

# Literary Responses to Pluralism and Harmony in India and Canada

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The forces of heterogeneity are at work everywhere – particularly in the lands of immigration and cultural pluralism where differences have taken on new meaning and value. In India and Canada regional and ethnic constituents become more visible and vocal every day and therefore, the concept of a single unified national culture is rather difficult for realization. For years people have lived and cultivated a schizophrenic mode of existence, speaking one language at home and another in the street or in the class room or elsewhere. Indian and Canadian societies have been relatively ‘provincial’ in outlook. Before Independence, India was an amalgamation of different states with the greater portion under the British and a few still under individual rulers and some areas shared by the French and the Portuguese. But for the fact that India was geographically a well-demarcated country, it was never a practically/ ideally unified single nation. When freedom was sought there were many pleas for independent Pakistan, Dravidastan, and Ambedkar demanded a separate land for the long suppressed Harijans.

Discussing the Indian political situation of the 1920s, Nehru remarked that there were several types of nationalism existing simultaneously such as the Hindu Nationalism, the Muslim Nationalism and a sectional nationalism of the Sikhs and the real Indian Nationalism.

These narrow communal feelings of different communities or group nationalisms as I have called them, were very unfortunate. And yet they were natural enough . . . . Each awakened group looked at nationalism and patriotism in the light of its own interests. (Nehru 745)

So far as Canada is concerned, as some people say, it has too much of geography and too little culture. Colonialism, imperialism, provincialism and pluralism are the various forms of Canadian nationalism. Margaret Atwood has said that Canadians are immigrants in their own lands. Commenting on the Canadian mentality, Northrope Frye observed that there was a sense that real action in human affairs was elsewhere. Secondly, the pervasive influence of the Southern

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neighbour has always been there. Canada may be far from God but never from the Americans. Thirdly, the Canadians live in a global village, some would say ‘a global pillage.’ Finally, in Canadian Tradition, liberalism and conservatism go hand in hand. The tradition resists new emergence but once it is accepted, tradition is ready to fight for it.

The concept of national literature meaning one-language-one nation or one-nation-one-language is totally inapplicable in the Indian as well as Canadian contexts. India is at present a union of linguistic states. When we think of Indian Literature, let us say for instance, Indian Poetry, we are at once confronted with a kind of “dilemma” as to what exactly is meant by the term. It is easier to comprehend expressions such as “Tamil Poetry” or “Bengali Poetry” or “Marathi Poetry.” India has recognized with a sense of linguistic democracy, more than 20 official languages for the purpose of awarding literary merit. This includes four languages belonging to the oldest Proto-Indian Dravidian language family: Kanada, Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam. Then there are ten Sanskrit-derived languages in the north: Assamese, Bengali, Oriya in the east; Hindi, Maithili, and Marathi in the centre, Gujarathi and Sindhi in the west; and Punjabi and Kashmiri in the north. Besides these modern languages, Sanskrit, the classical and sacred language of India, is considered one of the official languages. Added to this literary complexity are two more languages that have become rooted in India as a consequence of two foreign invasions in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, namely, Urdu, the by-product of Moghul occupation, and English, the left-over language of the British administration. All these languages are not only spoken in India today, but they are also vigorously used, among other things, for literary expression.

The situation in Canada is equally or even more complex. Canada exists in a mosaic of social regions and also ethnic cultures each retaining its own sense of identity. The nation exists in a dialectic of regional and ethnic tensions. In other words, the nation itself is a fully transplanted culture – the English, the French, the Jewish, the Polish, the Ukrainian, the Indian, the Italian, the Germanian, the Dutch and all such groups have been cut off provincial cultures trying to survive. For nearly two hundred years, all of them have been attempting to produce an art, and an identity of their own.

A comparative study of the multiculturalism of India and Canada reveals the fact that India has an inbuilt pluralistic pattern of life based on the Upanishadic philosophy of ‘unity and diversity’; whereas Canada is building up a pluralistic system to facilitate accommodation of various ethnic groups in a common pool of national life through a difficult process of conflict and adjustment.

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One might be startled while going through the lines of Irving Layton's poetry (Eg. *Fortunate Exile* and *Europe and Other Bad News*) and Layton still feels that "a Jew is a stranger everywhere" and vehemently complains that the predicament of the Jew is that of "the wretched of the Earth":

Pity the Poor  
 and oppressed,  
 Pity the wretched of the earth  
 Since God  
 Took a turn for the worst  
 and died  
 They've no one  
 to comfort them  
 except politicians and terrorists.

The Jewish-Canadian novelist Mordecai Richler suggests the need for transcending the ghetto culture and joining the mainstream and takes a stand different from that of Layton as exemplified through his novels like *Son of a Smaller Hero* and *Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. In his fiction he relates the strength, the weaknesses and the suffering of the Jew and leads him to a point of adjustment, acceptance, adaptation and realisation. The Montreal Jew, while retaining his ghetto culture and identity, wants to identify himself with the existential condition of all Canadians. Richler's hero must sooner or later leave the shelter of his home and encounter the "education offered (or forced upon him) by the gentile urban society surrounding him."

The Jewish-Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel, unlike Layton, does not exhibit a feeling of insecurity with regard to his cultural and national identity. In his poetry, the Jewish background ostensibly vanishes and what remains is his readiness to become a part of India. The organic relationship between the writer and the country is accepted by Ezekiel as exemplified by the following lines:

The Indian landscape sears my eyes  
 I have become a part of it.  
 I have made my commitment now  
 It's is one to stay where I am (Bhatnagar 28)

In Canada, there is a variety of different groups of native people living with distinct cultural, social and economic patterns. Following the European settlement and dominance of the White society, many of the problems faced by the native peoples become common ones and there

has been a tendency towards marginalization of all native groups in economic, social and political terms. Ryga's plays *The Indian* and *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* present some of these problems. Rita Joe's inability to live by the traditional ways of her people or adapt to the white man's ways and her sufferings under the heels of the white majority in the city, offer a much fuller and grimmer presentation of the Canadian Indian's situation. Death alone is able to deliver her from a life of oppression and humiliation.

Yar Salvutysh, an Ukrainian poet is of the opinion that Canadian policy of multi-culturalism has given him tremendous impetus to his creativity. He remarks:

. . . the prairie provinces which are populated also by my countrymen became to me like another Ukraine, a Canadian Ukrain. Here, I feel at home! Expressing myself in the language of my parents, teaching it at the university, speaking it on the streets in my cities and towns, visiting the Ukrainian families who live farm by farm . . . I live at home. To be exact I live in Canadian Ukrain . . . the United States Canada and Ukrainian writing represents a literature of a nation in diaspora . . . for me Ukrainian is a Canadian language . . . A Canadian citizen, I am a Ukrainian author in Canada. This is my identity. (75-80)

Having established such an identity, and having satisfied with the policy of multi-culturalism, the Ukrainian writer could feel elevated. Another Ukrainian poet Mykhaylo Gowda in his poem "To Canada," sings paeans as follows:

We were not reared within thy domains  
 Our father's graves and corpses lie afar,  
 They did not fall for freedom on thy plains  
 Nor we pour our blood beneath thy star  
 But, Canada, in liberty we work till death,  
 Our children shall be free to call thee theirs,  
 Their own dear land . . . (Mandryka 42)

Both Slavutysh nad Gowda have expressed their sense of freedom and satisfaction with dignity and persuasiveness. Their admiration for Canada and their preference to belong to Canada with the fond hope that "our children shall be free to call thee theirs" are made clear.

Indian literature, consisting of the literatures produced in various regional languages with multi-cultural background includes expression of regional as well as national sentiments paving the way for coexistence based on mutual cooperation at all levels. Their regional identities and their varied cultures are in no way detrimental to the growth of the spirit of nationalism. They

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have contributed richly towards the growth of nationalism particularly since the beginning of Indian Freedom Struggle. While highlighting aspects of regionalism, they never forget to sing the glory of the nation. Bharathi and Bharathidasan, two major Tamil Poets of this century, have written a lot about Tamil society, Tamil culture and Tamil language; yet they never forget to tell the Tamils,

Bharath is our ancient country  
 You are her children; never forget this  
 Bharath is the 'tilak' of the world  
 You are her children; never forget this.

(Bharathi, "Bharatha Nadu" (11-12)

The Ukrainian poets hope that their children shall be free to call Canada "their own land"; but to Bharathi India is a land of his grandparents:

My father and mother joyously spent  
 Their life time in this country  
 Their forefathers have lived for thousands of years here  
 With ennobling thoughts growing in their minds  
 They prospered in this country only –  
 Won't I adore her and praise her glory?  
 I worship her saying "Vande Matharam" "Vande Matharam."

(Bharathi, "Nattu Vanakkam" 10)

The multi-cultural and multi-lingual situation in Canada and India need not pose any problem to the prosperity of the nations. Like a lotus with several petals, the nations could contain the regional and ethnic cultures each of which retaining its own identity and at the same time contributing to the growth of a mainstream culture. The history of post-independence India and that of Canada follow a pattern of attempts to impose order and political unity but not cultural and linguistic homogeneity. This has indeed contributed for the Indian and Canadian uniqueness. One can come to the conclusion that pluralism is inevitably a means of establishing a harmonious relationship among the different cultural groups.

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