

## PAPAYAS AND RED RIVER CEREAL

REVIEWING MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *Running in the Family* in *Quill and Quire* in 1982, Bharati Mukherjee observed that the book "may help ... destroy the myth that the Canadian imagination is the sole property of liberated Ontario W.A.S.P.s and lacerated Quebec Catholics. It is nourished on papayas as well as Red River cereal." Setting aside the other myths that this generalization relies on — the Central Canada binarism, the geographical dislocation of Selkirk's Red River — her phrasing remains effective. Although it is well to be cautious about the implications of "effectiveness" — and hence the appeal of this particular phrase — Mukherjee's observation is a useful reminder that European vicissitudes are not the only influences that have been shaping Canada, and that the two official languages are not the only arbiters of variety open to national cultural understanding.

Just how accurate any "understanding" can ever be is another problem — but "accuracy" is less in question, probably, than the political function of image-making. Plainly, cultures make up images of other cultures, as well as of themselves: sometimes by accidents of cultural history, sometimes by deliberate political ploy. "North America" (as Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, B. Rajan's *Too Long in the West*, and the stories in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* all testify) exists in the "South Asian mind" as a place of ambitious corruption, of promise and abundance, and of naive aimlessness. Likewise, "South Asia" has worn numerous imaginative identities to Europeans and others. The island of Serendip has been located there (a circumstance that Ondaatje makes much of); it has surfaced in reportorial discourse as The Subcontinent (a term as portentous as it is vague); it has been equated with the Raj (Kiplingesque with burden), and been glimpsed as the Jewel in the Crown and the cradle of Gandhian passive resistance. It has been constructed as a hippie haven and as a tourist's dream of uncountable riches (or nightmare of teeming poverty). And Canadians have participated in this process of political conceptualization. From Sara Jeannette Duncan's Anglo-Indian ironies to Earle Birney's "The Bear on the Delhi Road," from Elise Aylen's reli-

gious quests to those of James Leo Conway's *The Christians of Malabar*, from the romance of Janette Turner Hospital's *The Ivory Swing* to the adventures of Craig Grant's *The Last India Overland*, and from the political comedy of Frank Davey's *The Abbotsford Guide to India* to the political revisionism of Sharon Pollock's *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Canadian writers have been, if not exactly obsessed with South Asia, at least cognizant of the imaginative relevance of "India" to their own lives.

But that there has been a lively literature written by South Asian immigrants to Canada since the earliest settlements at the beginning in the twentieth century — a literature in Punjabi and Gujarati and more recently Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, and English — is less widely appreciated. That Canadian critics should now be paying attention to the many connections between South Asia and Canadian literature is therefore less surprising than that it should have taken so long. Such poets as Surjeet Kalsey, Rienzi Crusz, and Suniti Namjoshi are among many who have been attracting attention. These and others are represented in Cyril Dabydeen's 1990 anthology of "Asian Canadian Poetry," *Another Way to Dance*. And Mukherjee is not alone in observing the power of Ondaatje's prose — or that of Mistry, M. G. Vassanji, and Ven Begamudré, to name only three other contemporary writers of fiction.

Begamudré's *A Planet of Eccentrics*, a collection of ten stories, recurrently confronts Canadians with versions of India — and with fluid versions of themselves. Racism and the limitations of multicultural policy lie behind the multiple perspectives of "Masaic," for example; other stories depend on culturally variable images of garden, colour, family, and "illusion." Throughout, the language of the stories shifts eloquently from one sensibility to another. Vassanji's style, in *No New Land*, is plainer, aptly matched to his no-nonsense portrayal of race, power relations, job hunger, gender inequity, opportunism, uncertainty, and opportunity among the immigrant communities of urban Toronto. Of East African origin himself, Vassanji writes briskly about the Indian diaspora; his social realism is concerned with "exorcizing" the past so that newcomers can find the confidence to consign lost or rejected opportunities to "another and unknowable world," and consequently "take on the future more evenly matched."

Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* is verbally much more complex, an allegory of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi relations during the wars of 1971, with hints of Rushdie and lashings of Dickens and a nod in the direction of Hindu holy books. The mixture works. To read this book carefully is to participate achingly in the anguish of loss, love, despair, and dislocation. And discovery. A tale of an ordinary middleclass Parsi Bombay bank worker named Gustad, whose seemingly placid family life is suddenly beset by quarrel and illness at the same time as it is abused by municipal bureaucracy and by the illegal machinations of longtime friends and an erstwhile government, the novel probes the family's efforts to

resolve their crises. In the long run, it solves some problems only to confront others. It refuses easy romantic conclusions, and it's fair to say that not all readers will be enamoured of its earthy maleness, the marauding sexuality that the narrator acknowledges, does not always approve of, but learns to interpret as a sign of loneliness, fear, anger, and a desperate insecurity. Different kinds of desperation lead to different shapes of violence here, and it would be easy to have allowed hyperbole and caricature to take over the narrative. One of the strengths of the book, however, is its refusal to apologize for ordinariness. Human frailty is not always admirable; Mistry just asks that it be acknowledged as *human*.

Gustad's quiet triumph — for he retrieves joy from his memories and his experience, as well as grief — derives from his rejection of the easily sentimentalized roles of martyr and self-proclaimed victim. After he abandons his Job-like lamentations, he also begins to give up any blind faith in the "miracle" of magical or divine political intercession. He gains dignity, instead, by coming simply to recognize the essential (though not always obvious) dignity of the other human beings with whom he shares the world. In a novel only indirectly and allegorically about war, politics, and the rhetoric of praise and blame, Mistry's lesson applies more widely than to Bombay in 1971. While it does not intrude, the moral here is abundantly plain: social divisiveness is only avoided by the active will to reject it, and to reject, with it, the fear that it depends on, and the susceptibility to the appeal of easy solutions.

Critics have been addressing these texts — from reviews (Edna Alford praising Begamudré; Clark Blaise praising Vassanji; Michael Ondaatje praising Mistry; Wilson Harris praising Cyril Dabydeen's *Dark Swirl*) to longer articles. Writing in *Ariel* in 1991, Michael Thorpe spread a wide net, surveying all of South Asian writing in Canada. Vassanji, and Arun Mukherjee — in *The Toronto South Asian Review* and elsewhere — have worked within a more selective range of commentary. Cogently and deliberately they have reflected on some of the theoretical issues that bear on this body of writing (the politics of racism and feminism, for example); coincidentally, they have also probed the political bitterness of many an immigrant individual and group. While Canadian critics have been thus provoked, attention has been turning in India, too, to the Canadian connection, as the instructive essays collected in Om P. Juneja and Chandra Mohan's 1990 volume *Ambivalence*, or in John Hill and Uttam Bhoite's *The Tropical Maple Leaf* (1989), indicate. These are all signs of an active current engagement with an increasingly large group of writers.

Yet there is a dim danger of treating all works that relate to South Asia as though they formed a cohesive unit; this practice would suggest that devising a *category* for them would actually *deal* with them, whereas such a mechanical tabulation would merely count them. A convenient category could still exclude them from the narrower versions of the Canadian mainstream. It becomes clear

that generalizations repeatedly construct predicaments: the language of universal platitudes is a refuge, both for the unready and the unwary. But so is a preoccupation with the minutiae of difference. Good criticism, like a productive society, still struggles to say *more* rather than *less* than the obvious, to read *more* rather than *less* than one of the lower common denominators of prejudice or opinion. Neither “ethnic” nor “multicultural” should be allowed to become a term of abuse: that way violence lies.

Writing about Ondaatje, Bharati Mukherjee tries to indicate how Ondaatje’s very particular prose functions. To do so she reaches yet again for an image. She claims that “He works by suggesting the final unknowability of the world. He disrupts comforting pieties and surrounds his characters with an almost absolute darkness.” But does the single image in use here *locate* or *dislocate*? “Darkness” is a loaded term. “Almost” and “absolute” come close to logical blows. And while “unknowability” is a suggestive word — it is Vassanji’s as well as Mukherjee’s — it by no means circumscribes Ondaatje. Nor will it do — to extrapolate beyond Mukherjee’s review — as a description of “India,” or of “spirituality,” or of “*the South Asian perspective*” on life in Canada: just as, ultimately, “papayas and Red River Cereal” will not do as social analysis, but satisfy only as metonym. Therein lies a further problem. For image-making creates as much of a potential for misunderstanding as for resolution. The cast of mind that defines by claiming universal truths — and that then sustains these “truths” by excluding “messy” alternatives — appears to enjoy the neatness of categories, and perhaps relaxes in the associative, generalizing appeal of metonymy. Yet real life — and any literature that has anything to do with real life — persistently defies and escapes such organized restriction. Messy alternatives constantly intrude into prepackaged order and ostensibly “coherent” design.

Perhaps it’s because order nonetheless does appeal that the comforting pieties of *criticism*, as well as those of spiritual aspiration and political desire, also persist. If they, too, consequently plead to be disrupted, that’s in part a sign of another need: the need to recognize and genuinely *appreciate* diversity in a world where statistics count too readily as truths and enigmas pass too fervently as answers.

W.N.

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