

# SOUTH ASIAN CANADIAN WRITERS FROM AFRICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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NOT ALL SOUTH ASIANS NOW living in Canada came directly from India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka; many came from India, via Africa or the Caribbean, where their ancestors had settled in British colonies either in nineteenth century or the early twentieth. After most of these colonies gained independence from Britain in the 1960s, many of their Indian citizens immigrated to western countries such as Britain, Canada and the U.S. They immigrated for variety of reasons — economic deprivation, ethnic rivalry, political victimisation or sheer physical insecurity. Whatever their reasons, since many of these Indo-Caribbean or Indo-African immigrants were the children or even great-grandchildren of Indians who had migrated from India, they could be regarded as migrating for a second time, and becoming thereby doubly displaced from India.

The first writing by South Asian Canadian writers<sup>1</sup> from Africa or the Caribbean was produced in the 1970s by Harold Sonny Ladoo (Trinidad), Reshard Gool (South Africa), and Cyril Dabydeen (Guyana). Ladoo wrote two promising novels—*No Pain Like This Body* (1972) and *Yesterdays* (1974)<sup>2</sup>—but this promise was cut tragically short by his murder while he was on a visit to Trinidad in 1974. *No Pain Like This Body* and *Yesterdays* are the first two works in a projected series of novels that Ladoo apparently planned to explore Indo-Caribbean experience. As such, these novels provide a foretaste of the essentials of Indo-Caribbean society—physical toil, economic hardship, pain, frustration, uncertainty, and entrapment; for Indians came to the Caribbean to replace African slaves who had been freed from British-owned sugar plantations in the 1830s, and Indians in Ladoo's novel still bear the marks of this plantation inheritance, as evidenced by the harsh and demanding circumstances in which his characters are forced to struggle for basic needs.

*No Pain Like This Body* and *Yesterdays* achieve success as robust narratives of local colour capturing the pungent speech idioms of rural Trinidad, together with

the violence, duplicity, and sprawling rawness of colonial deprivation. *Yesterdays* for instance, is so explicit about matters of sex and excretion as to give offence in more than one quarter. Implicitly, both novels indict British colonialism in the Caribbean, and *Yesterdays* mentions the imperialism of Canadian Presbyterian missionaries who, in the process of converting Indo-Trinidadians to Christianity, instilled in them western European cultural values that tended to replace their ancestral, cultural habits inherited from India. *Yesterdays* also expresses a retaliatory desire to send Hindu missionaries to Canada. Although this would have appeared ludicrous and utterly far-fetched in the early 1970s, it would no doubt please Ladoo to know that there are several Hindu temples in Toronto today. It would have been interesting to see how Ladoo's writing might have developed. In *No Pain Like This Body* and *Yesterdays*, at least, he has achieved a robustness not easily found among his Canadian contemporaries except in the early writings of Mordecai Richler.

RESHARD GOOL'S FIRST novel *Price* (1973)<sup>3</sup> portrays the society that he left behind in his homeland. This time the portrait is one of racism in South Africa, in the 1930s and 1940s. The novel successfully evokes mixed social conditions involving white racists, imperialists, and Marxists who fight among themselves and are equally corrupt. This historical portrait is heightened by the author's technique of employing frequent flashbacks and diary entries to emphasise the confusion and fragmentation in South Africa's social and political structure. *Price* has won more critical than popular acclaim, no doubt because of the novelty of its narrative technique. Gool's second novel *Nemesis Casket*<sup>4</sup> is even more experimental in technique, incorporating sections of diaries, notebooks, letters, and other materials in an attempt to reconstruct and probe the central relationship between the narrator and his wife. Not only does the social and political interest of *Price* give way to psychological issues of personal identity in *Nemesis Casket*, but the setting of the novel moves away from South Africa to Canada, indicating a pattern common among South Asian writers who deal with their countries of origin in their earliest work before moving on to Canadian subjects or settings.

In the writing of Cyril Dabydeen there is a more continuous relationship between subjects taken from his homeland and those taken from Canada. Dabydeen is very productive — probably, to date, the most prolific of all South Asian Canadian authors — and his poems and stories furnish perhaps the most complete record in Canadian literature of subjects, themes, interests and approaches of writers from his ethnic cultural and regional background. Dabydeen's early volume of poems *Goatsong* (1977)<sup>5</sup> and his first novel *The Wizard Swami* (1989)<sup>6</sup> evoke colonial Guyana with its combination of physical squalor, poverty, and raw boisterousness,

within an environment of brightly variegated tropical colours and blistering heat. *Goatsong* describes everyday Guyanese scenes and childhood experiences, while *The Wizard Swami* exposes Indo-Guyanese, religious charlatanism in the fashion of V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*, the story of a Hindu priest turned masseur and politician.

Although Dabydeen's work considers specifically Caribbean themes of exploitation, resistance and mimicry, it also includes the concerns of immigrants who face hostility, racism or neglect in Canada. In *Goatsong* he writes:

Walking along  
Heading for the Citizenship Court  
Kent Street/Ottawa  
I have been here seven years  
Yet the same question  
Where do you come from? (33)

Such feelings of displacement, anonymity and alienation become an increasing preoccupation in Dabydeen's work, and as the persona of another poem states:

I yearn still for the buttressed  
domain of silk cotton  
and mangrove  
  
trade winds shouting familiar voices  
echoes all around<sup>7</sup>

The persona in this poem admits that, although he is impressed and engaged with his new life in Canada, he is still "mudbound in memory" and misses the familiar sights and sounds of his Caribbean past. As an immigrant he is caught by divided loyalties to his present home in Canada, and memories of his former home in the Caribbean.

This ambivalent nature of immigrant experience in Canada remains a constant preoccupation throughout Dabydeen's poems and stories. Some of his stories include Caribbean and Canadian characters living in Canada or the Caribbean. Some stories in *Monkey Jungle* (1988),<sup>8</sup> for instance, are set entirely in northern Ontario, while others, like the title story, describe the experience of a Canadian working on a cocoa plantation in the Guyanese forest. In many cases, especially in his poems, Dabydeen's persona may be pictured reflecting on his life in Canada, when suddenly, involuntarily, his/her thoughts may shift back to past experience in the Caribbean, or vice versa. This is the phenomenon of "here" and "there" that Dabydeen regards as an inescapable part of the subject of his writing — an almost Jungian predilection for thoughts and ideas welling up from one's racial or cultural subconscious and mixing freely with one's current thoughts.

Dabydeen's attempt to mediate between the competing demands of "here" and "there" affects the quality and tone of his writing. In the poem "New Life" in

which the persona has already been quoted as being “mudbound in memory,” the effort to balance his Canadian and Caribbean experience takes a toll on the force of the emotions being expressed, whether they are grief, loss, confusion or nostalgia. The persona’s feeling may be sincere or earnest, but it lacks urgency or force. Far from being torn apart by divided loyalties or competing passions, the persona appears to mediate between Canada and the Caribbean, and the result is one of detachment or accommodation. This does not necessarily reduce the artistic value of “New Life,” but it gives the poem — and Dabydeen’s writing in general — a sense of being inhibited, holding itself back, so that it fits most properly into a minimalistic category of literature, mainly concerned with the balanced or detached observation of reality within a deliberately selected small focus of human experience.

**L**ADOO, GOOL AND DABYDEEN were succeeded (although Dabydeen is still writing) by a new batch of writers whose work began to appear in the 1980s. The Trinidadian Clyde Hosein is notable for his volume of thirteen stories *The Killing of Nelson John and Other Stories* (1980)<sup>9</sup> which vividly capture the mixture of dereliction, confusion and futility in colonial Trinidad, in the middle decades of this century. Like Ladoo, Hosein writes mainly of Indo-Trinidadians. In the first story “The Signature,” the narrator recalls his mother’s efforts to write in English, although she spoke and recited poetry in Bengali. If it is poignant when the thirteen-year-old narrator instructs his grown mother to write her own signature, or to count in English, it is positively heart-wrenching to learn that his mother bleeds to death from an accident in the cane fields where she laboured, leaving the narrator with one tangible memento of herself — a piece of paper torn from a brown shopping bag, on which she practised writing her name each morning, before readying herself for work in the fields.

The narrator of “The Signature” speaks of keeping this cherished memento of his mother in his wallet “even though so many years have passed and I am exiled to a far country.” This sense of exile is not investigated because it is not relevant to the story; but since the events of the story are recollected in a “far country” not unlike Canada, it allows us to make comparisons between Hosein’s recollections and those of Ladoo and Dabydeen. On the whole, the stories in *The Killing of Nelson John and Other Stories* are closer in tone and quality to Ladoo’s fiction. This is not simply because Ladoo and Hosein are from Trinidad; it has more to do with their attitude to their subject which is more explicit than Dabydeen’s, concentrating on the physical details of pain and adversity, and at least in some of their work, introducing a comic element that catches some flavour of the wit and humour of Samuel Selvon, and the irony of V. S. Naipaul.

DURING THE 1980s THE Guyanese Arnold Itwaru also began writing in Canada. So far he has produced *Shattered Songs* (1983)<sup>10</sup> a volume of poems, and *Shanti* (1990)<sup>11</sup> a novel, as well as other works of critical writing. Although Itwaru includes Guyanese subjects in *Shattered Songs*, his poems convey a sense of inertia, malaise and impotence that is more readily associated with contemporary life in the industrialised, developed world rather than with colonial Guyana. It is a mark of Itwaru's success that his favourite themes of entrapment, reversal and discontinuity flow with equal naturalness out of all the situations he describes. His persona, in almost every poem, conducts a never-ending, death-in-life struggle for survival or personal identity. But survival is found only in destruction, and identity in dissolution. Such is the sense of frustration and lack of fulfilment in these poems, and so pervasive are the images of violence and destruction, that *Shattered Songs* communicates, at worst, inert cynicism, and at best, a compassionate concern for mortality. Itwaru displays technical skill in many ways, for example, through staccato rhythms that reinforce feelings of truncation and loss.

From the global reflections of *Shattered Songs* Itwaru moves, in *Shanti*, to a more political story of imperialism and exploitation in colonial Guyana. The main victim is Shanti, an Indian girl, whose rape by a British overseer is symbolic of Britain's economic exploitation of all her Caribbean sugar colonies. Shanti is by no means a passive victim, but she cannot successfully resist against a system that is totally oppressive. The anti-colonial message of the novel emerges from the interaction of characters such as Shanti, the bright, spirited, but impoverished heroine; Booker, the British imperialist and rapist; Sergeant Reid, the ignorant and insensitive Afro-Guyanese policeman; and the Indo-Guyanese headmaster Sookraj, an embodiment of colonial toadyism and sycophancy. Perhaps the language of the novel aims at too consistently lyrical an effect. More interestingly, the language echoes certain phrases and images of established Guyanese writers such as Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris, suggesting some continuity of patterns in Guyanese writing. It should be interesting to see how such patterns fare in Canada.

RAMABAI ESPINET'S COLLECTION of poems *Nuclear Seasons* (1991)<sup>12</sup> is, in Indo-Caribbean terms, an original statement of feminist independence, enunciated in a tough, defiant, iconoclastic manner, that is yet open, caring, affectionate, and fortified by confidence and candour. The poems recreate familiar Caribbean scenes and activities, and include sensuous descriptions of the landscape as well as realistic glimpses of harsh poverty. They also attempt to cope with Canada, the new homeland:

This land is home to me  
 Now homeless, a true refugee  
 Of the soul's last corner  
 Saddhu days and babu days  
 And Mai in ohrni days  
 Lost to me — like elephants  
 And silks, the dhows of Naipaul's  
 Yearning, not mine (10)

Espinet's persona deliberately shuns the milder description of her condition as "exile," and calls herself a "refugee"; having lost her original Indian culture which was never truly hers anyway — because she is culturally part of the Caribbean as well — she is a true refugee, culturally dispossessed. Her passing shot at V. S. Naipaul does not merely acknowledge his importance to the Caribbean literary and intellectual tradition, but the fact that she belongs to the generation after him, and is to that extent, less Indian and more Caribbean.

Espinet's poem "For Patricia Deanna" reflects on the death of a young Caribbean woman who tried to escape from Canadian immigration officers, and fell to her death from the balcony of her apartment. Patricia's death is regarded as an unnoticed event since she was "pregnant, illegal and utterly alone." Espinet is a passionate spokesperson for women like Patricia, and other disadvantaged people. She movingly transmits the stark quality of Patricia's fear, terror and powerlessness as she is cornered, in her utterly desperate and panic-stricken attempt to escape from the immigration "Hunter-man." Espinet's passion gains power and intensity by being focused on one person and one incident. It contrasts with Itwaru's more generalized reflections and Dabydeen's muted tone especially in dealing with Canadian or North American subjects.

IF REGIONALISM IS AN ISSUE in Canadian politics and economics, it also affects literature, including the writing of "new Canadians" as freshly arrived immigrants are optimistically called. Since Toronto has become the cultural and commercial centre of Canada, it has attracted a huge immigrant population, including South Asians of every background. With the exception of Dabydeen and Gool, all the writers discussed so far have lived in Toronto, and their view of Canada is undoubtedly coloured by their experience in the huge metropolis. A third exception is Ishmael Baksh whose novel *Black Light* (1988)<sup>13</sup> is concerned with Indo-Trinidadian Nazrul Khan, who, like the author, teaches in the department of education at Memorial University, in St. John's, Newfoundland. The novel explores Nazrul's efforts to cope with racism in an academic context where attitudes are more guarded and elusive. The hypocrisy of these hidden attitudes is

exposed when they are shown as the true cause of Nazrul's resignation from the headship of his department. As if this blow to Nazrul's professional reputation is not enough, his relationship with Elizabeth, a white woman, also breaks up about the same time; and it seems almost providential that he finds an Indo-Caribbean woman Shareeda, who offers solace and comfort. The final scene of the novel in which Nazrul and Shareeda narrowly escape what appears to be a racist attack on a secluded beach may be a somewhat gratuitous attempt to drive home the point about racism.

There is a provincial flavour of remoteness in *Black Light*. The academic milieu as a whole is unusual in writing by South Asian Canadians, the closest parallel being Saros Cowasjee's *Goodbye to Elsa* (1974)<sup>14</sup> a novel of uproarious wit and rollicking satire. In comparison *Black Light* is a workmanlike effort with descriptions that are correct rather than natural, and dialogue that could be more sharply differentiated between characters. Yet the novel offers a good study of an ethnic outsider's reaction to an enclosed academic community in Canada. The best sections are the chapters recalling Nazrul's childhood and schooldays in Trinidad. The dialogue in these chapters has a zest and vitality not matched in the rest of the novel, and the observation of Trinidad's feudalistic, class-conscious society has conviction and sureness of touch.

WITH TWO COLLECTIONS of poetry *Demerara Telepathy* (1988) and *Between the Dash and the Comma* (1989), and his novel *Dear Death* (1989)<sup>15</sup> the Guyanese Sasenarine Persaud has staked a claim as one of the more productive of the younger South Asian Canadian writers. Set within an Indian community in Guyana, *Dear Death* conjures up a Gothic atmosphere consistent with its rural environment and wild, rain-drenched, tropical landscape. Events are related through the consciousness of a boy Dalip whose aunt, mother and brother die in mysterious circumstances. Dalip himself has nightmares, from which he is only freed after exorcism by a Hindu priest. The novel as a whole is infused with a pervasive feeling of Hindu spirituality, pantheistic in essence, and philosophically centred on transcendence. There are similar preoccupations in Persaud's poems which also reproduce many of the social and political subjects dealt with by most Indo-Caribbean authors. In a Canadian based poem in *Demerara Telepathy*, he notes the ambivalence of an immigrant who comes to Canada "to enjoy fast cars and good lanes," but who also asserts:

But I will not forget I'm a glad alien in  
Your seasonal land! (35)

The persona, like several of Dabydeen's, remains divided and unsettled in mind.

Of the writers mentioned so far, Dabydeen has made the greatest impact on the Canadian literary scene. Yet this impact is grudging, far from enthusiastic, and it would not be surprising if Dabydeen feels unjustly neglected. One writer who should have no complaints about being neglected is Neil Bissoondath from Trinidad. From the appearance of his first book *Digging up the Mountains*, (1985)<sup>16</sup> a collection of stories, Bissoondath has established himself as the most important South Asian writer of Indo-Caribbean origin, although he would reject such a label of himself, and claim that he is merely a Canadian writer. Since *Digging up the Mountains*, Bissoondath has written a novel *A Casual Brutality* (1988)<sup>17</sup> and another collection of stories *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows* (1990).<sup>18</sup>

Bissoondath's writing stands out by its self-confidence and critical sharpness. The stories in his first volume, for instance, advance the view that after settling in the Caribbean for one hundred and fifty years, Indians may be forced to emigrate, in which case the Caribbean would have to be regarded just as a stop over for them, on their journey from India to other destinations. Stories such as "Insecurity" and "Digging up the Mountains" illustrate a real threat to Indian security in the Caribbean, and this is no doubt one factor motivating Indians to emigrate from the region. Obviously, this is not a view that would endear Bissoondath to Caribbean governments, especially those in Guyana and Trinidad.

But all the stories in *Digging up the Mountains* are not as political as this. "The Christmas Lunch" for instance, is set in Canada, and exposes the suppressed frustration and puzzlement of Caribbean immigrants when first confronted with some Canadian habits and customs. The result is a feeling of not belonging — to Canada, the Caribbean, or anywhere. Bissoondath reveals a similar feeling in stories involving East European and Japanese characters, the implication being that insecurity leading to emigration and a sense of homelessness are phenomena of modern twentieth century life. This is what links his fiction to that of his uncle V. S. Naipaul, whose writing provides perhaps the most complete fictional study of exile and homelessness in the post-colonial era.

Bissoondath's novel centres on Raj Ramsingh an Indo-Caribbean doctor who moves between Canada and the Caribbean, surrounded by events of violence and terror, and images of chaos and collapse. In the end, after the death of his Canadian wife and their son, he flees from his home island, which at that stage, is bracing itself for an apparent invasion by American forces similar to the American invasion of Grenada in 1984. *A Casual Brutality* has more overtly political implications than the author's short stories: its portrait of the Caribbean is one of decay and disintegration, and the recurrent images in the novel are those of brutality, insensitivity, forlornness and annihilation.

The stories in *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows* offer further meditation on brutality and disorder leading to emigration and exile, except that the focus is on immigrants living in Canada. The immigrants come from equally inhospitable



backgrounds, whether of Caribbean chaos and brutality, or Latin American political persecution. For example, the title story recounts the interaction of several refugees — a Haitian, Sikh, and Sri Lankan, as well as a Vietnamese couple — living together in one house in a Canadian city. They are all forced into homelessness by a shared background of starvation, civil war, forced conscription and economic deprivation, and their common fate is summed up by the unnerving sense of loss, uncertainty and feeble vulnerability that consumes one protagonist, as he awaits deportation from Canada, and possible death in his homeland.

The story "Security" in Bissoondath's second collection is a sequel to "Insecurity" in his first. In the earlier story Ramgolam was living in fear of persecution and death in the Caribbean. In the later story he is an immigrant living with his wife and sons in Toronto. He is no longer in fear of his life, but he is bored at home, aimlessly watching television and burdened by thought about his sons being transformed by living in Canada into barbarians who eat beef and pork, despite being brought up as Hindus. The fact is that Ramgolam is just as insecure as he was in the Caribbean, only in a different way. His situation compares with that of V. S. Naipaul's hero Ralph Singh who, in *The Mimic Men*<sup>19</sup> escapes from the disorder of his Caribbean island to London, the supposedly stable centre of Empire, only to find "a greater disorder" there. Through characters like Ramgolam, Bissoondath illustrates the futility of immigration and the essential inadequacy of being human.

Among South Asian Canadian writers from the Caribbean, Bissoondath may be regarded as the most perceptive and skilled commentator on characteristic themes of disorder and persecution leading to flight or displacement, and ultimately to uncertainty or inner disorder. Bissoondath's success is due partly to an Atwoodian grasp of topical issues, an analytic intelligence reminiscent of V. S. Naipaul, and a technical fluency all his own. His stories are packed with authoritative detail presented with naturalness and conviction. At the same time, this very perfection of technique carries a touch of perfunctory professionalism. This is most true of some non-Caribbean stories, but it may also be seen in "Power of Reason" (in his second volume) in which we are given a wonderfully exact portrait of the West Indian protagonist Monica, including excellent descriptions of her jobs, personal relationships and domestic circumstances. Yet the power of the technique itself contributes to Monica's inability to cope, and her eventual victimisation: it makes it less likely that she will triumph over her circumstances. By the same token, it is the studied technique that increases the impact of stories like "Insecurity" and "Security."

IN M. G. VASSANJI, South Asian Canadian writing has found its most promising novelist so far. Vassanji combines an encyclopaedic memory with magisterial literary technique in his first novel *The Gunny Sack* (1989).<sup>20</sup> The

result is a work that has some stylistic resemblance to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, but a more general resemblance to V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. What *The Gunny Sack* does for the East African Ishmaeli community, *A House for Mr. Biswas* has done for the Indo-Trinidadian community: presented a comprehensive view of its history, whilst eliciting the most significant factors that come out of history — cultural deracination and transplantation, multicultural coexistence, loss, exile, and homelessness. Yet Naipaul's irony makes his novel an altogether different work — more penetrating and rigorous; but less tolerant and accepting. This is Vassanji's achievement: that he objectively shows the Shamsis — as the Ishmaelis are called in *The Gunny Sack* — to be preoccupied mainly with survival, and therefore not greatly concerned with moral niceties.

The story is told by Salim Juma who recounts the consequences of the family's movement from India to Africa. His narrative, modelled on *The Arabian Nights*, carries an air of fairy tale romance, as Salim recounts his family's fortunes under German, then British colonialism, and finally under Julius Nyerere's socialism in independent Tanzania. It is a spirited saga of alliances, rivalries, successes and failures, always illustrating the Shamsis' ability to survive oppression, fragmentation, displacement or whatever else. In the process there are varied and colourful events, customs, conventions and taboos, all fulsomely recorded with humour and zest:

It was now, not before, when Ushirika House was nationalised, that Hassan Uncle was wiped out. Not completely, shopkeepers are indomitable, Hassan Uncle had other assets, but positively his last. He had five children, three of them overseas, including Mehboob, who had shown Charlie Chaplin films on their bedroom linen in Msimbazi so many years ago, for ten cents a show per person. Mehboob, after several false starts in Toronto, had rediscovered his vocation; he showed Indian films, first in School halls on weekends, and later in a full-fledged cinema house. And with the new name of Mehboob Khan, he came to claim his parents, one of whom, my uncle, had suffered a nervous breakdown. (247)

Hassan Uncle's portrait illustrates the variety and zest of the narrative, and the author's relish in his characters, warts and all.

Vassanji's second novel *No New Land* (1991)<sup>21</sup> is something of a sequel to his first, not in the literal sense of following the same characters at a later stage of their lives, but in following members of the Ishmaeli community to Toronto and observing their initial efforts at settling in. This time there is no *Arabian Nights* aura of romance to mask or mollify the harsh realism of the narrative. The problem is that the new immigrants are regarded as "visible," which increases their difficulty of settling among people of different colour, manners, and conventions. The structure of the novel is circular, beginning with Nurdin Lalam living in his Rosecliffe Drive apartment in Toronto, after being charged with assaulting a (white) Canadian girl, then giving the history of Nurdin's family, mainly from the time they left

Tanzania for Toronto. The family go through the usual economic struggle, racial discrimination, cultural loss and uncertainty, until in the end Nurdin faces the humiliation of being charged with sexual assault.

What East African immigrants have done at 69 Rosecliffe Park Drive is to turn the whole apartment building into a miniature Dar es Salaam, the city in Tanzania from which they have come. There is nothing that you cannot buy from one apartment to another whether it is halal meat, toilet supplies or snacks:

Sixty-nine Rosecliffe Park. The name still sound romantic, exotic, out of a storybook or a film. Sometimes it's hard to believe you are here, at this address, sitting inside, thinking these thoughts, surrounded by luxury: the carpeting, the sofas, the telephone, the fridge, the television — yes, luxuries by Dar standards — things you could not have owned in a lifetime. The CN Tower blinks unfailingly in the distance; the parkway is incredibly beautiful at night: dotted lines of glowing lights curving in the darkness of the valley. And when it's snowing there in the night, softly, silently, whitely, you wonder if it's not a childish Christmas card you are dreaming. But then you step out in the common corridor with its all too real down-to-earth sights, sounds, and smells, and you wonder: This, sixty-nine Rosecliffe? And you realize you've not left Dar far behind. (59-60)

Vassanji's excellent observation of detail enables him to capture an uneasy blend of human relations in Toronto involving immigrant frustration over job hunting, fear of victimisation by Canadian racists, and strategies for survival. All this is best encapsulated in the climactic incident where Nurdin attempts to help a young woman sitting on the floor of the Ontario Addiction Centre, where he has a menial job. With genuine solicitude, he puts his hand inquiringly on her shoulder only to be charged with attempted rape. The incident illustrates the uneasy contact of immigrant innocence with calculated hostility. It takes Missionary, a revered Ishmaeli figure from Dar es Salaam, and a repository of communal wisdom, to heal the bruised feelings of his people in Toronto and give them hope for the future.

*No New Land* follows the direction of most South Asian Canadian writers in gradually taking on Canadian subjects in their work. If Canadian literature is defined as literature written about Canada, most South Asian Canadian writers tend to become more Canadian the longer they stay in Canada. This has also been the pattern with Austin Clarke, Canada's major black writer, who is of Barbadian origin. Anglophone Caribbean writers who immigrated to England in the 1950s did much the same thing. Samuel Selvon, for instance, after two novels set in the Caribbean, devoted much of his writing to West Indians living in England. Selvon immigrated to England in 1950, where he established a reputation as one of the major West Indian authors. He moved to Canada in 1978, but he is somewhat different from most South Asian Canadian writers in not having produced much writing based on his Canadian experience.

THE SUBJECT OF LOSING one's native community and struggling to cope with the loss in an alien environment is a general problem faced by all immigrants. The South Asian Canadian experience of this problem, as described by the writers in this essay, is broadly similar to the experience of other immigrant groups such as Icelandic homesteaders in Laura Goodman Salverson's *The Viking Heart*, the Depression-hit Hungarians in John Marlyn's *Under the Ribs of Death*, Jewish people in novels by Mordecai Richler and Adele Wiseman, and even the lone Irish immigrant Ginger Coffey in Brian Moore's *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*. As a rule, most of these novels reflect a process in which immigrants gradually become integrated into Canadian society, whether they resist it strongly, moderately, or not at all. Resistance comes from those who believe that integration into Canadian culture entails the necessary loss of their own inherited cultural identity. White immigrants, for obvious reasons, integrate more readily than the visible minorities examined in this essay. These minorities have welcomed the official definition of Canada as a mosaic of cultures, and the accompanying policy of multiculturalism which professes to allow immigrants to retain their inherited cultural identity within the mosaic, while enjoying the rights and privileges of full-fledged Canadian citizens. The evidence of South Asian Canadian writers from Africa and the Caribbean suggests that the citizenship of their characters is less full-fledged than promised, partly because of their own reluctance to give up the cultural baggage they have brought to Canada, and partly because of the hostility or inhospitality they encounter here.

In a stimulating review of Vassanji's *No New Land*, Neil Bissoondath takes the author to task for what he sees as a "need to present the whole, to be a kind of literary ringmaster for the community circus."<sup>22</sup> Bissoondath is well known for his strictures against official multiculturalism which, he claims, promotes cultural ghettos. His review argues that Vassanji's attempt to portray the whole Ishmaeli community in Toronto, prevents him from creating fully individualized characters. The review provides other critical insights, some of which are very perceptive, but its main argument is not justified, because Vassanji does create brilliant character sketches, even if his chief aim is to provide a cross-section view of the East African, Ishmaeli community in Toronto. If a wholly Canadian analogy may be used, *No New Land* is more like *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* than *The Stone Angel*, each excellent in its own way.

But Bissoondath also recognizes Vassanji's portrayal of significant differences between immigrants and their children in *No New Land*: the children appear more fully integrated into Canadian society. Far from promoting ghettoization, *No New Land* seems to show that integration/assimilation — call it what you like — will take place, with or without multiculturalism. At its best, multiculturalism merely

provides a cushion to the more radical and painful adjustments that are inevitable, especially in the initial stages of the process of integration/assimilation. *No New Land* does not advocate anything. It offers a candid, realistic, informed and persuasive appraisal of the fate of South Asian immigrants in Canada.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The writers considered here are all of Indian descent, although born in Africa or the Caribbean. Other Indian writers who have written about Canada, for example, Saros Cowasjee, Rohinton Misty or Bharati Mukherjee are not considered, nor indeed the South Asian Michael Ondaatje from Sri Lanka. Even so, the essay does not claim to include every writer within its narrow margin.
- <sup>2</sup> Harold Sonny Ladoo, *No Pain Like This Body* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972); *Yesterdays* (Toronto: Anansi, 1974).
- <sup>3</sup> Reshard Gool, *Price* (Charlottetown: Square Deal Publications, 1976).
- <sup>4</sup> *Nemesis Casket* was published by Square Deal Publications in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, under the pseudonym, Ved Devajee. It is undated, but appeared in the 1980s.
- <sup>5</sup> Cyril Dabydeen, *Goatsong* (Ottawa: Mosaic Press, 1977).
- <sup>6</sup> Cyril Dabydeen, *The Wizard Swami* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1989).
- <sup>7</sup> Cyril Dabydeen, *This Planet Earth* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1979) 64.
- <sup>8</sup> Cyril Dabydeen, *To Monkey Jungle* (London: Third Eye, 1988).
- <sup>9</sup> Clyde Hosein, *The Killing of Nelson John and Other Stories* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1980).
- <sup>10</sup> Arnold Itwaru, *Shattered Songs* (Toronto: Aya Press, 1982).
- <sup>11</sup> Arnold Itwaru, *Shanti* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990).
- <sup>12</sup> Espinet Ramabai, *Nuclear Seasons* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1991).
- <sup>13</sup> Ishmael Baksh, *Black Light* (St. Johns: Jespersen Press, 1988).
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