

On the Emergence of South Asian Novelists in Canadian Literature

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Within the last 20 years, several Canadian novelists of South Asian origin have achieved both critical and commercial success. Writers such as Michael Ondaatje and Rohinton Mistry as well as rising talents, Anita Rau Badami and Shyam Selvadurai, represent a new development in Canadian literature.

Technically, the term “South Asian” refers to people from the Indian subcontinent, an area that includes India, Pakistan, Bangla Desh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan. Only the British and the Chinese have had larger numbers of emigrants. The great Indian diaspora that began with British colonization and the use of indentured Indian labour in the British empire has reached even higher levels today due to the globalization of the world’s economies with the result that now there are more than 20 million people of Indian origin settled in 70 different countries, including 500,000 in Canada and 1.5 million in the U.S. (Duschinski 1, *Hindustan Times*).

In Canadian literature, South Asian writers are immigrant writers who have come to Canada directly from the Indian subcontinent or “twice-migrants” who have ancestral links with it. Twice-migrants include important Canadian writers of Indian origin such as Neil Bissoondath and Rabindrath Maharaj, from Trinidad, and M.G. Vassanji, born in Kenya and raised in Tanzania. However, for the purposes of this essay, we will restrict our discussion to the first group of immigrant writers.

South Asian writing in Canada is new because the large scale im-

migration of people from the Indian sub-continent to Canada is a recent phenomena. Between 1905 and 1908, there were only about 5,000 immigrants, predominantly Sikhs, working in the farming and lumber industries in British Columbia (Parameswaran 81). Following the ignominious Komagatu Maru incident in 1914 in which 376 Indian immigrants arrived in Vancouver, were quarantined, then deported, only 80 Indian immigrants were admitted annually until Canadian immigration laws which had discriminated on the basis of ethnic origin and geography were changed in 1967 to a point system that emphasized trades or professions needed in the country (Bissondath 33). The numbers of South Asian immigrants grew rapidly after these changes and large numbers of twice-migrants came as well in the 1970s as political refugees from former British colonies, particularly Uganda where South Asians were forcibly expelled (Duschinski 4).

As the community increased in size, South Asians had a major impact on the Canadian body politic. As a visible minority, these immigrants were subject to discrimination and even physical attack. With the growth in their numbers came South Asian writers and critics who began to express the perspectives and experiences of their community. A number of academics, including M.G. Vassanji, a research associate and novelist teaching at the University of Toronto, founded the *Toronto South Asian Review*, a quarterly which was to play an important role in articulating the South Asian perspective in Canadian literature. In the introduction to *The Meeting of Streams*, a 1985 collection of essays originating at a conference on South Asian writing in Canada, October 1 to 3, 1983, and published by *The Toronto South Asian Review*, the book's editor, M. G. Vassanji set out the aims of the writers and critics working in this area. They were to define South Asian writing in part by comparing it to other writing in Canada.

But why the specific need for a new literature or literary conscious-

ness to define itself? In this, one perhaps follows the national trend, in a country as insecure about its cultural identity as its immigrant groups. The need exists for a new consciousness to define itself in order that it should survive: to understand what is particular to it and differentiates it instead of to submit to a voluntary death (2, 3).

The Toronto South Asian Review pursued this goal for the next ten years through publishing the poetry and reviews of South Asian writers in Canada and the early writing of Rohinton Mistry and Anita Rau Badami who will be discussed later in this essay.

Initially, South Asian writers in Canada had difficulty in finding an audience. For one thing, they represented a new immigrant group in a country whose history and culture emphasized its bilingual and bi-cultural origins in the 17th century French and British colonization of North America, and the experience of a long, protracted struggle to differentiate Canadian culture from British culture, then American culture, the latter, an issue that remains on the forefront of cultural discussion within Canada. The emerging South Asian writers showed few of the traditional concerns of Canadian writers, which according to Margaret Atwood in her definitive study, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 1972 (Toronto: Anansi) included surviving the threat of American economic and cultural domination, the preservation of French language and cultural identity, the impact on the psyche of living in a vast, unpopulated and possibly dangerous land, and of animal life co-existing with human beings. What South Asian writers did share with earlier Canadian novelists was the theme of the reluctant immigrant to Canada and the hostility he or she encountered. Whereas previous immigrants faced the hostility of an earlier generation of settlers and aboriginal peoples, Atwood suggests that new immigrants encounter the hostility of "WASPs and the French" (149).

South Asian writers brought different values and interests to Ca-

nadian literature, reflecting their personal experiences of coming of age in different cultures and of the political and social environment in the countries in the Indian subcontinent. Vassanji (1985) summarized them as follows:

Writers must write and in their writing be true to their own age and experience. This experience, for writers who come from the Third World is in large part that of subjection, exile and alienation, of post-colonial social and political upheavals of societies, of racial confrontation and economic hardship (3).

Language, of course, precluded South Asian writers who wrote in Urdu, or Panjabi from reaching any appreciable numbers of Canadian readers. However, others were able to write in English as English language instruction had been part of their education and it had been used for literary purposes in India and in other states in the region for many years. But these writers had an additional communication problem in that their mythology and cultural allusions were largely unknown in Canada. Mukherjee (1985) describes a poem by Uma Parameswaran about a dying man who appears "white-faced" like his neighbours and asks for "*Gangajal*" or Ganges River water which every Hindu believer keeps in supply, (usually in bottled form) because it is needed for religious sacraments relating to birth, initiation, and death where it is poured into the mouth of a dying person (22).

In addition to these constraints, few Canadian readers knew much about the political and economic conditions in the Indian subcontinent. This meant that for a writer to be successful in reaching an audience and writing about some aspect of the South Asian experience, his or her fiction has to be explicit in its description of character and place. Sugurasiri (1985) explains how the pattern was set with "The Kumbh Fair," a short story by Ahmad Iqbal which appeared in the volume 80, 1969 Summer issue of *Fiddlehead*, probably the first piece of fiction to be published in Canada by a

South Asian (33, 34). Its predominant feature is its literary realism. Iqbal's story tells of a rural girl, Vimla, separated from her parents at the Kumbh religious festival and taken to a brothel against her will. She cannot go home after what has happened, so she has been ensnared by both the rural superstition that brought her family to the fair, her father believing that those who die at the festival go straight to heaven, and by the Third World predicament of the helpless rural dweller caught up in the city's corrupting influence.

When the first South Asian writers placed Canada in their novels, it is a source of disappointment, frustration, and racism. Saros Cowasjee's *Goodbye to Elsa*, 1974 (Toronto: New Press) is an uneven satirical novel "in the fashion of 1960s black humour" about Tristan, an Anglo-Indian academic teaching history at a Western Canadian university who has withdrawn to an isolated house in British Columbia to record his last words before shooting himself (Birbalsingh 52). Self-mocking and comical, the novel covers a bewildering array of subjects from Canada's provincialism and sexual permissiveness to the self-importance, pettiness, and rivalry of academic life. Of less merit are the self-published novels (Cornwall: Vesta Press) of Stephen Gill, *Why*, 1976, *Immigrant*, 1978, and *The Loyalist City*, 1979, of which *Immigrant* is typical in its treatment of racism. The protagonist, a university graduate, Reghu Nath, is turned down for one job after another. Birbalsingh (1985) criticizes the book for failing to arouse sympathy for the character or to illustrate the practical difficulties in operating a multicultural society without lapsing into reportage or "dramatized monologues, relaying the author's own platitudinous reflections rather than characters with an independent life" (55). Canada is absent in the work of Bharati Mukherjee whose first two novels, *Bengal Tiger*, 1971, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co) and *Wife*, 1975, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co) approximate her early experiences growing up with wealth and status in Calcutta, then studying in the U.

S. The first novel deals with Tara, a Westernized Bengali school girl, coming of age in Calcutta. She continues her education in the U.S., marries an American, and visits India where she learns something of how her privileges have contributed to the impoverishment of other Indians. In *Wife*, Dimple Das Gupta, a refined upper class Bengali woman marries a Bengali engineer and they emigrate to New York. The first part of the novel, set in India, replicates typical Indian attitudes toward marriage, money, and education. But the main action of the novel occurs in America as the couple try to adapt to a new culture and grow apart and Dimple has an extra-marital affair, forcing herself to forge a new identity independent of her husband and her initial cultural expectations. The book has had a mixed evaluation from South Asian critics. Singh (1985) finds it all too familiar a subject among Indian women writers (28). Birbalsingh (1985) cites the book's strengths in its realistic depiction of women's psychology and domestic life but complains of its lack of dramatic tension (54, 55). In summarizing these early works by South Asian writers in Canada, he contends that they share a sense of protest about racial discrimination in the country and social injustice in India (59).

The issue of Canadian content in the novels by these early South Asian writers became a controversial one as noted by Vassanji earlier in this essay. Government funding has supported efforts by Canadian artists to define their culture as distinct from America. As a result, Mukherjee drew criticism for the lack of Canadian content in her work. In a 1981 essay in *Saturday Night* about her decision to emigrate to the U.S. (after 24 years in Canada) because of racism and artistic neglect, she notes this criticism about her second novel. She describes how one reviewer complained "the only thing Canadian about it was that it was written by a woman who now lives in Montreal" and a CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) broadcaster castigated her, saying, "How can you describe yourself as a

Canadian if you've never played in the snow as a child," and more severely, for taking Canada Council arts grants but not writing about Canada (39). Perhaps to defy her critics, Mukherjee included Canadian content in her next book, a story anthology, *Darkness*, 1985 (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books) that she published after she had left Canada. It was not the kind of content most of her critics would have liked to read though. Most of her stories deal with racism, including "Tamurlane," an acerbic comment on the death of a South Asian immigrant in a confrontation with Canadian police. In the foreword to her book, she goes so far as to suggest that cultural assimilation in the U.S., the so-called "melting pot" to use the familiar metaphor, is preferable to the Canadian approach to integrating immigrants into the country through joining the Canadian "cultural mosaic," a metaphor for the government policy of multiculturalism. She argues that instead of leading the country to racial and cultural equality, the policy actually encourages discrimination and even attacks against immigrants.

The problem of racial equality deserves some discussion here insofar as it has been one of the themes of the emigrant experience in the writing of South Asian novelists. At the heart of the matter is the ambiguity of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1971. Bissondath (1994) describes how it committed the government to promote policies and practices to improve respect for ethnic diversity in Canada, based on the incorrect assumption that cultures never change and avoiding any clarification on how far the country would go in encouraging differences (43, 44). Bissondath notes that the two words often used with multiculturalism are "acceptance" and "tolerance" but they are very different: the former requires an acknowledgment of the full humanity of another person regardless of race while tolerance requires no special effort, simply wilful ignorance or indifference. He suggests that Canada is not an accepting country and that tolerance is not enough to build a country upon;

multiculturalism has failed because it has “heightened differences rather than diminished them” (199).

South Asian writers in Canada may therefore have an important role to play in describing their cultures in their writing and enabling other Canadians to understand South Asians better. However, these same differences in values and experiences between the two groups made it difficult initially for South Asian writers to establish a reading audience. In order to reach a larger number of readers than they had done in the past, Birbalsingh (1985) suggests that South Asian writers in Canada might follow the course of Jewish-American writers like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, or the Jewish-Canadian writer, Mordechai Richler whose subjects and attitudes are as much Jewish as they are North American (59, 60).

This approach of combining South Asian and Canadian subjects and attitudes appears to be the direction that Michael Ondaatje’s career has taken. Of Dutch, Tamil, Sinhalese, and English descent, he left Sri Lanka in 1954 at the age of 11, moving to England for his secondary education, then to Canada after he became dissatisfied with the British university system. His experiences in all three countries have found expression in his work. His first volume of poems, *The Dainty Monsters*, 1967 (Toronto: Coach House Press) draws upon his time in England and Toronto. He describes animals in the poems in the first part of the book, then moves to adult experiences in Toronto, naming streets and places, and describing love affairs. Other poems in the book reflect his education in Britain as they are replete with allusions to classical myths like the story of Prometheus and the siege of Troy and historical figures such as Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. Later work would emphasize North American iconography through the figure of Billy the Kid in Ondaatje’s fourth book of poetry and winner of the Governor General’s Award, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left handed Po-*

ems, 1970 (Toronto: Anansi) a jazz music pioneer, Buddy Bolden, through his first novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, 1976 (Toronto: Anansi), and recalling the Sri Lanka of his childhood in his memoir, *Running in the Family*, 1982 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart).

However, just as a South Asian writer could err during these times by writing too much about his or her experiences in the Indian subcontinent and on the themes of colonialism and racism discussed earlier, avoiding them could become an issue as well. Mukherjee (1984) argues that Ondaatje's early work is flawed because it avoids race and culture and poverty and injustice in favor of a romantic view of the artist struggling against the madness brought about by the creative act, a type of "deconstruction of the act of writing" (33-36). One of her examples is his novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*. Although the book is set in turn-of-the-century New Orleans and deals with jazz trumpeter Buddy Bolden, the son of a slave, born 12 years after the Civil War, and raised by a mother who was a housekeeper for White families and although Bolden's only audiences were African-Americans, Ondaatje manages to avoid dealing with race altogether. His interest lies in the anarchy of Bolden's life, in his drinking and jazz playing, and in the madness that struck him down at age 31 during a parade. Yet the criticism is not an entirely fair one as Ondaatje's focus has always been on the artist as a marginal figure, an outcast and social rebel. In addition, the novel represented a technical breakthrough for Ondaatje in interweaving different narrative voices and non-chronological story-telling in a novel. He had experimented with both techniques earlier in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems*, a modernist collage of photographs, excerpts from newspapers, local histories, and a narration that doesn't end with the Kid's death (which occurs mid-way in the text), but with the description of a photograph of him.

When Ondaatje took up the subject of his childhood and Sri Lankan homeland in his memoir, *Running in the Family*, Mukherjee (1984) accused him of “exoticising” Sri Lanka through exaggeration and once more of avoiding any substantive social or even personal issues (33-36). In the book, he traces his ancestors — some of them, ministers, and judges — back 14 generations to 17th century Ceylon. Mervyn and Daisy, his beautiful, wealthy, irresponsible, and unhappy parents dine, dance, drink, and finally divorce. Appearing, then vanishing in his fragmentary, episodic narrative are his eccentric aunt Lalla, carried off by a flood, and his dipsomaniac father, a major in the Ceylonese Light Infantry who halted the trains on the Columbo-Trincomalee line by waving his revolver at the crews. Characteristically, Ondaatje’s book is a concoction of fact, story, poetry, and period photographs, rendering up an intensely imaginative experience rather than a realistic one. And as in all of Ondaatje’s writing, he embeds the prose in *Running in the Family* with an intense, almost hallucinatory imagery.

His maturer work seems to address the earlier criticisms of his content. In his second novel, *In the Skin of A Lion*, 1987 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart), set during the years, 1928 to 1938, he explores the immigrant experience and that of the working class in Toronto. In one of the many witty, delightful passages in the book, immigrants learn English by attending the same play, night after night, until they know the actors’ lines so well that they start shouting them out before the actors do.

This infuriated the actors, especially when a line such as ‘Who put the stove in the living room, Kirsten?’ — which originally brought the house down — was now spoken simultaneously by at least 70 people and so tended to lose its spontaneity. When the matinee idol Wayne Burnett dropped dead during a performance, a Sicilian butcher took over, knowing his lines and his blocking meticulously, and money did not have to be refunded (47).

The narrative is built on similarly precocious anecdotes with Ondaatje layering facts with either hyperbole or understatement or both. The reader hardly knows how much to believe yet Ondaatje carefully reports facts about the viaduct and other construction projects of that era and introduces historical figures into the book such as millionaire Ambrose Small and Rowland Harris, Commissioner of Public Works.

The story's protagonist, Patrick Lewis, drifts into the rapidly industrializing city and finds a home in the Macedonian community as part of a vast exploited labor pool of Italians, Finns, Greeks and Bulgarians sweating in abattoirs, tanneries, and sausage factories, or risking their lives on the high wire of the Prince Edward Viaduct over the Don Valley. More engaging characters in the novel include Patrick's lover, Alice Gull, a nun who falls off the viaduct, is rescued, and becomes a labor organizer, Carravaggio, a thief and professional house breaker who escapes from prison by painting himself blue, and public works commissioner Rowland Harris who builds the new water filtration plant so extravagantly with extravagant copper roofs and herringbone-tiled floors in the toilets.

The weakness in this exquisitely written novel is in its structure. French (1987) complains that it is hard to pinpoint any protagonist in the book because the structure is too loose (C7). Ondaatje's protagonist weaves in and out of the narrative, particularly in the first part of the book, which is largely about the construction of the viaduct, a transportation project that marked the growth of modern Toronto. Ondaatje recounts that latter story through describing the archival photographs of the bridge construction and reconstructing the events recorded in them. At these times, Patrick seems more of an narrative device than a fully-realized character.

In his third novel, *The English Patient*, 1992 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart), Ondaatje introduces a South Asian character, a Sikh, Kip Singh, and in the novel, we even learn a little about the

Sikh religion. Among the themes that Ondaatje develops is that quintessential one of South Asian writers in Canada of the conflict of values between the developed world and the Third World. He communicated these aspects of his work to a very large audience. Not only did the novel achieve critical success through becoming the first Canadian book to win the Booker Prize for Commonwealth writers, but it gained enormous commercial success as well. The novel was made into the film, *The English Patient*, in 1997 which won nine awards including Best Picture, and Ondaatje sold more than 300,000 copies of his book in Canada and some 1.2 million in the U.S. (Ratliff G1, G4).

Set in North Africa and Italy in the 1930s and 1940s, the main action of the story concerns the identity of a mysterious, burned patient, dying of his injuries, who claims to be English, and therefore a sort of “every man” and his relationship with the nurse who tends him in the abandoned Italian villa where they live. Scheherazade-like, Hana, the grown-up daughter of Patrick Lewis from Ondaatje’s previous book, *In the Skin of A Lion*, reads to her patient nightly from the books she finds in the villa library. But the Germans booby-trapped the library before their retreat and she is saved by a Sikh British Army sapper, Kip Singh, who defuses the bomb. Several intense, even forbidden relationships gradually unfold: an adulterous one in the past, recalled by the English patient, between he and Katherine Clifton, the wife of a trusted colleague; an inter-racial one between Hana and Kip; and that of Carravaggio, Hana’s childhood friend, another character from Ondaatje’s earlier novel, now a spy seeking revenge against the English patient who has betrayed him.

Again, there is little conventional plotting in Ondaatje’s novel. Incidents do not build upon each other in the traditional way. Instead, the reader’s pleasure in the book is in following the distinct voices and thoughts of the characters in an exquisitely written nar-

rative that interweaves the observations of the British explorers on the lost oasis settlement of Zerkura with elegant snatches of Herodotus writing about the desert and the lyricism of Ondaatje's descriptions:

The desert could not be claimed or owned — it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East (138, 139).

The desert, like love, belongs to no one.

Gradually, the reader pieces together the truth about the English patient's identity — Count Almásy — and of his betrayal of his friends in his efforts to rescue Katherine. Meanwhile the bombs that Kip has to defuse keep growing larger until he learns the entire city of Naples has been mined and he joins a squad of sappers struggling to find 11,000 bombs before the electricity is turned back on. At the climax of the novel, he learns of the savage bombing of an Asian city, Hiroshima, and he rejects the West, charging that the atomic bomb would never have been dropped on a white nation.

However, while the narrative is beautifully written, and the love stories in the novel, compelling ones, Ondaatje's use of historical figures and events proved contentious. As in his other works, he scrupulously lists his sources at the end of the novel. Examination of them fueled much of the criticism of his work. *The English Patient* opens with an account of the meeting of the Royal Geographical Society in London describing the tragic death of Geoffrey Clifton and the disappearance of his wife, Katherine. According to Janet Osen (1997), Ondaatje based this section on the report of the demise of a real life husband-and-wife team of explorers, the Clayton-East-Claytons who had mounted a joint expedition to find Zerkura with a Count Almásy. Far from being a romantic hero, the

real Almásy was an opportunistic, homosexual, Nazi sympathizer who helped set up a German spy ring behind British lines. Onsen argues that in mixing truth and fiction, Ondaatje has suggested that ethically the British were no better than the Germans and that he has created “a moral desert where all traces of the truth have been obscured in a sandstorm of liquid poetry” (63). When an opinion piece appeared in *The Washington Post* in 1996 by someone who actually knew Count Lazlo de Almásy and claimed that he was a committed Nazi collaborator, Ondaatje defended his choices:

From Homer to Richard III to the present, literature has based its imaginative stories on historical events. We read these epics and literary works to discover not the facts of the Trojan War, but the human emotions, the human truth discovered in the story (Sanders A 18).

Ondaatje's latest novel, *Anil's Ghost* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart) tackles the corruption, oppression, and injustice found in the Third World and explores a migrant's ambivalent feelings associated with her return home. The novel, which won Ondaatje his fourth Governor General's Award as well as the Giller Prize, France's Prix Medicis, and the Kiriama Pacific Rim Book Prize, is arguably his best for its strength of characterization and storytelling.

After half a lifetime overseas, Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan emigrant returns to her homeland on an international human rights fact-finding mission. A bitter civil war rages between the Sri Lankan government, Tamil guerrillas in the north and insurgents in the south. Anil struggles with her past, an unsettled family history, and a failed affair with a married man, and she searches for connections to her old home, something Ondaatje did as well while writing the book:

It is great to be able to walk in a landscape that is very familiar and also peopled with your ancestors. Having been an immigrant to Canada, that seemed to be lost to me... It was very important to me to

write about the place, to write about Sri Lanka with all the names and traits as they were (Burns 2000)

Anil finds herself caught in an atmosphere of deceit, paranoia, and terror following her discovery of the skeleton of a murdered man that might link the government to a series of atrocities. Her search for the identity of the skeleton she nicknames "Sailor" personalizes the dead and missing everywhere, from the mass graves in Bosnia-Herzegovnia to those in Rwanda:

And who was this skeleton? In this room, among these four, she was hiding among the unhistorical dead. *To fetch a dead body: what a curious task! To cut down the corpse of an unknown hanged man and then bear the body of the animal on one's back... something dead, something unburied, something already rotting away?* Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest (57).

Unlike the fragmentary narrative of *The English Patient*, the novel is told in a straightforward chronological sequence. Most of the shifts in narrative voice are those of Anil as she remembers her past life in Sri Lanka, her abandoned love affair with an American poet, Cullis, or the times when she loses herself in the demands of forensic medicine.

But there are other voices in the novel as well, each carefully rendered, including that of the archeologist, Dr. Saranath who initially appears to be a government apologist, but later demonstrates great personal courage. The most memorable of the other voices in the novel is Palipana, a renowned Sri Lankan archeologist, now in his seventies, almost blind, and living in a remote forest grove that was an outdoor Buddhist monastery in the 6th century. Thoroughly discredited by his free translations of the rock carvings he has found, he continues writing, conscious of his thin, frail body and of his aging papers, "insect-bitten, sun-faded, wind-scattered" (84). Yet Palipana supplies a key to Sailor's identity.

Ondaatje's writing has never been better than in his lucid descriptions of the lush countryside, or his precise language in describing forensics. Modern, moral, and unsparing in its examination of government repression, *Anil's Ghost* offers hope by showing how individual actions can ameliorate government repression and internecine warfare.

In contrast with the experimental approach of Michael Ondaatje and his wide-ranging settings is South-Asian-Canadian novelist Rohinton Mistry with his detailed descriptions of life in India and his emphasis on traditional character development, dialogue, and a limited omniscient narrative that focuses on the thoughts of two or three main characters in his books. His novels of 600 or 700 pages in length are epic in scale and reminiscent of the Victorian novels of Charles Dickens or William Makepeace Thackeray, and are set almost exclusively among the close-knit Parsi community in Bombay, a group numbering no more than 60,000 among the 14 million people living there, a community in which Mistry once lived in a three-room apartment with his two brothers, his sister and his parents.

Within the terms of South Asian writing in Canada, Mistry's work falls within the pattern of the realistic genre suggested earlier in an essay by Birbalsingh (1985). Beyond his artistry, his early success as a novelist may be attributable to a number of causes. These include the growing sophistication about India among Canadian readers who may have traveled there, read other South Asian fiction, or at least know something about the area and its environment from the media. In addition, there has been increased demand for ethnic stories ever since the critical and commercial success of Chinese-American novelists Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, the latter, in particular, with the appearance of her first book, *The Joy Luck Club*, 1989 (New York: Putnam's).

Mistry's writing career began after he left India. After earning a

science degree, he emigrated to Canada in 1975. He describes this decision as typical of that time:

That's the sort of idea you grew up with in the '60s and '70s, that real progress was made in the West. Opportunities were limited in Bombay. To make something of your life you had to go away (Gibson 22)

Hired by a Toronto bank, he soon became disenchanted with his job and attended night school at the University of Toronto, earning a second degree in English and Philosophy. In 1982, he called in sick to work so that he could write a story and enter a university contest. "One Sunday" won that contest as did the story he entered in the second year, and after that he applied for a Canada Council grant and kept writing and publishing stories, appearing in the *Toronto South Asian Review*, among other Canadian literary magazines (Gibson 22). He compiled a 1987 anthology, *Tales from the Firosha Baag* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart) that would go on to become a critical success in Canada, England, and the U.S.

Many anthologies are simply collections of stories written by an author over a period of time such as Timothy Findlay's *Dinner along the Amazon*, 1984 (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books), are linked by place such as the wilderness setting of Margaret Atwood's *Wilderness Tips*, 1991 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart) or a life journey as in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, 1971 (New York: McGraw-Hill) in which a bright, sexually precocious girl comes of age in a small Ontario town. But Mistry's book invites the reader into the world of the Firosha Baag, the Bombay apartment inhabited by a bevy of characters including Najamai, the lonely widow who lets the other tenants use her refrigerator, Jaakalee, the superstitious housekeeper whose ghost runs amok, and Jehangir, the university student whose mother complex thwarts his romance.

Unlike most anthologies, these stories cry out to be re-read because our opinions about the characters keep changing. For example, Rustomji, the curmudgeonly middle-aged lawyer, surfaces as the main character in one story, then pops up as a nuisance in another as he tries to get the boys at the apartment building to stop playing their noisy cricket games. A more complex world arises, one more like reality, because in a single day, each of us can play many different roles. Therefore, our opinions of these characters keeps shifting as we see them in different situations or learn how others see them. The book contains gems like "The Collectors" which describes the friendship of a lonely doctor and a shy young boy who share an interest in stamp collecting until the boy is accused of stealing the doctor's favorite stamp. "Squatter" is a comic masterpiece about an immigrant who almost succeeds in acculturating to Canada but can't use a Western-style toilet. Curiously enough, the book's two weakest stories are set in Canada. In "Lend Me Your Light," the homesick narrator struggles to overcome his homesickness through correspondence with another Indian emigrant. In "Swimming Lessons," the last story in the book, and an attempt to conclude the anthology, a character tries to fit into Canadian life by learning how to swim, all the while exchanging letters with his parents about his developing writing career and his attempt to portray their Indian home in his stories.

Five years later, Mistry made a stunning critical and commercial debut as a novelist with *Such A Long Journey*, 1991 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart) which won the Governor General's Award for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Made into a film in 1988, it won three Genie awards from the Canadian film industry. In what would become the trademarks of his novels, *Such A Long Journey* contains a preponderance of detail — the dirt, crowding, and squalor of a Third World country and it explores the grand themes of inter-generational conflict, the return of the

prodigal son, and the difficulty of making moral choices. Yet despite these ambitious concerns, it unfolds on a small scale among a family living in the Khodadad apartment building which like Firozsha Baag is home to a small Parsi community.

The main action of the story concerns Gustad Noble, an honest bank clerk who becomes entangled in events beyond his control. He comes from a once wealthy Parsi family and can scarcely keep pace with the economic and political changes in Indian life in the early 1970s. Frustrated by his son enrolling in an arts degree instead of at a prestigious technical institute, he aids an old family friend, and former neighbor, Major Jimmy Bilimaria, by opening a phoney bank account in order to finance a liberation movement in East Pakistan soon to breakaway from Pakistan and become the state of Bangla Desh. But Gustad has been duped and he is swallowed up by a 1971 corruption scandal in which Indira Gandhi apparently siphoned off six million rupees (about \$240,000) from the State Bank of India for her personal fortune.

Near the climax of the book when Gustad's problems have been compounded by his son running off, the imprisonment of the major, and the death of his sole ally at the bank, Dinshawji, he attends Dinshawji's funeral. The curious 1,200 year-old Parsi religious rites are described, including the ritual prayers that precede the exposure of the dead body to the vultures that will eat it in order to avoid polluting the elements of earth, water, air, or fire. It should be a repellent passage but is handled masterfully in the narrative. And while Gustad lingers at the fire temple to hear the prayers for his dead friend, he has a spiritual awakening and the words of the priest or *dustoorji* soothe him:

All his life he had uttered by rote the words of this dead language, comprehending not one of them while mouthing his prayers. But tonight, in the *dustoorji's* soft and gentle music, the words were alive; tonight, he came closer than he ever had to understanding the an-

cient meanings (248).

The event sets in motion a change in Gustad's character, so that by the novel's end, he is capable of weeping for his lost friends and forgiving his son, thus ending his long journey to redemption.

One of the few trenchant criticisms of the novel is in the weakness of Mistry's female characters who all seem stereotypical (Ekelund 6-14). Unlike his male characters, they show no development over the course of the story. They are either dutiful housewives like Gustad's wife, Dilnavaz, the witch-like Kutpitia with her folk remedies, sexy Laurie Coutino, a mini-skirted secretary, Gustad's daughter, Roshan, a suffering innocent, or a harpy like Dinshawji's wife.

Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance*, 1995 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart) surpassed his first in its critical and commercial impact. Like his first novel, it was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize. It won Canada's \$50,000 Giller Prize, as well as the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction, The Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Award, the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, and the Irish Times Fiction Prize. In terms of commercial success to date, it has had the largest circulation of all his work because it was selected for TV host Oprah Winfrey's Book Club, and subsequent to the show, Mistry's publishers reprinted 750,000 copies of the book (Gibson 24).

Rather than taking place in a family as did his previous novel, the story unrolls among four strangers, drawn together by economic need into a sort of family, profoundly affecting one another's lives amid the crushing poverty of India, the caste system, political corruption and the state of emergency invoked by Indira Gandhi that granted her widespread political powers in a short-lived dictatorship from 1976 to 1977. These characters include Ishvar Darji and his nephew, Omprakesh Darji, two tailors, from the untouchable class,

exiled from their village, Maneck Kholah, a student of refrigeration technology from northern India, and a wonderfully sympathetic female character, and the protagonist of the novel, Dina Dalal, a 42-year-old Parsi widow living in a tiny one-bedroom apartment, the sole legacy of her short, happy marriage. The central action of the novel is Dina's attempt to retain her independence from her detested elder brother by subletting part of her home to Maneck and taking in sewing and hiring the tailors. Unlike the women in Mistry's previous novel, she undergoes real growth and though she may be defeated, she endures life's setbacks and acquires a little wisdom by living to another day.

The novel has an even more fantastical array of characters than Mistry's first, including a legless, handless, beggar, Shankar who rolls about the city on a *gaadi* or wheeled cart, Mrs. Gupta, the ample-framed manager of Au Revoir Exports, and Thakur Dharamsi, the sinister village thug delivering election votes to the highest bidder. Among them is also Vasantrao Valmik, an ex-lawyer turned newspaper proofreader turned social activist whose philosophy seems to come closest to the author's:

'Sometimes you have to use your failures as stepping-stones to success. You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair.' He paused, considering what he had just said. 'Yes,' he repeated. 'In the end, it's all a question of balance.' (269)

That same note of despairing hopefulness or hopeful despair could serve as the theme of the novel. For the characters all strive to achieve that same balance in their lives.

The weakness in the novel comes when Mistry employs the same sort of plot coincidences as would Charles Dickens or Thomas Hardy and the turn of events strains the modern reader's sense of credulity. Even though the coincidences almost always turn out to be unlucky ones and there is no cheery sentimental ending to *A*

Fine Balance, they are still jarring and at worse they feel contrived.

Mistry's third novel, *Family Matters*, 2002 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart) attracted less attention than his others, but was still a critical and commercial success. The story which centers around an aging family patriarch is a measure of Mistry's ability that he can make such unpromising material into a major novel; not only is the novel about family, but in a double entendre, it suggests that family is ultimately all that matters. A 79-year old Parsi, Nariman Vakeel, a former Literature professor suffering from Parkinson's disease, breaks his leg in a fall and ends up bed-ridden. He is shunted from his cavernous old apartment where he lives with his step children who are largely unsympathetic toward him to staying in a crowded two-bedroom apartment with his daughter, Roxana, her husband, Yezad, and their two sons, Murad and Jehangir, the latter of whom, the narrative hints, is destined to become the family chronicler, perhaps the writer of this book. Nariman's particular sadness is a result of an arranged marriage with a Parsi woman instead of his true love, a non-Parsi, an event that alienated him from his stepchildren. The burden of caring for Nariman pushes Yezhad into withholding the protection money his boss pays to some goons from Shiv Sena (the Hindu nationalist party) and sets in train his boss's murder. Ostensibly, the book ends with a happy ending for Roxana and her family, but Nariman ends up in an empty room cared for by a paid *ayah* whose negligence leaves him with bedsores.

The success of Ondaatje, and particularly of Mistry whose work is almost entirely set in India in reaching a large audience in Canada and elsewhere has enabled other South Asian writers to rise in Canadian Literature. Among the new South Asian novelists are Shyam Selvadurai and Anita Rau Badami. Like Mistry, their techniques are realistic and their books, particularly those of Selvadurai, recall the structure and themes of 19th century British novels. In a related development in 1993, perhaps reflecting the newfound con-

fidence of South Asian writers in Canada due to the appearance of a number of critically acclaimed and commercially successful novels, *The Toronto South Asian Review* became the *Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*.

The personal history of Shyam Selvadurai has had a great bearing on his career. He and his family fled Sri Lanka when he was 19, during the Tamil-Sinhalese civil war of the 1980s described in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. In Canada, he found that the judges on the Canada Council arts granting agencies were all European and the focus of their support was to French or English writers or those from Europe, not Asia. He and other young South Asian artists agitated for support and recognition.

Being part of that struggle gave me the idea that I could be a writer... We were determined that we were going to have a place in that country (Strong 18).

Sevadurai's critically-acclaimed first novel, *Funny Boy*, 1994 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart) deals with gender issues and coming of age in strife-torn Sri Lanka. The theme of the sensitive young man at odds with his society has been tackled by everyone from Johann Goethe to James Joyce, but the difference here is that the protagonist is a gay Tamil, in fact, a minority within a minority. His world includes such comic, entertaining characters as his cricket-obsessed older brother, Diggy Nose, so named for a particularly nasty habit, his imposing grandmother, Ammachi who smells of stale cocoanut, and his beloved mother, Amma, as glamorous as a movie star. Well-received in Canada, the book spent four months on the bestseller list and was subsequently translated into six different languages.

Told from a first person narrative, *Funny Boy* consists of six stories about the boyhood of Arjie Chelvaratnam, a Tamil boy who likes to wear a sari like the girls and hates playing cricket with his

brother. In "Pigs Can't Fly," the first story and the best in the series, Arjie is humiliated at his grandparents' home while playing "Bride-bride," a wedding dress-up game with his sister and cousins that he has invented. A jealous cousin, "Her Fatness," unmasks him before his parents and relatives as a "funny boy," effeminate and possibly homosexual. In "Radha Auntie," the second story, Arjie learns of a forbidden romance between a favourite aunt and her Sinhalese friend. Given the growing attacks against the Tamils, their love story has the tragic potential of a Romeo and Juliet, but instead it provides a lesson in real world boundaries when she marries within the Tamil community. Each story represents a benchmark in Arjie's life and indicates his growing understanding of himself. Later, he discovers his homosexuality and his capacity for love after meeting another outsider at his school, Shehan. The climax of the novel comes in "The Best School of All," unfortunately, the weakest story in the collection due to the passivity of the central character and his one-dimensional antagonist, the principal, more caricature than a character. Arjie strikes back at the principal for his cruelty and pompousness by fumbling a public reading of the principal's favourite poem. More interesting is the final chapter, "Riot Journal: An Epilogue" in which Arjie writes a series of journal entries about the weeks leading to his family's flight from Sri Lanka. It is a crude but effective shorthand for the destruction of his home and the effects on his family. Criticisms aside, *Funny Boy* represents a new South Asian voice in Canadian literature.

Cinnamon Gardens, 1998 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart), the 40-year old novelist's well-received second book describes the thwarted personal lives of a man and a woman in the Cinnamon Gardens, the exclusive community in Columbo where the upper classes lived during the repressive colonial period in Sri Lanka. Balendran, the scion of a wealthy family, who has followed the wishes of his domineering father and married, re-encounters his one-time

lover from England, Richard Howland, a government administrator and he risks his marriage and his comfortable life to see him. His counterpart in the novel is a young schoolteacher, Annalukshimi, torn between her parents' wishes for her to marry and her dreams of an independent life like that of her headmistress, Miss Lawton.

Selvadurai's skill in delineating the intertwined destinies of these two characters and in recreating the social strictures of class and the economic and ethnic pressures of Ceylonese life show a far greater range of ability than in his first novel. The picture he has drawn of the upper classes and of how even under the very strict social controls of that time, people could still make important personal choices is inspiring. In addition, the characters in *Cinnamon Gardens* are more complex and fully drawn than in *Funny Boy* and the events in the narrative that lead to Balendran confronting his tyrannical father are convincing. Though it lacks the freshness and comic touches of his first novel, this book is a solid achievement.

The second South Asian novelist to emerge in Canadian Literature is the 44-year old Anita Rau Badami, formerly a journalist in southern India who emigrated to Canada in the 1990s. Both *Tamarind Mem*, 1996 (Toronto: Penguin Books) and *The Hero's Walk*, 2000 (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada), winner of the 2001 Commonwealth Prize for the Caribbean-Canada region, have attained critical and commercial success and editions in the the U.S., England, France, Germany, India, and Spain. She is the only South Asian woman writer in Canada since Bharati Mukherjee to have found a major publisher for her work, a singular achievement, particularly as she had her first novel published barely five years after graduating with a master's degree in Creative Writing.

Besides Badami's obvious talent, part of her breakthrough as a novelist has come from her publishers promoting her as an ethnic writer rather than acknowledging the feminist sensibilities at the core of the story. Rahman (1999) describes the mass marketing of

her first book as ethnic literature and the corresponding exoticism of a story placed in a distant land. But with characteristic wit, Badami takes on this issue of her identity as an ethnic woman writer.

In India, I never saw myself that way. It was only in Canada I discovered I was a female writer of colour... It seemed to me that all the white people around me were coloured, with their different coloured eyes and red hair. (Strong 18).

Badami's writing encompasses the relationships between mothers and daughters in her first book and that of the extended family in her second. She also deals with the elusiveness of memory and the legacy of dreams and disappointments that one generation passes to another. In addition, her books are set in both India and Canada and they deal with a major aspect of the theme of the immigrant's experience in Canada, the conflict that emigrants experience between the values associated with their new environments and their old ones.

Tamarind Mem tells of the stormy relations of a young Indian woman, Kamini who is going to study in Calgary and her sharp-tongued mother, Saroja, nicknamed after the bitter tamarind fruit. Years ago, Saroja sacrificed her aspirations of becoming a doctor in order to fulfill her family's wishes of marriage for her. She became the perfect memsahib, or woman of the house to her rule-bound husband, Vishwa, a quiet railway officer, nearly twice her age, who was often absent touring India's railroads. Now her daughter, Kamini to whom she has bequeathed her dreams of a fuller life, seeks her mother's blessings to follow her own dreams even if they are very different to the ones that her mother would have chosen.

The book is divided into two sections, describing their family life, one related by Kamini, and the second and more interesting of the two accounts, the one told by her spirited, tempestuous mother. The novel opens with Kamini's memories of an upper-middle class

Indian childhood with the smells of a woman's lavender powder, and of crushed grass and fresh coconut. It is only as an adult that Kamini understands how difficult her parents' marriage was for her mother. Her husband moved his family often and was so frequently away that he rarely helped in raising the children. Because of her father's absences, Kamini has to will herself to recall him:

Of Dadda himself, there remained so little to hold onto. Roopa said that she remembered him as an absence. His chair at the dining room table sat empty fifteen days of the month. And when he was home, she couldn't see his face only the sheets of newspaper rustling before it. Roopa and I exchanged our own memories of him like a pair of misers. For if we did not, Dadda would float away like a puff of dandelion seed (40)

Ultimately, Saorja, now a feisty old widow, eschews the offer to live with her daughters and using her husband's railway pass, she decides to see India on her terms and on her own schedule for once. She admonishes her daughter to get on with her life and stop dwelling on the past and allowing Saroja's history to affect her own.

Badami's second book, *The Hero's Walk* depicts the cultural and psychological gulf between Sripathi Rao, 57, a burned-out advertising copywriter, a mediocrity who tries to make room in his heart for six-year old Nandana, his orphaned Canadian grandchild. Eight years earlier, he had disowned Nandana's brilliant and accomplished mother for marrying a white man. The couple had moved to Vancouver where Nandana had been born and were killed in a traffic accident. The crisis of his daughter's death and of bringing Nandana to India reveals everything wrong with Sripathi's own family: a wife, Nirmala, steeped in routine; a sister, Putti, starved for love; an idealistic son, Arun, a loafer; and Sripathi's bitter, scheming mother, Ammayya. Their family situation is so stagnant that even their town, Toturpuram, seems to exist in a state of torpor, one so bad that "the heat would hang over the town in long wet sheets,

puddle behind people's knees, in their armpits and in the hollows of their necks, and drip down their foreheads" (1).

With a dramatic situation and characters such as these, Badami is able to show the tensions between modernity and traditions in contemporary India. At the same time, the India in Badami's book is an extraordinary place where cows graze on lawns, a stay in the hospital might result in a stolen organ, and apartment buildings that don't have elevators because of the frequent power failures. With Nandana as the catalyst, everyone but Sripathi's mother will eventually take the hero's walk: Sripathi in deciding to sell the family home; his wife, Nirmala, in standing up to her tyrannical mother-in-law and befriending a lower caste family; Putti in finding a husband; and Arun, a job; but best of all, little Nandana in accepting her parents' deaths and learning to acclimatize herself to her new home. The novel expresses the very hopeful idea that given time and necessity, any of us can change for the better.

Compelling characterization and funny, expertly rendered dialogue are additional achievements of the novel. If Badami stumbles in places, it is when the narrative tone seems too judgmental, pointing out the characters' flaws too obviously rather than letting the reader discover them.

In conclusion, South Asians have had a relatively short history as a prominent ethnic group in Canada. But in that time, they have succeeded in finding a place within Canadian literature and in introducing new themes such as the experience of Third World corruption and political instability, cultural and racial conflict and poverty. They have also depicted childhood and coming of age in another culture. Their work is gaining ever wider currency both in Canada and abroad, especially the novels of Michael Ondaatje and Rohinton Mistry. Ondaatje and Mistry, in so far as his short stories are concerned, have also enlarged our notions of literary forms and of narrative devices as well. All four writers are helping to extend

our English lexicon, too, in familiarizing us with Hindi words, for example, for clothing such as the *dhota*, a rectangular cloth wrapped around the legs and waist and the *kurta*, a type of loose chemise worn over them, both worn by Indian males. These join numerous other Hindi words already circulating in the English language such as “pundit,” “nirvana,” or “jungle.”

As well, these novelists are promulgating new idiomatic expressions in English and through the dialogue of the characters in their fiction, a wider acceptance of the variety of English known as South Asian standard English. In both popular and academic discussion, South Asian English is acquiring legitimacy as part of the globalization of English. Writing in the March edition of *Newsweek*, Power (2005) notes that “non-native English speakers now outnumber natives three to one” and that “within a decade, two billion people will be studying it and about half the world, some three billion will speak it” (41). Honna (2005) has presented the globalization of English as a positive development, an expansion in the capacity of the English language to carry meaning and to adapt to the political, social, and economic environments of different countries. And by writing of South Asian cultures, Ondaatje, Mistry, Selvadurai, and Badami teach us about them, providing the cultural sensitivity needed for one culture to learn to accept another. Finally, in Canada’s trend toward even greater ethnicity, immigrant writers such as these four have an important role in demonstrating the peaceful intersection of new and older trends in Canadian literature.

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