To Canada from “My Many Selves”: Addressing the Theoretical Implications of South Asian Diasporic Literature in English as a Pedagogical Paradigm

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i breathe harder
with my many selves,
    turning back

— Cyril Dabydeen, “I Am Not”

By race I am Indian
Not Carib Indian.
East Indian-born North
Of the Amazon Basin.

By religion I’m Buddhist
By history British
By culture Caribbean
And by ambition American.

And if perchance you want a pen pal
Write to me at my native address.
P.D. Sharma P.O. Box 472 Georgetown Guyana
WEST INDIES.

— P.D. Sharma, “Diaspora"
As the above excerpts indicate, writers of the South Asian diaspora self-consciously foreground their multiply positioned identities. In evoking their "many selves," South Asian diasporic writers call upon a diverse range of literary fields, at least as they are defined in cultural and national terms. For instance, Cyril Dabydeen, Ottawa's former poet laureate (1984–87) of Indo-Guyanese origin, can just as readily fall under the rubric of Canadian literature as that of English, Guyanese, Caribbean, Indo-Caribbean, South American, and South Asian literature. To this end, the Toronto-based diasporic writer M.G. Vassanji suggests: "The term South Asian . . . does not represent a single stand, a single outlook or concern in political, cultural or literary matters. . . . South Asian is then perhaps a term best used as one of contrast" (4).

South Asian diasporic literature thus poses a particularly poignant challenge to the Canadian curriculum, for, in their cross-cultural habitations, South Asian diasporic writers bring to the fore what James Clifford refers to as "a processual configuration of historically given elements—including race, culture, class, gender, and sexuality—different combinations of which may be featured in different conjunctures" (116). Subsequently, South Asian diasporic writers challenge the reader, teacher, and critic alike to re-evaluate the narrowly defined literary and cultural paradigms through which diasporic texts are commonly apprehended.

In addressing the theoretical implications of the South Asian diasporic writer's multiply positioned identity, I find myself asking a two-fold question: a) how is South Asian diasporic literature presently approached in the Canadian literary curriculum and by Canadian scholars? and b) how should South Asian diasporic literature ideally be approached, given the culturally and historically diverse backgrounds of South Asian diasporic writers and their ever-growing literary output, the bulk of which is written in English?

The answer to the first question is relatively straightforward. Despite their multiple positionings, South Asian diasporic writers continue to be taken as wholesale representatives of a qualitative South Asianness on the one hand and of a quantitative minority status on the other—at least as they are studied, theorized, and perceived in the academic arena. For the most part, these writers continue to be viewed as a homogeneous entity regardless of their complex networks of identification. They are, in turn, examined in terms of their status as immigrants, which is quite often
synonymous with their position as visible minorities (a misnomer in such metropolises as Toronto where South Asians have earned the arguably absurd label as an “ethnic majority-minority”).

Though labels such as minority, immigrant, and, more recently, diaspora itself are avowedly meant to foster constructive discussions of identity and identity politics, each of the above categories is defined by a yardstick of comparison that is strictly posited in relation to North American constructions of difference, which are themselves the lingering vestiges of Eurocentric cultural and racial norms. Such seemingly inclusive gestures ironically tend to efface the cultural dynamics at play within each author’s work. Indeed, like the ideological trappings of a discretely hierarchized multicultural mosaic, the South Asian writer is both homogenized and kept at arm’s length from the dominant culture and its literary canons.

There are two interrelated casualties in such fields of containment: namely, the cross-continental diversity of South Asian peoples themselves and their equally extensive literary output. In fact, the vast majority of South Asian diasporic writers are all too often eclipsed by a negligible number of international celebrities who have come to comprise a modest canon. Moreover, even the canonized few are taken to represent a shared South Asian perspective regardless of each writer’s very different cultural, national, or ideological points of view. In other words, such figures as V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, and Rohinton Mistry are often examined under the rubric of “Post-Colonial Literature,” or for their positions as “minorities” or “immigrants” in Western countries. The canonization of this small coterie of writers seems to have precluded a more dialogic, cross-cultural, and contextualized approach to a burgeoning number of writers from the numerous regions of the South Asian diaspora.

This brings me to my second question: if present conceptual literary and cultural models and existing canons are not up to the task of apprehending a body of literature that can stem as easily from India or Pakistan as from South Africa, Canada, or Fiji, where do we go from here? My second question is best addressed with a concomitant consideration of the sociocultural implications of diasporic experience more generally and a brief historical overview of the South Asian diaspora in particular. This is because diasporic peoples make explicit Stuart Hall’s notion of cultural identity as “a ‘production’ which is never complete” (392).
In his seminal article, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall writes against essentialist and decontextualized notions of identity:

Cultural identity . . . is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” It belongs to the future as much as to the past. . . . Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere “recovery” of the past . . . identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (394; emphasis added)

Since the past is not so much lost as it is re-imagined and reconstructed through time, cultural identity can be seen as processual and transformative. As Hall notes, cultural identity signals a positioning between “the narratives of the past” (which are themselves multiple and hybrid) and the realities or exigencies of the present.

Through their own multiple positionings, then, diasporic writers further James Clifford’s call for “a better comparative awareness of . . . ‘diaspora cultures’” as a means of inverting “a reconception—both theoretical and political—of familiar notions of ethnicity and identity” (108). By bringing to view the contextual, processual, and transformative networks of identity formation, diasporic writers consciously or implicitly challenge static and totalizing definitions of cultural identity. In other words, diasporic writing, like diasporic cultures, signals inherently cross-cultural networks of production, which in turn give rise to a comparative cultural, literary, and theoretical framework. Indeed, a comparative view of a diasporic body of writing best illustrates the reductive nature of categories of literary study, which insist on positing Manichean dichotomies and simplistic cultural binaries at the expense of the heterogeneous contours and widely dispersed landscapes of the diasporic imagination.

As I have suggested, however, South Asian writers are often examined for their articulations of migrancy, wherein significant distinctions between such varying phenomena as diaspora, immigration, exile, expatriatism, and refugeism are rarely made. For example, Salman Rushdie’s cosmopolitan world view, which upholds that modern-day émigrés “straddle
two cultures...[or] fall between two stools" (15), is commonly applied
to other kinds of migrant South Asian writers. When we examine
diasporic authors, however, Rushdie's paradigm of migrancy as a split perspective
or a paradoxically permanent state of "in-betweenness" is greatly nu-
anced, if not problematized. Unlike their immigrant, exile, or trans-
national counterparts, diasporic writers often make it clear that, at least
for second and subsequent generations, this state of "in-betweenness" is
not always applicable to people whose links to the "homeland" have long
been severed but who nonetheless retain their cultural roots; in other
words, for those who do not necessarily feel physically or psychologically
torn between their diasporic location and the site of their genealogical
origins.

This is not the "diaspora" (co-opted by postmodern and postcolonial
theory alike), therefore, that typecasts all manner of migrants, regardless of
their historical or cultural trajectories, as free-floating, homeless entities. In fact, the dispersal of South Asian peoples has rarely led to a de-
tribalized, decentred, or de-territorialized consciousness. On the contrary,
diasporic South Asians generally form tight-knit cultural, ethnic and, most
intrinsically, religious enclaves with strong social structures, traditional
practices, and endogamous relations which help preserve a deeply rooted
sense of community. These communities should not be mistaken, in turn,
as unitary or homogeneous, but are dynamic, highly stratified, and often
contentious alliances, internally divided by such factors as language, reli-
gion, caste, political ideology, nationalist feeling, generational differences,
and the orientation to the host society itself.

I employ the term diaspora, then, to connote a history of migration
arising out of common historical conjunctures, which has resulted in the
multiple signifiers of a cross-cultural identity. The South Asian diaspora
can thus be seen as the most literal symbol of the Indian Subcontinent as a
crossroads of intercultural exchange and an often daunting diversity. In
fact, South Asian-diasporic writers give voice to multiple generations of
migratory subjects who interpret their surroundings anywhere from the
perspective of a first-generation immigrant to that of a fifth-generation
descendant of earlier waves of diasporic peoples.

Though the total number of diasporic South Asians seems modest
in relation to the one billion plus population of the Indian Subcontinent,
these peoples nonetheless constitute very substantial portions of local
populations around the world and, in some cases, have come to dominate the ethnic, political, and cultural scene therein:

As of 1981, the number of people born in India and living outside of India was estimated at more than 13 million—more than 400,000 in the United States, 440,000 in Trinidad, 500,000 in Britain, 800,000 in South Africa, more than a million each in Burma and Malaysia. As of about 1960, South Asians were more than one-third of the population of Trinidad and Suriname, and nearly half the population of Guyana and Fiji, and two-thirds of the population of Mauritius. (Sowell 310, 313)

It is also important to note that the movements and migrations of South Asian peoples predate European colonial history, tracing back to several millennia of intercultural contact that is most tellingly manifested in the imprint of Hindu, Buddhist and, later, Islamic civilisations in other parts of the world. However, the largest physical exodus of South Asian peoples occurred under the colonial infrastructure between the 1830s and the turn of the twentieth century in the demand for labour in a post-emancipation economy. Many writers of South Asian origin are thus descendants of early migrants who braved life in the numerous colonies of the British Empire as contractual workers on such projects as the East Africa Railway, as indentured labourers on colonial plantations, as clerics, administrators and servicemen, or as fortune-seeking merchants and traders.

The British colonies were not the only recipients of South Asian migrants; indeed, the Western hemisphere’s history of South Asian immigration is as old as the British Raj itself. As K. Laxmi Narayan states, South Asians have populated Britain for almost three hundred years as “seamen, domestic servants, politicians, barristers [and] doctors” (16). In addition, as early as the 1820s, a group of Punjabi-Sikhs migrated to the southwestern United States, where they eventually established their own relatively prosperous farm-owning communities. At the turn of the twentieth century, Punjabi-Sikhs also formed the first major South Asian community in Canada, settling in British Columbia where they worked mainly as agricultural labourers.

Shortly after the earliest influx of Chinese and South Asian peoples to Britain, the United States, and Canada, each of these countries prohibited or severely curtailed “Asian” immigration up until the post-war era. In
the United States, for example, the implementation of “the Oriental Exclusion Act in 1924 virtually banned all immigration from Asia” (Narayan 18); similarly, in Canada, South Asian immigration was banned in 1908 and remained strictly controlled as late as the 1970s. Since the post-World War II era, South Asian diasporic peoples have comprised more recent streams of migration to both the Middle East and the Western hemisphere. The period between the 1960s and 1980s witnessed a phenomenal increase in emigration as a response to either the mid-east oil boom, or to Europe and North America’s shortage of industrial, skilled, and professional labour and the subsequent lifting of its racially-based immigration policies.

Generally, the South Asian diaspora does not conjure images of ethnically or religiously allied groups fleeing political or other forms of persecution. There are striking and significant exceptions, however. A large proportion of those recruited for indentured labour during the colonial era, for instance, were Hindus hoping to flee the rigid hierarchy of the caste system. The en masse expulsion of South Asians from Uganda under the notorious edict of Idi Amin is a more recent exception. When we speak of diasporic South Asians today, therefore, we are referring to a people—be they descendants of the earliest diasporic communities or part of more recent migrations—who now occupy a common position away from the Indian Subcontinent, a distance that is experienced, to differing degrees, in geographic, national, linguistic, political, socioeconomic, ethnocultural, religious, and gendered terms.

On the one hand, these differences can be traced to the Indian Subcontinent itself, a densely populated region whose cultural fabric is as ancient as it is changing, and as cohesive as it is fragmented. On the other hand, South Asian identity continues to be shaped by geopolitical and cultural contexts which stretch from East to South Africa, West to South East Asia, the Caribbean Region, North America, Europe, Australia, as well as the islands of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Rim. South Asian peoples thus bring to the fore the complex permutations of diasporic identity in what Hall aptly refers to as a transformative process that is paradoxically grounded in history.

In *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*, Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg correctly describe the “already hybridized” nature of both the diasporic subject’s “mother country” (i.e., his/her
Diaspora refers to the doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places—their connection to the space they currently occupy and their own continuing involvement with "back home." Diasporic populations frequently occupy no singular cultural space but are enmeshed in circuits of social, economic, and cultural ties encompassing both the mother country and the country of settlement. Yet many studies of borders and diasporas tend to focus on the processual shuttling of peoples and capital between two distinct territorial entities, as if these cultures were not both already hybridized. (14, 15)

However, Lavie and Swedenburg's discussion of a "dual loyalty" disregards the multiple migrations in which diasporic peoples are often engaged. As many diasporic writers reveal (particularly those living in the Western hemisphere), diasporic experience has often resulted in subsequent migrations from the country of settlement to other destinations. Indeed, South Asian diasporic peoples might migrate from and to any number of locations worldwide; moreover, they often do so not as Sri Lankans or Bangladeshis but as Trinidadians or Tanzanians (to name only a few examples). Ironically, then, for the second- or third-generation diasporic subject, the mother country may come to signify the historic country of settlement rather than the originary culture. Thus, diasporic peoples might occupy multiple hybridized spaces in which "origins" and "home/homeland" become highly individuated and mutable concepts.

Novelist and critic Peter Nazareth, for instance, is a second-generation Ugandan who writes from his location in the United States, although his novels are set in Uganda where they flip between not only an East African and South Asian but also a specifically Goan perspective. Similarly, author Farida Karodia is a second-generation South African, for whom the process of migration signals her own personal journey from South Africa to Canada and her father's historical journey from the Indian Subcontinent to South Africa, a generation earlier. Like many diasporic writers, then, Karodia shifts between multiple points of reference; in Karodia's case, these include her Gujarati-Muslim heritage, her South African place of birth, and her immigrant status in Canada. To this end,
South Asian diasporic writers often juxtapose the mythic proportions of the ancestral journey from the Subcontinent with the actual, contemporary experience of a subsequent move away from the diasporic location to a third destination (rather than a return journey "back home").

Sociologist Mohammed A. Rauf rightly suggests that change itself, for the diasporic community, operates at the generational level as well as in terms of contact with other groups: "Cultural continuities usually become the first victims of fragmentation as a result of increasing contact with other cultural segments at the descending generational levels..." (106). However, even Rauf's conclusion must be further nuanced in a globalized, technologically driven economy wherein cultural contact occurs not only locally but also transnationally. In this sense, the descendants, or more recent waves, of diasporic peoples are often less acutely disconnected from the "homeland" than their ancestors, given both the facilitation of frequent travel and the dissemination of information, news, and cultural products without the requisite "return home." Having said this, however, it is important to clarify that such channels of communication are further dependent on numerous other factors, such as urban or rural settings, financial resources, levels of education, class privileges, the preservation of the mother tongue, gender biases, etc.

Even in their more commonly positioned roles as postcolonial authors, therefore, South Asian diasporic writers problematize key postcolonial paradigms such as hybridity, the subaltern, resistance literature, the national allegory, etc.9 As Arun Mukherjee attests in her convincing critiques of postcolonial theory's tendency to eclipse historical specificity in its totalizing view of postcolonial societies, "Too often, one finds an unproblematic conflation of 'postcolonial writers' with 'postcolonial people.' The 'postcolonial writer' supposedly speaks for all 'postcolonial people' through the 'postcolonial text'" (Postcolonialism 12). Indeed, South Asian diasporic writers consciously or implicitly deconstruct theoretical and cultural labels when they are used as strategies of containment, which rarely correspond to the diverse, if not often fractious, reality of human relations. For example, Peter Nazareth's fictionalized account of the former Ugandan President Idi Amin's decision to drive "South Asians" out of their "African" homeland ironizes both the postcolonial moment as one of national "unity," as well as Amin's rejection of a population whose own political and ethnic allegiances were as varied as they were internally split.
As Nazareth's omniscient narrator wryly observes of the South Asian population in East Africa:

Even more ridiculous, Goans were at such pains to point out that they were not Indians and most of them were still angry over the Indian takeover of Goa from the Portuguese, instead of being pleased that they were freed at long last from one of the most vicious of Imperialists!

On the other hand, George had to admit that Goans were different from Indians. (General 22)

Nazareth's satirical portrait of the divisive internal politics of post-independence Uganda warrants a careful consideration of the South Asian diasporic population's long-established history in the East African context. Indeed, an examination of Nazareth's In a Brown Mantle and The General Is Up as South Asian diasporic texts, rather than simply as postcolonial texts, would bring into view the author's scathing critique not only of neo-colonial structures, but also of the antagonisms between and, more importantly, among East Africa's African and South Asian communities. In this regard, a contextualized reading of Nazareth's novel disturbs the standard foci of postcolonial theory, such that his multiracial characters are not seen to be restricted to their experiences as an unproblematically aligned group of colonial subjects.

To this end, diasporic writers such as Nazareth emphasize their pre-colonial histories as insistently as they foreground the complicity of hegemonic forms of discourse across the colonial and postcolonial era. Subsequently, they also bring to view a more nuanced apprehension of minority experience and group dynamics as they are determined by class and caste hierarchies, gendered, racial and sexual discriminations, and inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. A comparative view of South Asian diasporic writing illustrates, therefore, that in their own investigations of difference, these texts first raise the question, in relation to what or to whom?

Thus, even the most cursory comparative glance of a few diasporic writers from radically different contexts such as Malaysia, Trinidad, Guyana, and South Africa, complicates issues of postcoloniality. For instance, Malaysian writer K.S. Maniam's majority Tamil position among the South Asian diasporic community of the Malay Peninsula is paradoxically overshadowed by his minority Hindu position in an Islamic Republic. More-
over, in choosing to write in English in post-independence Malaysia, Maniam has quite consciously situated his oeuvre against the grain of the dominant Malay culture, thereby affording himself greater international recognition as a member of an elite circle of English-language writers. Guyanese writers such as Narmala Shewcharan further nuance postcolonial paradigms in ironizing the albeit modest majority status that South Asian peoples maintain in contemporary Guyana under what was, until recently, an Afro-Guyanese political stronghold. In *A Butterfly in the Wind*, the Trinidadian writer Lakshmi Persaud offers a feminist revisioning of Indo-Trinidadian experience in juxtaposing Hindu and colonial patriarchal structures, while betraying her own caste and class privileges.

In her first novel, *Daughters of the Twilight*, South African writer Farida Karodia’s portrait of the disenfranchisement of both African and South Asian peoples under apartheid policies such as the Group Areas Act renders the postcolonial paradigm particularly inoperative. Karodia’s bildungsroman focuses on the offspring of a Muslim–South Asian father and a “coloured” mother—that is, a family that brings together the many persecuted ethnic and racial communities of South Africa. That is to say, Karodia provides an alternative and more complex vision of South African society in giving voice to a community that is rarely discussed in the context of apartheid. Moreover, she offers a unique consideration of the political and cultural dynamic between South Asian and African peoples in their shared struggle for emancipation. But Karodia is careful not to idealize her fictitious family’s interracial hybridity as the sole impetus for overturning a racially delineated system. Postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha’s theorization of *hybridity* as a subversive strategy of resistance collapses in Karodia’s vision of South Africa—a context in which even the hybrid or “coloured” subject is officially classified and contained in the insurance of a purist racial ideology.

Karodia and other writers of the diaspora thus do not so much expose the inapplicability of current conceptual models as highlight the limitations of relying on a handful of pre-existing paradigms or, indeed, a handful of writers, to apprehend a heterogeneous and cross-continental body of work. A categorical and static approach to South Asian writing not only reigns in the ongoing creative output of the South Asian diaspora, but it also denies diasporic writers and critics a wider forum of cross-cultural engagement. The formidable reputation of the recent Nobel Prize recipient, V.S. Naipaul, offers perhaps the most recognizable case in point.
At least in terms of Indo-Caribbean literature, little to no attention has been accorded Naipaul’s successors, who now comprise two subsequent generations of writers. Such glaring oversights leave considerable gaps in our appreciation of the cultural and literary developments and ideological shifts that have taken place since Naipaul’s canonization as a “Caribbean” or “postcolonial” writer. Ironically, then, many non-Western critics quite consistently contest Naipaul’s often racially-motivated diatribe against Caribbean, African, South Asian, and Islamic societies, while most Western critics pay homage to Naipaul on the basis of his “honest” assessment of the “Third World.” Despite the fact that non-Western critics often take issue with Naipaul’s ideological position, I predict that such criticism will continue to carry little weight so long as the latter’s work is divorced from the cultural dialogues to be found across the body of Caribbean and/or South Asian writing.

Without a comparative look at South Asian diasporic writing, then, the historically specific and simultaneously intertextual landscapes of the diasporic imagination are systematically levelled or, at the very least, glossed over. This is as true of writers such as Rooplall Monar, Gopal Baratham, or Deepchand Beeharry who write from their respective locations in Guyana, Singapore, and Mauritius, as is it of writers situated in Canada. Indeed, in the Canadian context, Yasmin Ladha, Lakshmi Gill, and Shani Mootoo provide a basis for comparison which reveals the insights to be gained from a more specialized approach to an otherwise seemingly unitary group of “South Asian immigrant” writers.

Yasmin Ladha was born in Tanzania; Lakshmi Gill is a mestiza of Punjabi and Filipina origins; Shani Mootoo was born in Ireland and grew up in her parents’ native Trinidad. They are each of Muslim, Sikh/Christian, and Hindu backgrounds, respectively. Ladha’s “Circum the Gesture” is quite literally set “between” locations on a “flight from Delhi to Cochin” (155); Gill’s “Altered Dreams” is set in “any town,” New Brunswick, and Mootoo’s “The Upside-Downness of the World as It Unfolds” flips between Trinidad and Vancouver. Both in their shared and divergent South Asianness, as well as in their unique styles and subject matter, writers such as Ladha, Gill, and Mootoo evoke a South Asian diasporic identity that defies any singularly identifiable characteristic.

Ladha, Gill, and Mootoo offer feminist readings of South Asian and Canadian identity from their narrators’ contrasting immigrant perspec-
tives and respective Canadian settings. In juxtaposition, their stories bring to view the diverse and relative terms upon which even their feminist positions are constructed—terms which nuance, if not challenge, their status as “immigrant” or “minority” writers or, indeed, their positions as “subaltern” women. To this end, Ladha’s “Circum the Gesture” exposes the extent to which chauvinistic attitudes are re-inscribed in both secular and religious domains. Gill’s “Altered Dreams” ironically reverses cultural stereotypes from the perspective of a Sikh woman who finds herself trapped in a provincial atmosphere and her professional goals compromised not by Sikh orthodoxy but by her conservative English-Canadian husband. Thus, her narrator ironically remarks, “just as he was free to do what he wished, so she was free to do what she wished, if it didn’t inconvenience him—this was called the democratic way, another virtue” (174). Shani Mootoo’s “The Upside-Downness of the World as It Unfolds” deconstructs, from a lesbian perspective, a hetero-normative ethos that pervades religious, political, and cultural credos, alongside a Western feminist discourse, which falls prey to its own brand of Orientalism in the exoticization of South Asian women or the reductive perception of a shared victimhood.

In his study, “The Literature of Canadians of South Asian Origin,” Suwanda Sugunasiri commendably offers the first comparative study of its kind to be funded in Canada. However, when applied to the ongoing production of South Asian diasporic writing in Canada, Sugunasiri’s overview is quickly dated by its uncritical use of an essentialist cultural discourse. Thus, many of Sugunasiri’s assertions are informed by an oppositional cultural aesthetic that traps the South Asian writer within a binary discourse of otherness. Sugunasiri’s study also betrays a distinctly multicultural ethos in which the “ethnic writer” is examined in terms of two monolithic cultural paradigms: namely, his or her assimilation to or cultural distinction from what appears to be an unchanging, opaque, and dominant “Canadian mainstream.” To this end, Sugunasiri makes a sweeping generalization about the “significant development in the area of the English-language short story . . . [given] the entry on the scene of second-generation Canadians.” According to Sugunasiri, stories by first-generation writers reveal a continued attachment to and thematization of the “homeland”; in contrast, stories by second-generation writers “bear no trace of South Asianness. Thus we see Canadian rural life and very ordinary Canadian mainstream situations depicted” (21; emphasis added).
Though Sugunasiri offers a helpful preliminary overview, the rhizomatic, hybrid, and unfolding networks of cultural identity and, by extension, cultural production are rarely factored into his observations. Where, for instance, would one place a first-generation writer like Gill whose story could well be construed as “ordinary Canadian mainstream,” considering the fact that it deals with a bourgeois New Brunswick household, and raises such ostensibly Canadian concerns as a woman’s struggle to live up to her competing roles as a mother, wife, and professional? To carry Sugunasiri’s argument to its logical conclusion is thus sadly to concede that Gill’s story is somehow less Canadian in its inclusion of a Sikh character and an interracial marriage.

Sugunasiri also tends to impose a singular literary framework over writers of South Asian origin in the following assertion: “If there is a predominant feature that characterizes the South Asian Canadian short story, it is realism” (“Reality” 33). Again, in their strikingly different styles, Ladha’s, Gill’s, and Mootoo’s stories topple such monolithic frameworks. Though Gill’s “Altered Dreams” may be described as a realist narrative, the same cannot be said of Mootoo’s “The Upside-Downness of the World as It Unfolds” nor of Ladha’s “Circum the Gesture.” In a narrative ploy that is echoed in her novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Mootoo juxtaposes autobiography and fiction so as to foreground the constructability of identity and to mirror the inner workings of a selective memory. Finally, Ladha’s story is the most experimental in form. In its narrative slippages between quotations, poetry, dialogue, and prose; in its iconoclastic juxtaposition of Islamic, Christian, and Hindu beliefs alongside everyday pop cultural references; in its linguistic and syntactical fragmentation and inter-lingual punning, Ladha’s story constitutes a dizzying narrative gesture that quite self-consciously circumvents generic codification altogether:

_In Urdu, to conjure up mirrors is to lose one’s senses. Who has gone potty, Babu... In Arabic, she is fitna, one name for chaos and beauty. In Urdu, she is _rundi_, whore. She is _rundi_, widow... But I cannot discard like male, instead I, Muslim woman, follow my own cadence. It is true, so true_

_When Rushdie Babu comes home_
_I will knead flour with flying fingers._

(“Circum the Gesture” 158)
Ladha, Gill, and Mootoo thus challenge what Mukherjee accurately refers to as the "homogenizing tendencies of much Western scholarship which speaks of 'the third world woman' or the 'South Asian woman' as though these terms denoted actual, existing entities whose characteristics could be quantified..." (Introduction 10). As their stories illustrate, a reductive view of a variously positioned identity holds South Asian diasporic writers hostage to a contained univocality that stifes the dialogic relationship between each writer's "sense of unique experience and sense of collective history" (Espinet 100). Mukherjee's argument can thus be extended to include any such totalizing impulse which does not take into account the relative, transformative, and ongoing processes of identity formation and cultural production.

It seems that little has changed since Smaro Kamboureli's assertion that the "ethnic subject" has been "contaminated by the disciplinary practices of the social and cultural systems containing it" (14). To date, South Asian diasporic writers are included as part of the literary curriculum only in their representative capacity as "immigrants," "minorities," or, more generally, "postcolonial" subjects. As I have illustrated, a rigid reliance on such paradigms—even when used as a basis for comparison—precludes a more complex view of South Asian identity and experience as it is articulated both in Canada and abroad. Indeed, the continued decontextualization of ethnic writing within a handful of often ill-suited paradigms hems in the unfolding fabric of South Asian cultural and literary production. Moreover, when greater room is accorded ethnic writing, it is still hierarchically assessed against what we are to take as seemingly monolithic and impermeable Western literary traditions.

In "New Contexts of Canadian Criticism," Ajay Heble points to an alternative way of apprehending cultural diversity: "cultural listening is predicated on our ability to recognize and understand the role that multiple voices (speaking simultaneously) have played [and continue to play] in the construction of Canada" (186). As Heble argues, the "multiple voices" of Canada produce a cultural discourse in which all members of Canadian society participate. Unfortunately, the theoretical containment of South Asian diasporic writers in such fields as "postcolonial literature" at the expense of a more cross-cultural view of Canadian and, by extension, English literature arrests the literary curriculum within a seemingly essentialist cultural and national discourse. Current conceptual models
thus continue to drown out cross-cultural and transcultural channels of influence, which often reveal compelling patterns of development across the body of English literature as a whole, such as its increasingly heteroglossic texture or the growing proliferation of symbolic and mythic allusions to other, non-European cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions.

Perhaps what is called for is a two-pronged pedagogical approach that is simultaneously as specialized as it is comparative. In other words, a specialized treatment of South Asian diasporic literature is an essential step in apprehending the cultural developments, literary movements, critical dialogues, and ideological discourses in which South Asian diasporic writers are engaged. In turn, South Asian diasporic literature necessitates a comparative consideration—a cultural listening—of the multiple other cultural and national contexts which the diasporic writer’s “many selves” inevitably occupy and address.

NOTES

1. Vassanji is a wonderful example of the multiply positioned diasporic writer. He was born in Kenya, grew up in Tanzania, and migrated to Canada where he launched his literary career.
2. Peepal Tree Press owner and Caribbean scholar Jeremy Poynting points to this depressing trend in terms of Caribbean literature specifically. See Poynting’s article, “Anglophone Caribbean Literature: Towards the Millennium.”
3. Note that James Clifford draws on Stuart Hall’s theorization of diaspora in his own conclusions. My own definition of diaspora is greatly indebted to Hall’s and Clifford’s insightful discussions of cultural identity and diasporic experience.
4. Indeed, most literary scholars and critics use the term diaspora quite loosely as either a postmodern or postcolonial condition of migration. Even studies dedicated to diasporic writing seem to use the term quite freely, often restricting their studies to a few first-generation immigrant writers in the West or even a few writers who have never left the Indian Subcontinent, thereby entirely overlooking its sociohistorical implications. See, for instance, Crane and Mohanran, Shifting Continents/Colliding Cultures.
5. See Milton W. Meyer’s Asia: A Concise History.
7. Narayan associates the change with the passage of the 1976 Immigration Act which institutionalized less racially selective admission practices.
8. On 5 November 1972, Uganda’s most notorious President, Idi Amin,
called for the expulsion of all South Asians from Uganda. Idi Amin's edict was an extreme manifestation of prevalent African-South Asian tensions in post-colonial East African nations.


10. See K.S. Maniam's autobiographical novel *The Return*.

11. See Narmala Shewcharan's *Tomorrow is Another Day* and Rooplall Monar's *Janjhat* for portrayals of post-independence Guyanese society.

12. The Group Areas Act was implemented by the apartheid regime in 1950. The policy designated the most uninhabitable stretches of land for occupation by people of a particular racial group, and the simultaneous seizure of businesses and properties from those classified as *coloureds* and *Indians*.

13. See Farida Karodia's *Daughters of the Twilight* and Peter Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle*.

14. See Dolly Zulakha Hassan's study, *V.S. Naipaul and the West Indies*, for a comparative overview of Western and non-Western responses to Naipaul's oeuvre.

15. Naipaul's nephew, Neil Bissoondath, is one of the few members of a new generation of Indo-Caribbean writers to be heard in the Canadian classroom. Ironically, Bissoondath rejects being labelled as a Caribbean writer, insisting instead on his acceptance as a Canadian writer. Bissoondath's position is itself a hotly contested one among South Asian and other critics in Canada. For Bissoondath's own identity politics, see specifically *Selling Illusions*.

**WORKS CITED**


