

OTHER SOLITUDES

CANADIAN
MULTICULTURAL
FICTIONS

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Grandpa, where he wonders if Grandpa's spirit is really watching him and blessing him, because you know I really told him that, I told him helping an old suffering person who is near death is the most blessed thing to do, because that person will ever after watch over you from heaven, I told him this when he was disgusted with Grandpa's urine-bottle and would not touch it, would not hand it to him even when I was not at home.

Are you sure, said Father, that you really told him this, or you believe you told him because you like the sound of it, you said yourself the other day that he changes and adds and alters things in the stories but he writes it all so beautifully that it seems true, so how can you be sure; this sounds like another theory, said Mother, but I don't care, he says I told him and I believe now I told him, so even if I did not tell him then it does not matter now.

Don't you see, said Father, that you are confusing fiction with facts, fiction does not create facts, fiction can come from facts, it can grow out of facts by compounding, transposing, augmenting, diminishing, or altering them in any way; but you must not confuse cause and effect, you must not confuse what really happened with what the story says happened, you must not loose your grasp on reality, that way madness lies.

Then Mother stopped listening because, as she told Father so often, she was not very fond of theories, and she took out her writing pad and started a letter to her son; Father looked over her shoulder, telling her to say how proud they were of him and were waiting for his next book, he also said, leave a little space for me at the end, I want to write a few lines when I put the address on the envelope.



ROHINTON MISTRY was born in Bombay in 1952 and in 1975 moved to Toronto, where with the exception of one year (1986-87) spent in Long Beach, California, he and his wife have lived ever since. While at the University of Toronto, he won two Hart House literary prizes (for 'One Sunday' and 'Auspicious Occasion'), and in 1985 was awarded the *Canadian Fiction* Contributor's Prize. He has just completed a novel, which is set in Bombay. His collection of short stories, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (Penguin, 1987), was short-listed for the Governor General's Award in 1988.

DAGMAR NOVAK was born in Czechoslovakia and teaches in the department of English at the University of Toronto, where she completed her Ph.D. in English literature in 1985. Her book *The Canadian Novel and the Two World Wars* is forthcoming from McGill-Queen's University Press. She is currently writing a biography of Gabrielle Roy, to be published by Oxford University Press.

Is there anything in your experience that you would say typifies an immigrant experience?

When it happened, I didn't realize it was a Canadian immigrant experience. Being asked when one goes for job interviews, 'Do you have any Canadian experience?' was just a very stupid question, I thought. But later on, I found that it was one way of saying: 'No, there's no job for you.' It's a catch-22 for a new immigrant. They immediately say: 'We're very sorry but we need someone with Canadian experience.' Then I thought perhaps there was something very special about Canadian experience, that if you've done the same kind of work elsewhere, it's not the same thing, according to them.

How long did it take before you discovered that what they were asking had a more subtle or insidious meaning?

My habit of giving people the benefit of the doubt kept getting in the way. It took a while to realize what was going on, just as it took a while to realize what was happening at the bank where I started work. There were so many immigrants working there, of all colours, and it seemed very reassuring. But they were all in the lowest possible salary grade — and predominantly females. Occasionally, a white male would appear in the ranks and in a few weeks be gone. Gone where? In time, it became clear. The higher up the ladder one went, the work force became increasingly white and overwhelmingly male.

Do you think that the values with which you were brought up in India have changed in any way since you came to Canada?

I'd have to say no. It was an easygoing home, although my parents may have preferred stronger religious strictures and observances.

Did your parents emphasize hard work and a sense of having a purpose in life?

Yes, but it didn't strike us as being unusual because it was going on all around us. So, it was just something that parents said, and I'm sure that kids everywhere listen to the things their parents say and probably imagine it's something parents have to do. The way I see it, parents want the same things for their children, no matter what urban culture they belong to or live in, don't they? We all want our children to be successful and the way to success is through hard work. Perhaps the pressures are different in the way the message is pounded in.

In the story 'Swimming Lessons' there's a suggestion of a clash between the old culture of India and the new culture of Canada.

I don't think I really see it as a clash. I see it more as an opportunity to put things in their proper places. If you have a cupboard with a certain amount of space in it, then you have to arrange your belongings in that cupboard the best way you can, given the space. But if you buy a new cupboard you have more space.

Yes, but isn't this rather schizophrenic?

Only if I try to pretend there is just one, where there are two in reality.

Do the cupboards have to be separate?

But they're in the same room, aren't they? And I have the keys to both.

You should write a story called 'The Two Cupboards'. In 'Swimming Lessons' too, though, there is a complex view of the double vision of immigrants—both a looking forward and a yearning backward.

Yes, but I would have to say that it's part of every person's life; it's part of the human condition. No matter where you live, even if you lived in the same village all your life, you would look at the past, at lost moments, lost opportunities, lost loves.

Is this story autobiographical in any way?

Yes and no. Obviously, I came from Bombay to Toronto; I lived in an apartment building. But I don't think this looking forward and

yearning backward is restricted to an immigrant. It's a universal phenomenon. We're doing it all the time, all of us, except that here, the two worlds are so far apart geographically that it seems to take on more significance.

So, when I asked you if this is part of the immigrant experience, if it's not an insulting question, it's at least an irritating one. In other words, I'm suggesting that an immigrant writer would have a different experience from one living in his own land.

Yes, but the question has to be asked. It took some time for me to realize that I'm not that different from a person who has lived in Toronto all his life.

Multiculturalism has received a great deal of attention, both positive and negative, in recent years. In your view, is there any difference between the clichés of Canadian multiculturalism and the American melting pot?

They've both become clichés over time. Whatever means they use, the results are the same. Look around us. Canada and the United States: there's racism in both places. Neither cliché is achieving what it's supposed to achieve. The melting pot has not been able to bring everyone together as Americans, by transcending hatred, fear, bigotry, colour prejudice. Multiculturalism is supposed to promote peace and harmony, to foster respect and appreciation for our differences. But it does not. But multiculturalism is also expected to do more than it can and is being blamed where it should not be blamed. It is accused of creating ethnic ghettos, but ethnic ghettos have always existed—inside and outside the melting pot.

Why do you think there's so much resistance to multiculturalism among some Canadians?

Fear, among certain groups, I think.

So, you're saying that prejudice and hatred are the result of fear?

Yes, a misguided fear.

As a writer, does multiculturalism make a difference to you?

I think it makes more of a difference to those around a writer, by creating expectations in the audience, in the critics, in the establishment. I think they feel that when a person arrives here from a different culture, if that person is a writer, he must have some profound observations about the meeting of the two cultures. And he must write about racism. He must write about multiculturalism. He has an area of expertise foisted on him which he may not necessarily want, or which may not really interest him. He may not want to be an expert in race relations.

So, there can be a kind of tyranny associated with multiculturalism?

Yes, the writer may just want to write without any of this agenda of cross-culturalism.

Do you think there is pressure on writers from other countries to conform to certain expectations?

There may be some covert pressure, due to the very existence of those expectations. But I don't think that a writer who allows himself to be pressured is a good writer. If he succumbs to this kind of pressure, he won't write very well. On the other hand, if I want to write about something that is very close to my heart, and then there are pressures on me — if my life is threatened because I want to write about those things — then the pressure will not matter. In fact, it might even help me do better. But if a pressure is of a more primary nature, where it forces me to select something which I really don't want to write about, that's different.

Have you ever experienced this kind of pressure?

No, I just imagine it could happen this way. After the publication of my first book, there were people who said they would be very interested to see what I have to say about the Canadian banking establishment. They suggested — jocularly, I hope — that my next book should be about banks.

In 'Swimming Lessons' there seems to be a competition between the parents to understand their son, to see, in effect, which one of them understands him better through his work.

Yes, the father wants to know his son through his mind: he thinks he will reach his heart through his mind. But the mother takes a more heart-to-heart approach with her son. I think it suggests the way in which each views the world.

There is also in this story a specific kind of portrait of family life. What are some of the differences in the ways in which Canadian and Indian children are raised?

Perhaps the relationships between parents and children are universal. But the way in which the relationships manifest themselves are different. In India, children have to respond to their parents in a certain way, in an open, almost stylized show of respect. Perhaps that's missing here. And I guess from there we can go on to grandparents—the way they are shunted off to old people's homes here just doesn't happen there. But I think that the casual parent-child relationships in North American have their positive side. A child in America would find it easier to write to his parents than the protagonist does in that story. There is a dark side to Indian parent-child relationships.

How do you respond in your writing to the potential dangers of stereotyping an ethnic group in order to show cultural difference?

I've never really had any trouble with that so far, because the characters live in my mind so completely before the writing commences that stereotyping isn't a danger. They're quite well formed, with their own idiosyncrasies. It might be a problem if what a writer is writing about is not really familiar to him. A person has to know certain things before he can be honest about them. And if he does not, no matter how honest he is, the picture will be incomplete. I suppose, too, a writer has to come very close to his material and then move back.

Can you say something about the potential dangers of sentimentality and nostalgia in writing? Do you consciously think about this kind of thing as you write?

I think it's like adding salt to your food. You know after a while that with this much salt the food will taste just right—no more, no less. It's not a very conscious thing. But salt is a bad example: adding salt

is a very conscious act. If you're going to put on a sweater, you don't have to think too much about it. When you are cold, you just reach for a sweater and put it on. It's very basic.

I heard John Irving say that it is important for him as a writer to feel detached in some way from what goes on around him. He feels a need to be lonely. For him, loneliness leads to creativity.

I don't think there's any choice in this for a writer. Loneliness, or rather solitude, is a necessary condition. A writer has no choice about his detachment either. At times, I wonder, though, if one writes because one is lonely or if one is alone because one is a writer?

What do you see as the future for Canadian writers of other than British or French ethnic backgrounds? Do you foresee a time when there will no longer be a need to explain differences among us?

Everything may be accepted but the reader will always be curious; that's why he or she reads, and for the reader, the book is the story plus the writer, I think. He or she will want to know both. But if, as we've said, prejudice stems from fear, the only thing that can cast out fear is education. But not education as we know it. That's not education; it's more the processing of children with the least inconvenience to society. Education is respect for humanity, essentially a turning away from fear.

And, of course, some parents are in no position to teach their children.

Or the parents are in a very good position to teach and perpetuate their own prejudice. But racism is not just a North American evil. In India, for example, the tall, wheat-complexioned North Indian Hindu of Aryan descent feels superior to the short, dark-skinned South Indian Hindu of Dravidian descent. And even within the same religion, the hierarchy of castes and sub-castes leads to a maze of prejudice and attitudes which is quite bewildering. Of course, worst of all, the politicians on both sides of the globe are always willing and eager to exploit these irrational feelings and fears. It's one more similarity shared by my old country and new.

Earlier you said that children take to racism easily.

Yes, so easily that maybe it's a response to something very basic inside all of us.

Perhaps it's a need to feel superior in some way?

Yes, but if you have something to feel really good about, something genuine, whatever the reason, then you wouldn't have to rely on artificial or spurious reasons of race and colour.

But the economic and political climate now in Canada isn't conducive to the promotion of fairness and equality among people, is it?

I think that, even if there were no multiculturalism policy, people who are against it would find other reasons for speaking out against those of other backgrounds. Perhaps the multiculturalism concept is offering those bigots and racists a sounding board—at worst, it's doing that. At best, it could be in some way spreading the message that all races, all cultures are to be respected. That's what the goal is and by constantly reiterating it, the bigots and racists are told that it is not fashionable to be very open about racism, that we do not look upon it kindly. So, it keeps a lid on and we do not have the sort of blatancy that is seen in the States. But perhaps that's equally bad—or worse—because it transforms those tendencies in Canada into something more subtle, something more difficult to identify.

DIONNE BRAND b. 1953

Blossom

Priestess of Oya, Goddess of winds, storms and waterfalls

Blossom's was jumping tonight. Oya and Shango and God and spirit and ordinary people was chanting and singing and jumping the place down. Blossom's was a obeah house and speakeasy on Vaughan Road. People didn't come for the cheap liquor Blossom sell, though as night wear on, on any given night, Blossom, in she waters, would tilt the bottle a little in your favour. No, it wasn't the cheap liquor, even if you could drink it all night long till morning. It was the feel of the place. The cheap light revolving over the bar, the red shag covering the wall against which Blossom always sit, a line of beer, along the window-sill behind, as long as she ample arms spread out over the back of a wooden bench. And, the candles glowing bright on the shrine of Oya, Blossom's mother Goddess.

This was Blossom's most successful endeavour since coming to Canada. Every once in a while, under she breath, she curse the day she come to Toronto from Oropuche, Trinidad. But nothing, not even snarky white people could keep Blossom under. When she first come it was to babysit some snot-nosed children on Oriole Parkway. She did meet a man, in a club on Henry Street in Port-of-Spain, who promise she to take care of she, if she ever was in Toronto. When Blossom reach, the man disappear and through the one other person she know in Toronto she get the work on Oriole.

Well Blossom decide long that she did never mean for this kinda work, steady cleaning up after white people, and that is when she decide to take a course in secretarial at night. Is there she meet Peg and Betty, who she did know from home, and Fancy Girl. And for two good years they all try to type; but their heart wasn't in it. So they switch to carpentry and upholstering. Fancy Girl swear that they could make a good business because she father was a joiner and white people was paying a lot of money for old-looking furniture. They all went along with this until Peg say she need to make some fast money because, where they was going to find white people who