



PROJECT MUSE®

He Drown She in the Sea (review)

Hyacinth M. Simpson

Canadian Ethnic Studies, Volume 39, Number 1–2, 2007, pp. 246–248
(Review)

Published by Canadian Ethnic Studies Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ces.0.0020>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/254234>

practitioners. In fact, by the mid 1950s, only seven Canadian universities offered degrees in social work — British Columbia, Dalhousie, Laval, Manitoba, McGill, Ottawa, and Toronto. In an article entitled, “Social Work Education at UBC in the 1950s: A Student Perspective,” Brian Wharf praises the gains made in the quality of professional training over the past half-century, but also comments on unfortunate changes. Today many university offices are vacant as faculty members conduct research at home on their computers and student complete their training through distance education. Face to face contact and informal dialogue have been replaced by modern technology.

The role of women in social work is outlined by Marilyn Callahan in a paper entitled “Beyond Stereotypes of Old Maids and Grand Dames: Women as Insurgents in Child Welfare in British Columbia.” Because most social workers until recently have been female and thus seen as threatening to the status quo, demeaning stereotypes of them were quickly invented to defuse any professional progress they may have made at the time. Lady Bountifuls, like Grand Dames, as social workers were called, were viewed as domineering and self-interested, and Saints, like Old Maids, were seen as identifying too much with the downtrodden. Fortunately this negative regard did not stunt the growth of professionalism among social workers.

The fourth and final section of the book details developments in British Columbia in child welfare, the introduction of Mothers’ Pension, and the development of family courts in that province. In the matter of family court cases, Diane Purvey points out that one unfair challenge faced by female clients at that time was that they were regarded by social workers as trouble makers who needed to embrace their femininity and “submit to counseling in order to uncover [their] unconscious desire for abuse” (276). Fortunately, things have changed somewhat since then.

Read the book. Its contents are heavily documented, but there is no index. This will require a page-by-page perusal for specific information, but the process will be well worth it.

John W. Friesen

Graduate Division of Educational Research
University of Calgary

Shani Mootoo. *He Drown She in the Sea*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2005. 350 pp. \$29.99 hc; \$21.00 sc.

In her second novel, *He Drown She in the Sea*, Shani Mootoo, Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian writer, visual artist, and filmmaker, once again creates a masterful literary work that coheres around the themes of identity politics, belonging and the search

for home, sexuality, and desire. As in her acclaimed first novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), in *He Drown She* Mootoo explores the complications of race and class in the relationships of her main characters; and, again, a fictionalized Caribbean island that is a stand-in for Trinidad features prominently in the setting. But that is not to say that her latest offering is simply a rehashing of her earlier work. One obvious difference is that the British Columbia setting is as much part of the story line as the Caribbean landscape is in this more recent novel. The experience of the Caribbean community in Canada is an important focus in the novel. (The narrative also addresses the settlement and adaptation experience of Indian indentured labourers of different classes among Afro-Caribbeans in the region.) Also, in a move that was initially difficult for some fans of *Cereus* to accept, Mootoo opts to focus here on a “conventional” heterosexual romance, stepping away from her earlier engagement with alternative sexualities and questions of sexual citizenship by including only one lesbian, who plays a small secondary role in the story. The result of both these shifts is a greater emphasis in *He Drown She in the Sea* on how important a role place and our relationship to landscape play in our sense of who we are and where we belong, and how our participation in (or exclusion from) community depends less on the supposed fixity of identity markers—such as “race” and ethnicity—and more on our ability and willingness to negotiate terms of affiliation.

At the heart of the story is the relationship between Harry St. George and Rose Sangha, childhood friends on the island of Guanagaspar during World War II, who become lovers in present-day British Columbia. Both are Indo-Caribbeans, but their circumstances at birth created a seemingly unbridgeable divide between them. At one point, the young Harry is cautioned against pursuing his romantic interest in Rose. The gardener, a servant to the Sanghas like Harry’s mother, warns: “You and she different, boy. That is Narine Sangha daughter. You and me is yard-boy material. She is the bossman daughter. Oil and water. Never the two shall mix” (138). Although Harry’s mother, Dolly, tells him that “All of we cross Black Water...They not better than we” (192-3), the Sanghas no longer feel an affinity with the poorer class of Indo-Caribbeans. Class distinctions matter more than ethnic identification. In a similar shift in allegiance, Harry’s father, Seudath, was adopted by a black fisherman and his wife after he had been abandoned as a child. This was an unusual act on an island where racial politics dictate that those of African and those of Indian descent keep to their own. Seudath is described as “more African-than-Indian Indian” (102), and it is his adoptive parents and the African community of Raleigh who take in and nurture Dolly when her family disowns her for defying their traditions. The son of two misplaced Indians who had found a home in a rural fishing village among African Guanagasparans, Harry’s identity becomes permanently wrapped up with the sea, a world away from the inland-based, urban community of his parents.

It is the sea that links Harry's Elderberry Bay residence in British Columbia with the fishing village of his childhood, symbolically merging both topographies to suggest an affinity between two seemingly disparate geographies and to indicate that, as an immigrant, he has found in Canada a home away from home. The novel opens with Harry dreaming: "*Though he lives by the sea now, the sea in this dream is invariably the other one, that of his earliest childhood*" (1; italics in the original); and it is to the sea, in a mystical ending reminiscent of the fantastical bent of *Cereus*, that Harry and Rose return in their bid to cross numerous divides to secure their love. As with the rising tide that deluges the village in Harry's dream, the sea erodes social and geographical barriers and lines of demarcation. The land itself carries symbolic overtones. Harry is, significantly, a landscape gardener — a job that allows him to literally put his own mark on his adopted land — rooting himself in the country by tilling its soil. In the chapter titled "Landscaping," Mootoo offers a compelling portrait of a man fitting himself to an alien landscape. On the invitation of his white Canadian friend Kay, Harry takes a trip into the wilderness of Canadian "postcards and tourism posters" (42). It is not the usual terrain for people who look like him, "the dark-skinned island people" (38), but as he surveys his surroundings, "[p]ride coursed through him; he had become an insider" (42), and such scenery was part of his backyard. Under the majestic ice-capped mountains, ethnic and racial differences that mark him as an outsider in this landscape slip away as he realizes that "he instinctively knew the names of the formations around him" (43).

He Drown She in the Sea moves along at a fast pace, but slows down at the right moments to develop the finer points of character and dialogue. The language is lilt-ing and musical, simultaneously capturing a Caribbean ethos with authenticity and painting the British Columbia landscape in recognizable colours. With her third novel already optioned by House of Anansi Press, it will not be too long before readers can dig into the next delectable treat from Mootoo.

Hyacinth M. Simpson

Department of English and

M.A. Program in Immigration and Settlement Studies

Ryerson University

Robin S. Gendron. *Towards a Francophone Community*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006. 191 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$75.00 hc.

Robin Gendron's *Towards a Francophone Community* chronicles the complicated relations between the Canadian government and the French-speaking world in the