers, especially as fulfilling a need for cheap labour.

However, the diaspora is not a homogeneous whole, nor a series of concentric circles. Issues concerning the diaspora would include not only the question of identity, but also questions of culture and power, multiculturalism and transnationalism. At stake is the place of identity and the presence of difference in the structures of power. As identity is always multiple, it would be fruitful to examine the levels at which difference is asserted, and the reason for assertion. Diasporic existence is global at one level. At another, it recreates a local community and a local identity, which is simultaneously a part of the host country, the home country and the global community.

Besides, above issues, women writers and women immigrants have faced many different and challenging issues that males faced in the adopted country. Therefore, male voice regarding identity, culture and power is not the same as female voice. Until the 1970's the mainstream of historical scholarship chose to focus on only a partial facet of the human past in which the agents of change were always elite males.

Like all male South Asian Canadian Writers, South Asian women writers of the Diaspora also feel the difference in Canada, at least at the initial stages, acutely colour and racial attitude of the mainstream always marginalize the diaspora women. They have to

define both their historical legacies and their present geographic and social realities. Hence, diaspora is a part of a process of narrative cultural history in the making of a people, who have chosen to live in another country far away from the country of their origin. It consists of diverse and complex strands, often problematic but with ever widening implications.

There are different methods of possible transitions within, between and among cultures for the people in the diaspora. The models used for understanding the process of change are assimilation, acculturation, alternation, multiculturalism.

The Women writers have used their models in their writings as they themselves have used to adjust as immigrant in their adopted country. For example, Uma Parameswaran is a vocal supporter of multiculturalism, as an effective and active ingredient, in the quest for life in the Diaspora. She merges the past with the present. She makes her voice heard through images and descriptions drawn from her Indian heritage, as well as her Canadian experience. She says about the immigrant experience:

We are new Canadians
Come from many races
Black, white, olive, brown
All alike, for all the many places
High tech, mid tech or no tech are one.

(<http://www.coolwomen.org/coolwomen/cwrite.rsb>).

Historical writing at end of the 1970s has moved far away from the history of few men to the history of human beings. The rediscovery of the human past in its totality has been envisaged and ensured by the emergence of women's history, a commitment and an experience shared alike by historians of Canada and the South Asian Countries. In both countries, it emerged as an important field of study as a result of the stimulus provided by the women's liberation movement, or what is termed as the second wave of feminism of the 1960s and 70s in Canada and the 1970s and 80s in India. Since then women's history has succeeded in exploring and mapping a vast area of knowledge.

The Eurocentric patriarchal hegemony prevalent in Canada aggravates the condition of the South Asian women in the diaspora. In this category, women suffer not only from a sense of dislocation, alienation and loss of identity but also from their gender. The question of their identity, specially in women's writings assumes particular significance as they are out to create a space in the great tradition of male writing in a dominant patriarchal world. No wonder, the female reader reading women's writings bring to the rest what the two women editors of Shakti's words – Diane Mc Gifford and Judith Kearns – call "a pure aesthetic pleasure" as "she find personal truth joined with the

beauty of art” (ix). In other words, the question of reading and interpretation of women’s text are centered on an unwritten text, namely the world of women which offers various possibilities of reading as a woman, focusing on gender sensitive readings, not only female experience in men’s writings, but also on their own where they are the producers of female discourse.

The thematic content of the South Asian Canadian writing reflects a sense of community. On one level, the term community means a group of people in a specific location, subject to some sort of government or control. But it goes much deeper than that the word comes from the Latin “Communis”, meaning fellowship and that is an indispensable component of every successful community. In it people not only live together more or less harmoniously, they relate to each other effectively and share sense of belonging and that of obligation to their groups. The need for this kind of human contact is both psychological and practical. On a psychological level, every human has the need for companionship and for the reassurance and emotional security which comes from belonging to a social unit whose members share the same ideas and patterns of behaviour. On the practical level, the individual needs cooperation with his fellow beings in order to be provided with necessities of life: food, work, and security. Fellowship is life and the lack of fellowship is death. The truth of this perception has been demonstrated repeatedly by social scientists’ studies: men rarely live alone and they can live properly only in community that meets certain requirements. In the book, *The Community*, the author Hedley Donovan has mentioned that there are the five roles of community. If community is to exist, all five roles must take place in or near a definite geographical location, a place of physical and psychological security that serves as a home base. He remarks as :

One of the five functions is socialisation, by which community instills its values in its members. Another function is economic welfare: the community provides its members with the means to make a living. Social Participation is a third function, filling the universal need for companionship; while a fourth is social control enforcing adherence to the community’s values. The fifth function is mutual support, the process by which community members accomplish task too large – too urgent to be handled by a single person. (27)

In Robin Cohen’s book *Global Diaspora: An Introduction*, the author describes diasporas as communities of people living together in one country who acknowledge that, “the old country – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions” (ix).

The emphasis on collectivity and community here is very important, as is the sense of living in one country but look across time and space to another. Diasporas are composite communities. 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”. Differences of gender, race and class, religion and language as well as generational differences make diaspora spaces dynamic and shifting open to recurrent construction and reconstruction.

Diasporas actively engage in multiple spheres of life in the host countries as well as in the countries of their origin. Writers like M.G. Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje and Shyam Selvadurai have mentioned Khoja, Parsi, Sinhalese and Tamil Community in their works. All the novels have been written in the background of their home country. The experiences and culture of the new adopted countries have not been mentioned in their works. Rather, the writers have tried to create a space for themselves to establish their origins and identities. 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. These writers travel both the worlds: their heritage as well as adopted world. Thus, the cultural space, they create is criss-crossed by a series of dissensions and the location of their site. However, transnational networks of contemporary times have facilitated members of these communities “here and there”. The processes of globalization and technological advancement have given rise to networking among the diaspora communities dispersed across the world. These networks enable immigrants to maintain simultaneous connection with two or more nation states.

Women writers like Anita Rau Badami, Uma Parameswaran, Yasmin Ladha and Nazneen Sadiq have given birth to a new type of writing regarding their community. They have not mentioned about any particular community in their works. According to them, they do not belong to any particular community. 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 unconsciously projecting their feelings about community in Canada. Therefore, a dual tendency is observed. Sometime they discuss about their culture, place and tradition and sometime they shift from their own to the adopted culture. They display a trait of double conscious by nature. These diasporic writers have created a new space in the multicultural Canadian society to identify themselves as a separate group. It is true that in Canada, South Asian Women are a minority within minority, Race, class and gender have been oppressive to them. They have simultaneously victims of the oppression of colonization and patriarchy. Thus, the phrase ‘a double colonization’ refers to the fact that women are twice colonized.

An important aspect of social organization which has analytical significance in the study of South Asian Diaspora is the generational difference. The first generation of immigrants as a diasporic community is evidently different from the second and the subsequent ones. In this study the researcher has selected all the writers who belong to the first generation of immigrant.

The women living in diaspora did not publicly expressed their feelings of dislocations caused by immigration. So, it is difficult to have an access to knowledge about them. The women writers and activists on the other hand vocalized their inner feelings and wrote on issues that concerned them. Being cosmopolitan and having had direct experience, these women expressed their thought during interviews and more so in their writings. In the process, they have helped to contextualise their past into the reality of the present and have created a unique space for themselves in their adopted land, thus making a contribution to its plural culture.

Peterson and Anna Rutherford have used the phrase – a double decolonisation to refer to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the operation of colonialism and patriarchal power. Violence can be regarded as any form of oppression leading to injuries either physically or psychologically on a person. Thus, it reveals that when one understand women's lives, one notice that women are disciplined, constrained and controlled in order to make them conform to the imposed norms of the society. In this process, the women's mental make-up as well as physical body undergoes suppression.

The category of "Third World Women" is an effect of discourse rather than an existent. It does not approximate to any stable, collective body. In Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" , she explains the extent to which women's voices can be easily retrieved and restored to history. The South Asian women writers reflect an awareness of the deeper connotations of immigration and settlement. The new world poses unexpected problems for South Asian women. Getting them acclimatized to the adopted country is a challenge. However, they realise the fact that they have to make their voice heard and for that they have to become powerful.

Anita Rau revealed her positive attitude to life in Canada in her works. She also seems more comfortable, at a personal level, with the concepts of plurality and multiculturalism. In The Peak, University News-paper, Koszminuk has mentioned about Anita Rau's opinion regarding her community. Anita Rau Badami replied when she was asked whether she identified with Indo-Canadian Community:

I don't identify myself with any one community. I left India five years ago. For me, it is important to make as clean a break as possible because otherwise you are constantly dealing with these two worlds, two cultures and that can be a very difficult experiences. You become completely schizophrenic and it's not a happy state of mind to be in. So I'd rather decide that I belong to Canada and to be the just part of the general society... Some of this fragmentation into ethnic communities bothers me because Canada by its very nature is an immigrant society and so you have people from all kinds of ethnic communities from across the world. I mean, I like a mixture of communities. (Kosgminuk 1996).

(<http://www.peak.sfu.ca/the Peak/96-3 issue 6/anitat.html>)

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, Michael Ondaatje and Shyam Selvadurai 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.

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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.

Migration and dispersion are natural phenomenon, widely familiar both in the world of plants and in the animal kingdom. Human beings have been no exception. In the case of human beings, anthropology has recorded no madism as a stage preceding their settlement as communities. Even after their evolution as communities, human beings have been experiencing temporary, seasonal or permanent migration from their original habitant.

Migration has been defined differently by different experts. In its most journal sense, migration is ordinarily defined as the relatively permanent movement of persons over a significant distance. Migration may be permanent or a semi-permanent. Recently geographers have been concerning themselves with population dynamics and the problems associated with migration.

Migration, in fact, may be international, inter-regional, inter-urban, rural-urban, or intra-urban. On the basis of time criteria, migration may be temporary or permanent. If we take into consideration the distance, the migration may be long or short. On the basis of number, migration may be individual or mass. It may be politically sponsored or free. On the basis of social organisation, migration may be that of family clan, or individual. On the basis of cause, migration may be social or economic or religious. South Asian immigrants to Canada fall into four categories (1) the pioneer Sikhs who entered British Columbia in the early years of this century; (2) well educated people who came to Canada between 1947 and 1970 in response to the Canadian need for professional in institutions of higher learning; (3) Ugandan Asian refugees admitted to Canada on humanitarian grounds in the early 1970s and (4) those people of South Asian origin from the Asian subcontinent and other parts of the world who were accepted into the country in the late 1970s. This latter period of immigration marks a shift from accepting people in white collar jobs to admitting people with blue collar skills as Canada's labour requirements changed. Here, in this thesis migration of all the south Asian Canadian writers belong to fourth category.

In this study, an attempt has been made to recognise two unique factors in human immigration: Immigration does not mean the mere physical movement of people; and immigrants carry with them a socio cultural baggage which among other things consist of a predefined social identity, a set of religious beliefs and practices, a frame work of norms

and values governing family and kingship organisation and food habits and language. Most important, the immigrants are not cut off completely from the land of their heritage. They mediate between two worlds: the adopted and the countries of their heritage. They claim two cultures, two worldviews, two mindsets, two different kinds of experiences from two different worlds.

Like other third world immigrant writers, the South Asian Canadian writers have also used political and historical allegories to interpret national identity. Their goal is to use the fact of history and politics as an underline pattern in order to see it in a contemporary dimension, from a special as well as temporal prospective. Their conception of history is a matter of the soul's search for finding one's roots in his significance. Writers like Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje and Shyam Selvadurai have used national history to identify background under which people of their country have to live. Other groups of writers, like Uma Parameswaran, Yasmin Ladha, Anita Rau Badami and Nazneen Sadiq have revealed their national consciousness with the invention of traditional culture. The invention of traditional culture is an attempt to trace out the behaviour of ethnic group members in the context of social and psychological factors. Therefore the unending search for ethnic identity in terms of self identity, cultural identity and national identity has been observed in South Asian Canadian Writing.

In diasporic literature nature in different ways it can be treated as landscape, backdrop to human action or interaction. The relationship between human and the natural environment is the main focus of human geography. Human geography is one of the important branches of geography. One of the popular and widely accepted definitions of human geography is the man and his adjustment to his natural environment.

Apart from material gains and cultural achievements, the food, clothing, shelter, tools, technology, customs, traditions, socio-economic institutions, higher needs like religion, faith, language, literature, fine arts and folklore etc. are directly or indirectly influenced by physical environment. In other words, man has moulded his habits and life style according to his physical surroundings and natural endowment.

The South Asian immigrant writings often reflect an ambivalent attitude towards language. At times, these writers express both a desire to return to a homeland and a corresponding search for language in which they can articulate their experiences, at other times, they are suspicious of nostalgia and of belief in and hope for neutral language. However, no language is neutral. Immigrant writers cannot articulate their experiences in a Standard English language that strictly denies their existence. Therefore, the South Asian

writers deterritorialise or reterritorialise English language in order to put forth the inner voices.

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