

MULTICULTURALISM IN CANADA

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Abstract

The present paper highlights the multiculturalism in Canada. Multiculturalism means mosaic which esteems and values variances and pluralities. It is an ideology which advocates that society should consist of, or at least allow and include distinct and cultural and religious groups, with equitable status. Canada is known for its multiculturalism. Like Indian literary heritage, Canadian literature reflects a regionally diverse and multicultural society. The wide variety of literature fosters the growth of a unique composite identity. The diversity of culture has given rise to the emergence of various literatures, the most noteworthy being Indo Canadian literature. The last decades of the twentieth century saw the emergency of new generation of writers, poets, dramatists and novelists who have achieved distinct identities like Bharathi Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran and M. G. Vassanjee. They often explore the crucial issues of racism, alienation and social tensions that crowd the world of an immigrant.

Key words: Culture, multiculturalism, racism, diversity, tolerance, assimilation.

Culture is an integral part of a nation. The Oxford English Dictionary defines culture as “a particular form or type of intellectual development in a society generated by its distinctive customs, achievements and outlook”. Culture represents the way of life of an entire society and includes codes of manners, dress, language, rituals, social customs and folklore of a nation. Every nation has a distinct culture of its own. When an independent country becomes a colony, the native culture undergoes a radical change. The issue of multiculturalism has acquired importance, when people from different ethnicities and religions live together and thereby exchange vibrant multicultural practice. Multiculturalism represents the process of appreciating cultural diversity enabling the visible minorities to attain equity and social justice. It helps to evolve a pattern of social life in which diversity and tolerance of multiple ethnic groups are accommodated besides providing employment and social security for a secular, peaceful and progressive nation. In the West, migrants have achieved a number of cultural rights through the policies of multiculturalism.

Culture helps to integrate intellectualism in society along with the way people dress, behave, speak and follow customs and rituals. People have their own cultures in places where they live; but diversity, migration and social integration and cohesion, coincide with increasing awareness. These are the chief characteristics of cultural pluralism. It is inevitable that culture must undergo a drastic change at some point of time. When people interact with one another there is bound to be an inherent change. Ethnic differences and religious diversities lead to multiculturalism due to the interactions at the above levels.

The policy of multiculturalism is idealistically a genuine attempt to forge a new vibrant society which would embody the diversity of different cultures and yet possess a unified identity, like a patchwork quilt or a mosaic or a symphony. In practice, however, it did not work since it could not eliminate racism. In fact, by officially promising equal opportunity and equal status to immigrant it had, indeed feelings of economic insecurity, moral outrage, and conscious superiority among certain groups. According to S. N. Eisenstadt and B. Giesen multiculturalism refers to the doctrine that “cultural diversity should be recognized as a permanent and valuable part of political societies”.

Multiculturalism means mosaic which esteems and values variances and pluralities. It is an ideology which advocates that society should consist of, or at least allow and include distinct cultural

and religious groups, with equitable status. Karan Singh has expressed the idea of multiculturalism in his book on *India and Australia: History, Culture and Society* as:

Multiculturalism is now becoming an important point around the world. The old concept of 'one nation', 'one culture' is beginning to erode, and we find that multiculturalism, which means multi-ethnicity, multi-linguistic situations, multi-religious situations, cultural traditions that differ, all these are beginning now to assume increased importance. How we deal with multiculturalism in our own country is one of the areas we need to explore, because we in India ourselves are essentially a pluralistic society ... (11)

Multiculturalism also refers to ethnic and cultural diversity, tolerance, acceptance and cosmopolitanism. It either connotes some mode of transnational interrelationships between the cultures of two or more countries or suggests in a more circumscribed manner, the broader dimensions of multiple cultural identities within the boundaries of single nation. The term multicultural is often used to refer to non-European immigrant groups in countries such as the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Canada's experience with diverse communities distinguishes it from many other countries. Its thirty million inhabitants reflect a cultural, ethnic and linguistic makeup found rarely elsewhere. Diversity has been a fundamental characteristic of Canada since its beginnings. A broad framework of laws and policies supports Canada's approach to diversity which is based on the belief that the common good is best served when everyone is accepted and respected for whom he/she is, thus paving way for a harmonious and creative society. Augie Fleras and Jean Leonard Elliott in their book on *Multiculturalism in Canada: The Challenge of Diversity* points out Canada's Multiculturalism Act which emphasizes the equality of status and opportunity that is being given to all ethnic groups which is quoted extensively to bring out a clear idea of the prevalent multiculturalism in Canada:

- a) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and
- b) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity and that it provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada's future;
- c) promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to such participation;
- d) recognize the existence of communities whose members share a common origin and their historic contribution to Canadian society, and enhance their development.
- e) Ensure that all individuals receive equal treatment and equal protection under the law, while respecting and valuing their diversity;
- f) Encourage and assist the social, cultural, economic and political institutions of Canada to be both respectful and inclusive of Canada's multicultural character;
- g) Promote the understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of different origins;
- h) Foster the recognition and appreciation of the diverse cultures of Canadian society and promote the reflection and the evolving expressions of those cultures;
- i) Preserve and enhance the use of languages other than English and French, while strengthening the status and use of the official language of Canada; and
- j) Advance multiculturalism throughout Canada in harmony with the national commitment to the official language of Canada. (285)

In general, multiculturalism does not imply the superiority of one culture over another. Devika Khanna Narual in her article on "Introduction: The South Asian Diaspora in English Canadian Fiction" says, "... majority of Canadians believe that multiculturalism enriches Canadian culture ... They also understand this to be a policy and an ideal that is aimed at respect and tolerance, at sharing and exchanging, and at integrating and building the Canadian identity" (23). The policy of multiculturalism worked well with the immigrants though it had its own critics. The minorities have welcomed the official definition of Canada as a mosaic of cultures, and the accompanying policy of multiculturalism which profess to allow immigrants to retain their inherited cultural identity within the mosaic, while enjoying the rights and privileges of full-fledged Canadian citizenship without losing their identity.

Canada encourages multiculturalism and lives and let live attitudes among different races and diverse cultures. Rohinton Mistry in his novel on Tales from Firozsha Baag says:

The multiculturalism department is a Canadian invention. It is supposed to ensure that ethnic cultures are able to flourish, so that Canadian society will consist of mosaic of cultures that's their favorite world, mosaic instead of one uniform mix, like the American melting pot. If you ask me, mosaic and melting pot are both nonsense, and ethnic is a polite way of saying bloody foreigners. (160)

Canadians value diverse communities for enriching cultural expression and making daily life more varied and interesting. Multiculturalism encourages anti-racism activities and strengthens its support for other minority groups and helps individuals to overcome the barriers in society. Critics often refer to the Canadian mosaic which esteems and values, variances and pluralities. Like Indian literary heritage, Canadian literature reflects a regionally diverse and multicultural society. The wide variety of literature fosters the growth of a unique composite identity. The diversity of culture has given rise to the emergence of various literatures, the most noteworthy being Indo Canadian literature. The last decades of the twentieth century saw the emergency of new generation of writers, poets, dramatists and novelists who have achieved distinct identities like Bharathi Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran and M. G. Vassanjee. They often explore the crucial issues of racism, alienation and social tensions that crowd the world of an immigrant.

Much widely known writers of Indo Canadian literature is Bharati Mukherjee. Her works focus on the issues of migration, the status of new immigrants and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates as well as Indian women. Her own struggle with identity, first as an exile from India, then an Indian expatriate in Canada and finally as an immigrant in the United States has led to her current state of being an immigrant in a country of immigrants.

The best known writer in Indo Canadian literature is Rohinton Mistry. His works are focused on the boyhood initiations, everyday frustrations, nostalgia and aspirations with Indian outlook. He has bolstered the India-in-Canada reality by using Parsi words without either glossary or textual explanations such as resorted to by earlier writers in commonwealth literature. One can see the authentic and sensitive delineation of Parsi customs and way of life in his work. He has portrayed the most sustained exploration of Post-Independence Indian society through his chronicles of individual and community lives. His fiction covers many themes, from politics to Parsi community life and economic inequality to national 'events' such as wars rigorously examining the impact of historical forces and social evens on 'small' lives. Mistry's prize winning novels and collection of short stories such as Family matters, A fine balance and Tales from Firozsha Baag have been successful both in Canada and on international scale.

Uma Parameswaran, like many other immigrant writers, shows strong thematic interest in the experiences of immigrants, particularly South Asian Canada with an emphasis on alienation and racial position. She says that life of the immigrant no doubt shapes one's responses to India and the

response may vary a lot depending upon one's own personality and values. Through her writings the readers become aware not only of the South Asian experience but also of the struggles of the immigrants that make them more humane. Her multicultural lifestyle, with perplexing experience of these bicultural worlds is prominent in her works.

The much renowned Canadian writer M.G. Vassanji's works reflect his multinational and multicultural biographies. In most cases, his story has been a rather adventurous journey around the globe. Likewise, his fictional characters travel relentlessly; they are far away from home and constantly in foreign countries; while none of those places 'abroad' ever turn into a real home. His literary interest led to the formation of 'The Toronto Review of South Asian Writing Abroad'.

Frances Brooke, the English essayist, correctly described Canadian literature as "bilingual, multicultural, multiracial, multiethnic, postcolonial, postmodern and even multinational." The many examples of novels by Canadian writers detailing their experiences with immigration and cultural difference give weight to Brooke's definition. Indeed, Canada's literary identity crisis can be relaxed given the persistence of the uniquely Canadian theme that highlights the challenges associated with the multicultural mission.

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