CHAPTER 2
CARIBBEAN CANADIAN WRITING AS
OPPOSITIONAL DISCOURSE

Caribbean Canadian literature or writing is not a well established area of study but attempts have been made to study and document this emerging field. As literature and culture are integrally interconnected in the Caribbean context and as the age of “close reading” or textual criticism has gone by, it is imperative on our part to relate literature with history and culture. Hence, for a better understanding of Caribbean literary tradition and how it got transplanted in Canada by immigrant writers, a brief idea of the history of the peculiar conglomeration called Caribbean and its literary history seem to be indispensable.

“Caribbean” is a root word, and it is also a “route word”, according to Stuart Hall ( “Negotiating Caribbean Identities” 281). It can offer one way to travel: one path in the practices of self-articulation. Caribbeanness in tourism discourse includes such icons as white sand waving, coconut palms and memorable sunsets, all bordered by the pristine, brilliant, blue waters of the Caribbean Sea. Identities as far this place is concerned come mostly from outside and they are the ways in which they are recognized. To some, this caribbeanness was thrust upon its people who belonged to different territories
and even reached there from different nations excepting the original inhabitants who had been exterminated in due course of time by the so called “civilizers”. The region was actually divided into French speaking, Spanish speaking, English speaking and Dutch speaking areas. It had a fragmented nationalism from the beginning itself. People identify themselves as Haitians, Jamaicans, Guyanese and Trinidadians etc. The term also refers to a unique collection of people strung together by a common history and increasingly and perhaps irreversibly influenced by America.

Caribbean is composed of people from all over the world including those taken there by force and those who migrated freely. People came in large numbers to the Caribbean from Asia, Africa and Europe. Caribbeans are also described as “people on the move”. Caribbean was named after caribs-war like tribe of cannibalistic Indians. Caribs lived in the Caribbean for hundreds of years and are described as fierce and aggressive people. Arawkans were the natives of the Caribbean, when Columbus landed the Caribbean islands in 1492. He was greeted by Arawkans who gathered, fished, played games, ate fruit that were in abundance, made music and made love. After Columbus’ arrival only, Europeans realized the potential of this group of islands and they began to come in large numbers. Later they discovered that tobacco could be grown here and the natives there, Arawkans, were held in bondage to make them slaves. Spanish and others made them work in the fields and squeezed them in to extinction. When Arawkans were
virtually extinct many Caribs died of disease and penury. It resulted in the virtual elimination of an entire people, culture. It was virtual extinction in the sense that a few thousands fled into the jungles of Guyana.

Spanish were the first to explore this country and they eventually settled in Antilles and other places. They might have killed and exterminated many Arawkans. After the original inhabitants had been rapidly decimated by war, epidemic diseases and physical dislocation in the early 16\textsuperscript{th} century, a succession of immigrants from Europe, Africa and Asia steadily populated the region. The biggest migration to the Caribbean was the forced migration of enslaved people from Africa through the transatlantic slave trade. It was the white colonizers inspired by the arrival of Columbus who were attracted with the “white charm” of the West India brought in many African slaves to work for them tirelessly all through the day. In the late eighteenth century Britain moved soldiers and sailors to the Caribbean islands. Criminal labour was brought in from Africa and Africans were culled from their continent. It led to enslavement and murder of millions of Africans. They were rooted out from a place where they had a sense of home and self. They were shackled and placed in the bellies of the ships, with no more space to breathe in or move. Slave ships were described as spiritual coffins where human beings were packed like sardines in a box. In the tiny space they were provided, they ate, defecated, sweat and bled. It was said that even the gods fled from that horrible area. After this horror, the horror of plantation life began. Each dawn
broke like a whip on the back of a slave. Freedom to them was a grave away. After Europeans awakened to the fact that slave labour was no longer profitable a sort of economic slavery was brought in as indentured labour in the mid nineteenth century. Indians and Chinese were taken as indentured labourers. By 1930’s different people reached because of certain pressures and pulls. Each group was antagonistic to the other and what they shared was the unvoiced pain, consistent erasure of humanity, corrosion of the human pain and a series of cultural garrisons. Anthony Trollope even said that there were no people in West Indies in the true sense of the word. To writers like him they were not people at all. Even for that matter V.S.Naipaul in a way argued that West Indies is “story less”. European history would say that in 1830, they abolished slavery in the British and Dutch colonies. But radical historians and thinkers would argue otherwise that it was because of the stiff resistance from the affected and aggrieved people they were forced to do it. Always the colonial history which is hegemonic in nature considered it as their mission as was with the colonization, which was described as “white man’s burden”.

Abolition of slavery led to many consequent changes in the colonies. In places like Caribbean islands it resulted in severe shortage of labour. This subsequently paved the way for yet another form of “slavery” which was indentured labour. It was semi slave contract labour itself but with a sophisticated epithet. Many were recruited from the Asian countries. From
India, many contingents arrived and among them North Indians form the majority. Several factors made them come to these God forsaken lands like Guyana, Trinidad and Jamaica and of which famine and poverty were the major reasons. Harsh treatment was meted to them and even from among those some of the agents were chosen to make them break their backs. Despite miseries and cruel living conditions Indians survived and they could produce a middle class of small farmers and shop owners. Although the indentured labour ended, most of them didn’t return to India as long years got them acquainted and acclimatized to the new land. They became permanent settlers in the Caribbean and established themselves there. They bought and rented land to do agriculture and rear cows and they somehow formed half of the population. Another half consisted of descendants of people who were brought from Africa as slaves. The descendants of Indians who settled are called east Indians and they remain a visible minority group there.

Many different religions and cultural identities are there in the Caribbean. Enslaved Africans fought to keep their identity and heritage alive. There are black Caribs and yellow Caribs descending from both India and Africa. Colonialists at one point succeeded in making them bitter enemies for their easy survival. This “divide and rule” policy was adopted by colonialists wherever they went. The division of them as “coloured” and “mulatto’ further separated them in all fields. Caribs have been at loggerheads from many a time. Different religions also tried to establish themselves in this part of the
world. Some of the Caribbeans who were the descendants of the indentured laborers from India migrated to several developed countries like Britain, USA and Canada from 1960’s onwards. When Canada liberalized its immigration policies and when England sanctioned entry of foreigners many from Caribbean migrated to Canada in search of higher education and jobs. Most of them are financial immigrants in the sense that their migration was for higher jobs and salaries. Such people who reached here consisted mostly of students and teachers.

In a lecture given at York University in Toronto, in 1968, George Lamming, the famous Caribbean novelist and theoretician, addressed an audience mainly consisting of immigrants from the Caribbean. He described his audience as an external frontier of the Caribbean and this address attained far reaching ramification in the sense he had reversed the very European way of looking at things. He seemed to have reversed the world view in which European rulers regarded their colonial possessions as outposts on the periphery of their world which is white, rich, politically and technologically powerful metropolis of Europe and North America. The dependence on colonialists and imperial centers are not at all prominent now. Instead people from the Caribbean and the so called third world countries have reached in large numbers to these places. The immigrant communities evolving out of this Caribbean exodus would today number about two million people in London, Toronto and New York alone. Many immigrants left immediately
after the second world war to settle in Britain; others came in the 1970’s and 1980’s mainly to Canada and U.S; and both groups produced children who today remain British, Canadian or American citizens, while regarding the Caribbean, if not as their cultural and spiritual centre, at least as their place of origin. Many factors made this exodus possible and among them search for education, better opportunities and better standards of living are the major ones.

The oldest and largest Caribbean immigrant community is in London where people from the British Caribbean flocked, especially in the 1950’s because there were no immigration laws restricting their entry. When entry was restricted passing certain laws in 1962, the flow had been channelized to Canada, where the laws have been liberal from the second half of the twentieth century. Caribbean immigrants faced several problems abroad but those were issues different from the ones they encountered at home. What they faced at home were poverty, exploitation, and social and political insecurity while abroad they encountered racial discrimination, second class citizenship and alienation. Though many returned most of them remained where they landed first. Most of the immigrants decided to settle there because they thought that they would be definitely in a better position financially if they remained there. Unmindful of several issues the people who remained there belonged to different classes. They included students and professionals whom came in search of better options; their wish was not to
keep their identity intact but tried to remain Caribbean and Canadian at the same time.

World over migration has become a reality as globalization has almost blurred the notions of boundaries across the globe. Migrants encountered different problems on different occasions in different locations. Of which the central has been “sense of being rootless” and it has been otherwise described as “inbetweenness” or to use an expression from Homi.K.Bhabha, it would be even hybridity. Bhabha says:

Hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge. The third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom… The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of meaning and representation. (“The third Space” Rutherford 211)

Their life hung between two worlds; on the one hand a lost past and on the other a non-integrated present. To reconcile these irreconcilable contradictions has been the task of migrant writers. Already Caribbean literature is not a homogeneous entity since it consists of several streams drawn from diverse sources. In the case of Canadian Caribbean this becomes all the more interesting. The questions faced by these writers were confusing and manifold as they did not know where to begin in the initial stages. The
dilemma was that whether they wanted to write about the place they came to or the country of origin. But somehow or the other they struggled to come out of this impasse. How they themselves found an alternative space for them has been an interesting area of study. In his paper entitled “Rethinking Myness: Diaspora Caribbean Blacks in the Canadian Context”, Richardine woodall argues that, “Caribbean cultural identity in Canada is a site of crisis that is always becoming, fracturing and transforming; it is a temporal, contingent and historical space”(web. N. pag.). The statement is in keeping with the proposition brought forth by Stuart Hall, “Cultural identities are points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture” (395). Caribbean cultural identity is constituted by difference and rupture. Caribbean immigrants created a sense of continuity with “back home”, i.e. a home somewhere away from Canada, is not open to all Caribbean Diaspora. Among the Caribbean Diaspora Jamaicans constituted the majority and they are mostly located in Toronto.

Experiences of migration, displacement, alienation and incorporation haunt many immigrants and they more or less tried to get rid of these. To overcome these many have engaged in creative process. Even for that matter Caribbean Canadians depended much on European models and they also drew inspiration from the Caribbean literature which had its flourishing in the twentieth century. The kinds of issues encountered by immigrant writers were
similar to those experienced by Caribbean writers in the initial stages. As they were using the same language used by the colonizers they found it difficult to carve a niche for themselves which bears the distinct stamp of their culture. The genesis of a Caribbean aesthetic arose from a desire to decolonize and indigenize imaginatively and to claim a voice for a history, geography and a people which had been dominated by British Victorians. A desire to reclaim and restore alternative cultural tradition has been a prime motivating factor for many Caribbean writers.

As Kamau Brathwaite has put it, “the most significant feature of West Indian imagination since emancipation, has been its sense of rootlessness of not belonging to the landscape, dissociation, in fact, of art from act of living” (Routledge Caribbean reader 344). West Indian culture itself is a creolized one since it consists of different traditions like Asian, African and European. Creolization is a socio-cultural description and explanation of the way the four main culture carriers of the region: Amerindian, African and East Indian: interacted with each other and with their environment to create the societies of the new world. West Indian society has been a society which thrived upon inconsistencies and incongruities due to the peculiar making of it. Brathwaite says, “the problem of and for the west Indian artists and intellectuals is that having been born and educated within the fragmented culture they start out in the world without a sense of wholeness” (344-45). Disillusion with fragmentation leads to a sense of rootlessness. Uprootedness is also part of
West Indian condition. Displacement and exile have been quintessential Caribbean experiences. The “doubleness” of identity, of culture, of loyalties, of even language has been the basis of immigrants in general.

Writers like George lamming and others talked about the different ways of seeing. What had been regarded as models by the Europeans and the colonialists may not be the only models. Caribbean aesthetic grew out of the recognition that there are others also. Writers from the island nations in 1960’s and 70 have tried to move away from the so called models of the canonical literature which was largely based on European classics. Braithwaite, the Barbadian poet talked at length about bringing out a new Caribbean aesthetic which would really reflect,” reassertions of the local…which would involve the reestablishment of links—artistic and intellectual activity” (qtd. in Donnell 56).

Immigration from Caribbean to Canada occurred mostly in 60’s and 70’s thanks to the liberal multiculturalists policies. One of the earliest figures was Austin Clarke who reached Canada way back in 1950’s itself. George Lamming in his lecture “Concepts of the Caribbean” included as the first chapter in Frank Birbal Singh’s *Frontiers of Caribbean literature in English* outlines what constitutes caribbeanness. Lamming says that” a concept of people or place doesn’t arrive out of the blue” (1). It is a long drawn and complicated process. He points out the curious way in which the West Indies
was misnamed and when found out it was too late to change it. Before
Columbus arrived in the Caribbean at the end of fifteenth century, there was a
very viable culture and civilization in these islands. There was an aboriginal
population made up of people such as the Caraways and Caribs who were
moving from the mainland of South America or through the islands from
Trinidad up to Cuba. Within a matter of twenty five or thirty years of
Columbus’ arrival, this aboriginal population was destroyed. Unprecedented
act of genocide took place here in connection with colonialism. Acts of
barbarism were not at all reported in the early days and they were found out
later only. Though Columbus’ journal speaks of meeting and conversing with
the aboriginals, the fact was that he didn’t know a single word from the
aboriginal language nor aboriginals spoke a single word of Spanish or Latin.
Lamming argues, “what Columbus did was to create what he ordered, because
he represented power” (2). Here conflict was between centers of power and
centers of resistance.

Every European power that reached the Caribbean tried to assert their
supremacy and dominance and even interpreted things according to their
convenience. Theirs was a false concept in the sense there was no discovery
as already people have been living there. These territories were conquered,
settled, and maintained on behalf of those who owned them. According to
Lamming what brought radical changes to this place in the form of slavery
and such other atrocities was “this monster, sugar ,this thing associated with
sweetness”(2). When sugar as a crop was experimented with, it would require mass labour and large labour force. “Sugar means land”. (2). The movement of the people was absolutely necessary in order to justify the existence and expansion of the area as a plantation society. For more than three centuries, Europeans in the Caribbean brought slaves from Africa to work on their plantations.

Sexual liaisons between white masters and female slaves produced, in time, a mixed blood population who occupied an intermediate position in the feudalistic social hierarchy of the plantation system. When slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century, labourers were brought from India to work on plantations vacated by the freed slaves. Lamming refers to the cultural association between different ethnic groups in the Caribbean. Lamming continues his discussion:

As a result of struggles within plantation society, centres of resistance developed to the original concepts that were imposed. One such centre of resistance is the dismantling of the idea of the Caribbean as an imperial frontier. In resistance to such imperial ideas the concept grew that the Caribbean was a landscape remade by the labour force of all those who had been brought into it from one place or another. Therefore, when we speak of the Caribbean, we are looking at common historical experience that remains true for all parts of the region, whether they are French, English, or Spanish speaking. In other words, the most authentic meaning of the word ‘Caribbean’ is the
organization of labour within the region by people particularly from Asia and Africa, and the responses of their labor to imperial rule, including them way in which they organized successful rebellions against this rule. (3)

Although people in different territories had no direct experience of each other, a common kind of preoccupation comes out in the literature of all Caribbean territories, according to Lamming. He further observes, “The experience, in terms of organization, is one of plantation slavery, with its tremendous base of African labour, and the experience of indentured labour after emancipation” (3).

Asians came to Trinidad and Guyana in different circumstances but the purpose was substantially the same. Lamming argues, “Whatever may be identified as cultural differences, including religion, between what you may call Indians and Africans in the Caribbean, their one common experience is the culture of labour” (3). Lamming sees labour as the basis of this culture. He also talks at length about how the etymological meaning of the one of the key words in English language holds true in the case of Caribbean. He says:

If you are interested in the culture of a society, in whatever period of time, one of the first things that you must look for is the means by which people feed themselves. This is very obvious, because if there is no food, you cannot come to the university to read; you cannot do anything....” (5)
History of the labour is not so prominent in the official texts of history. But in the Caribbean, according to Lamming, one of the functions of the novel is to serve as a form of social history. He also takes a peep into the degeneration that has crept into the Caribbean society.

Indenture, according to Lamming, didn’t save money and what was saved was the ability to control the Africans. Both Africans and Asians, to Lamming, had no difference in performance of labour but both came with cultural legacies of differing nature. One difference is that Indians came later, and therefore the Indian element makes the Indo-Guyanese and Indo-Trinidadians feel closer to each other they might other Guyanese or Trinidadian. Guyana is the only Caribbean country shaped by its rivers. The word “Guyana” itself means land of streams. It is surrounded by three rivers, Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice. Ashcroft et al say that for Dennis Williams the Guyanese society is characterized by the post colonial “catalysis” or cross-culturality (146). It is said that the cultural clash and miscegenation formed the brutal texture of Caribbean society and literature (144). In his novels and stories, Wilson Harris tries to present the sort “psychic unease” that the Caribbeans possessed due to several factors. Wilson Harris, with his syncretic vision, is the practitioner of Caribbean catalysis par excellence and he is of the view that Guyanese writing is hugely marked by its attempts to come to terms with country’s physical space.
In Guyanese literature one can often find five distinct spaces: absolute ‘unpeopled’ wilderness, the inhabited interior, coastal and riverine villages, the sugar estate communities and city. In Guyana, race was used as means of social control since the colonial period. Francis Burnham and others made use of this opportunity. In 1953 the People’s Progressive party, under the joint leadership of Burnham and Jagan, played a decisive role in Caribbean history, in terms of the politics of the race.

Many from Guyana and other territories of the Caribbean migrated to Canada in 1970’s. People flowed into Canada from different parts of the world during this period. The waves of immigration that reached Canada indicate that the government encouraged it. First Europeans, especially from the northern part, came to Canada followed by people from central and South America. The largely non-Caucasian group that came to Canada from 1950’s onward created new issues of integration. People from Asia and Africa arrived and along with them some financial immigrants came from the Caribbean also. In the 1950’s onwards educated South Asians of newly independent countries set out to find their fortune in countries that were in need of their services. The decades of 60’s and 70’s witnessed a heavy rush of the influx of immigrants to western countries especially to Canada. Eighties also was a decade which had seen rather heavy flow of immigrants. As a result of this migration a simmering discontent developed among the dominant communities there and this culminated in a kind of racism that
excluded these people. Racism was brought into the overt which was latent and covert till then.

From the Caribbean the migrants who landed in Canada were mostly the descendants of the African slaves and also of the indentured labourers who originally hailed from different parts of India and other Asian countries. Some of them were utilized for the construction Canadian Pacific railway but some others came with the purpose of pursuing higher studies in Canadian universities and to look for employment opportunities. There were teachers, professors and editors among them. The descendants of the indentured labourers from India have been also referred to as South Asian Canadians even though they didn’t directly belong to any of the Asian countries. Yet they have been called so because their ancestry could be traced to India. The term, “immigrant’ refers to any one from a particular country who is legally admitted to live in any other country. In Canada they are called permanent residents or landed immigrants and they can become Canadian citizens provided they fulfill certain residency requirements. While each group of immigrants has its own experience of discrimination and prejudice, people from visible minority backgrounds generally continue be perceived as immigrant, regardless of their length of stay in Canada. In comparison with earlier waves of immigration, the majority of the immigrants who have arrived in Canada since the 1970’s are members of visible minority group. South Asian Canadians had a broad base by 1970’s because of the large scale
immigration and most among them were educated. The Employment equity Act defines persons who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour, and who are not Aboriginal people, as visible minorities. While the 3.2 million persons in this group make up 11.2% of the Canadian population, Ontario contains over half of visible minorities in Canada. Toronto is home to 42% of all visible minorities and they even form a sizeable the population of the city.

The migrants who happened to come there came with the legacy of their tradition. Though many tried to get assimilated into the vast stream, many others found it difficult to completely sacrifice their heritage and erase their identities. They have been even victims of covert racism which was prevalent even when cultural pluralism was the manifesto of the national culture. Nevertheless these Indo-Caribbeans tried to cope with the changed situation there. They tried to even express emotions, feelings and thoughts in the form of literature and other cultural activities.

Expatriate writing occupies a significant position between cultures and countries. Cultures travel, take root or get dislocated and individuals internalize nostalgia or experience amnesia. Writers living abroad exist on the margins of two societies and their “in-betweenness” makes their writing specific. Among them some may be on the margins within margins as they are doubly displaced because they carry with the bundle of different legacies and
cultures. This is true in the case of Caribbean Canadians as most of them are the descendants of those who have reached the islands either from Asia or Africa. “Expatriate” and “Diaspora” are terms which are mostly used in this connection. The word ‘Diaspora’ is said to have derived from a Greek word “diaspeir” meaning ‘scattering’. One of the founding editors of the multidisciplinary journal “Diaspora”, Khachig Toloyan uses the term to designate “social formations” that are “exemplary communities of the transnational moment” (qtd. in Wolfreys 13). But Toloyan makes a distinction between the pre modern or classical “ethno diasporas”–Jews, Greeks, Armenians–and the large scale dispersal of significant ethnic clusters, or what Arjun Appadurai describes as ‘ethnos capes” witnessed in the time of advanced capitalism. Vijay Mishra tries to conceive of diasporic formations as “the exemplary condition of late modernity” (428). The word signifies a sort of scattering and it carries within it the ambiguous status of being both an ambassador and a refugee. Both the roles are different in the sense that one implies the projection of one’s culture and the ability to enhance its understanding while the other seeks refuge and protection and relates more positively to the host culture. What is peculiar about the diasporic community is its variety and complexity.

Immigrants and expatriates for that matter are confronted with the question of the multiplicity of “homes”. The gap between the culture of origin and the culture of adoption is also another question which has frequently
discussed. Hybridity is also another issue in this context. The explanation given by Gurbhagat Singh to expatriate writing as the work of the exile that has experienced unsettlement at the existential, political and metaphysical levels holds true in the case of diasporic writing also \(\textit{Writers of Indian Diaspora}\) 21). Exile is one who has lost the centre that used to unify. Hybridity is sometimes used to refer to new, dynamic, mixed cultures. Jasbir Jain interprets Babha’s concept ‘hybridity’ as a process, not a position. She further explains it as a permanent state of flux, a concept which moves to and fro between two cultures, where the interstitial spaces, otherwise inaccessible, become articulate (“Problematizing Hybridity” 37). This kind of situation also leads to syncretism—the evolution of commingled cultures that are different from two or more parent cultures.

Stuart Hall makes a strong link between the development of hybridity and the changing character of diasporas. For Hall, the late modern world is marked by two broad contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, the drift of globalization is towards homogenization and assimilation. On the other hand, and perhaps in reaction to globalization, is the reassertion of localism- notably in the form of ethnicity, nationalism and religious fundamentalism. Although these tendencies appear to be irreconcilable, he makes a cogent case that cultural identities are emerging that are “in transition”, drawing on different traditions and harmonizing old and new without assimilation or total loss of the past (Robin Cohen \textit{Global Diasporas} 131 ). It is said that despite the different destinations and experiences of Caribbean peoples abroad, they
remain an exemplary case of a cultural Diaspora (Cohen 144). This may be because of their common history of forcible dispersion through slave trade and indenture. Caribbean experience implies double diaspora—a migration to this country from somewhere between 16th and 19th centuries and from Caribbean to the other parts of the globe, beginning in the middle of 20th century.

Many Caribbean writers immigrated to European as well as other countries like Canada. Their peculiar predicament can be described making use of Anita Rau Badami’s remark that appeared as the headline in the 13th May, Globe and Mail supplement, Toronto, that she has got one foot in India a couple of toes in Canada. Makarand Paranjpe inverts this expression as the title of his paper on South Asian Canadian writing as “One Foot in Canada and a couple of toes in India: Diasporas and Homelands in South Asian Canadian experience”. Writers belonging to Caribbean like Cyril Dabydeen, Arnold Itwaru, Reshard Gool, Dionne Brand and others moved towards Canada from the Caribbean in their literary pursuits. But at the same time these writers focus mainly on Caribbean experience in some of their works. As creativity is spontaneous and natural we cannot always expect their creations to have a mix of the Caribbean and Canadian.

It is not also desirable on the part of the readers to expect a formulaic kind of structure when we look at their writings. But at the same time certain common factors do seem to surface when we analyze their writings. Peter
Van Deer’s phrase “dialectics of longing and belonging” (qtd. in Paranjpe 161) is relevant here and their diasporic fiction relate to their homelands. However fragile one’s sense of rootedness is the longing for the homeland may be implicit in his works. Victor J. Ramraj observes that

diasporic writings are invariably concerned with the individual’s or community’s attachment to the centrifugal homeland. But this attachment is countered by a yearning for a sense of belonging to the current place of abode. Caught psychically between two worlds, diasporans are, to use Victor Turners’ terms, ‘transitional-being(s)’ or ‘liminal persona(e)’, that is they are in the process of moving from one cultural state of existence to another. (216)

As far as Caribbean writers immigrated to Canada are concerned their national identity is not so rigid in the sense that they might not have yearned for a sudden staging back as conditions are not so better there. They don’t even feel comfortable in the new promised land which doesn’t rise up to their expectations. According to Victor J. RamRaj, in contemporary literature, the term diasporic writing has come to be associated with works produced by globally dispersed minority communities that have common ancestral lands. Their relationship with the homeland doesn’t necessarily involve, as in the original Jewish conception of the term, “commitment to the maintenance of restoration of homeland”, which “is their true ideal home….the place to which they or their descendants would (should) eventually return” (214).
Generally speaking Diaspora writing expects Diasporas and homelands structurally interdependent but in the case of Caribbean Canadian the situation is somewhat different. There is no kind commonality and homogeneity among these writers even as they seem to have different predilections and prejudices. There is thus confusion and overlapping of categories of nation race, language ethnicity when it comes to defining their identity. Makarand Paranjpe says: “A homeland can be a nation, a region, a linguistic are located in South Asia or a language, ethnic, or religious group originally from South Asia or a combination of both. When considering the South Asian Diaspora, the challenge, in van der Veer’s words, is neither to “unify and homogenize” all the diasporic cultures into “Indian culture overseas” nor to “deconstruct the South Asian Diaspora to the point of dissolution”(162).

As the term South Asian is loosely arranged it cannot be expected every writer to have this sort of Indian ethos. The term South Asian, in the Canadian context, denotes the writings of Canadians who trace their origins to South Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It includes writers who came directly from such countries or indirectly by way of Britain or other erstwhile British colonies such as Africa, East Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific islands. Chelvan Kanaganayakam considers that, “by asserting the notion of ethnicity as a sine qua non of their literature, the writers secure a niche and an identity for themselves.” He also thinks that one has to assume an ambiguous stance, in relation to the dominant culture, "to be an ethnic writer” (Canadian Diaspora 184). The mainstream Canadian
literature was Anglo centric at first and later only it adopted Francophone writings. Though Multiculturalism was the avowed policy, literature produced by the immigrants was accorded only a minor status in the beginning and the literature of the minority was called ‘ethnic writing’ to marginalize it further. Their attempts to make them visible didn’t fructify that easily. Many of the major publishing houses there were not ready to produce their works and as a result getting things published was difficult for them. Even when some of them were willing it was merely because of their sheer exoticism. But waves of change started blowing from 80’s onwards as multiculturalism act was passed. The Canadian Government deemed it as their duty to make this multicultural mosaic visible and they offered financial assistance to the budding writers from the visible minorities. More and more voices of immigrants from various nationalities began to be heard.

The literature of the migrants developed a distinct sensibility as these writers live away from their roots and cultural moorings. Migration and the resultant shock made them look at the new land with a new perspective. Some of the writers were not able to write “specifically’ about “new land “since they hadn’t left their past behind and more over they haven’t yet fully come to terms with the new reality. They came with cultural legacies and “Capital” packed into bundles and boxes of their psyche. Himanni Bannerjee opines that “People’s memories of the places they have come persist with them” (qtd in B.Hariharan 207). An immigrant is a person whose existence is marked by an endless fluctuation between two polarities and two histories. As they are
haunted by some sense of loss, they have the same urge to reclaim or at least even to look back to their own past. A sense of dislocation and separation is common to immigrants who find themselves between the “here” and “there”. Their existence on the margins gives them a sense of belonging as well as “non belonging”.

*A Meeting of Streams : South Asian Canadian Literature* (Vassanji, 1985), an anthology of essays that were presented at the conference on South Asian literature, is the one that comes across the idea of a grouping writers according to their ethnicity and cultural legacies. The wide variety of South Asian literature makes it impossible to treat them as a single cohesive unit. To M.G.Vassanji, “South Asian Canadian Literature ….is not intended to convey a single outlook on literary matters. Again it is perhaps better understood as a term of contrast: the contrast been here with the “mainstream” literature- that which shares a common heritage with British and American literature (4)”.

*Shakti’s Worlds* edited by Diane McGifford and Judith Kean, is a collection of writings from South Asian Canadians. The second volume edited by Diane McGifford was entitled *Geography of Voice*. In the introduction to the volume, Diane says, “The alienation of the immigrants and the bitter stings of racism are the two parallel realities shaping the lives and arts of South Asian Canadians” (qtd. in Uma Parameswaran 51). The writers after reaching the new land ventured into their creative sojourns because of the atmosphere and ambience for literary and cultural activities. The climate of ideas they imbibed also helped them in continuing their literary pursuits. On the one hand some
of them were able garner the desired prosperity and on the other they encountered several problems like racism and other issues.

In the initial stages these new voices have not been reckoned with as they are the voices of the ‘unequal citizens” but later this “ethnic diversity” has been accepted as a part of liberal policies. Chelvan Kanaganayakam rightly puts it, “South Asian writing cannot be seen as an isolated activity divorced from the constant and continuing pressures of political and cultural life in Canada. Immigrant writing is framed, underpinned and legitimized by a wide spectrum of values and assumptions (Canadian Diaspora 183). These values and assumptions are gathered from several corners from the home land and also from the adopted country. Immigrants, often, everywhere try to seek the security of their own ethno cultural community when they reach a new land. The socio political peculiarities of the country also drive them for ghettoization rather than looking for coexistence.

According to Chelvan Kanaganayakam, “South Asian writing in Canada had had to a large extent its own trajectory of successes and failures” (186). The variegated texture of South Asian Canadian literature has been well received and widely acclaimed. Rohinton Mistry, Himanni Bannerjee, Uma Parameswaran, Surjeet Kalsey, Krishanta Bhaggyadatta are some of the writers who had migrated from India. Cyril Dabydeen and Arnold Itwaru along with Neil Bissondath and Sam selvon belonged to the group of writers who had come to Canada from the Caribbean. The list also includes writers
like Reinsci Cruz, Michael Ondaatje, and Syam Salvadorian who had gone from Sri Lanka and M.G.Vassanji from Kenya. According to Uma Parameswaran, the singing metaphors of Reinsci Cruz, the finely crafted lyrics of Lakshmi Gill, the powerful feminist credo of Suniti Joshi, the political consciousness of Himanni Bannerjee, the abstruse philosophies of Reshard Gool and Arnold Itwaru, the satires of Cyril Dabydeen and the gentle wit of Rohinton Mistry and M.G. Vassanji bear testimony to the multicoloured and multilayered fabric of this literature (51). Thus the group can be broadened and has got a rich variety.

The very term “South Asian” is bureaucratic and it might be said to produce a unitary community that is not actually there. Even then Arun Mukherjee opines, “and yet it cannot be denied that a South Asian Canadian identity has emerged” (Post colonialism 29). The South Asian writers deserve to be acknowledged on the strength of their numbers also. They are not bound by strict national boundaries as they would like to even talk most of the problems encountered by the third world people. These writers have also been called hyphenated Canadians without anything of the label of ethnicity attached to it. He is for easy assimilation through integration and he doesn’t mind even losing his own “past” as he has come here shedding things for good in his homeland itself.

Many of the first generation writers tried to communicate the tensions of psyche that had been doubly displaced. This double displacement is
remarkable as far the Caribbean Canadians are concerned as their ancestors might have reached the West Indies from different countries. At first many of them were forced to speak about their own “native themes” but later they started talking about their experiences in a “new land” comparing them with their own experiences at home. To speak for oneself in other words, voice appropriation has been a major concern in a multicultural society. In the plethora of voices it is extremely difficult to make one heard. This sort of mission has been one of the intentions of immigrant writing. In any such society cultural misappropriation takes place to large extent. The First Nations of Canada or Aboriginals are saying that misrepresentation and distortion of their cultures by whites have been going on for five hundred years and must now stop. They have been supported many groups or races having varied interests. According to Uma, “White Canada that was founded on the principle of two founding nations, stepped into the realities of today’s world only on July 21, 1988, when the Multiculturalism Act became a law though it was accepted as a policy by the liberal government way back in 1971” (63). Two nation concept soon outdated as it ignored the original presence of First Nations and also the problems and prospects of the immigrants.

As South Asians are a racial minority in Canada, their writing is described as “ethnic writing”. This is a community, like all other communities there, excepting the First nations, which is born out of immigration. It became the target of state and societal racism like some other minority groups. As Dionne Brand says, “Canadian national identity is necessarily predicated on
whiteness…” (qtd. in Arun Mukherjee.74). In spite of the fact that they were fairly ‘new’, South Asians have been prolific in their literary output because of the obvious reason that most of them arrived in Canada equipped with an English education and this dominant language was in a way essential to resist its further domination.

The Caribbean Canadians suffered a double kind of dislocation and that resulted in them forming a group within a group. In Cyril Dabydeen’s own words:

I believe that the imagination of Indo–Caribbean immigrants in Canada is no different from any other, despite identifiable differences stemming from unique and singular traditions and experiences relating to history, geography and identity: for the Indo-Caribbean collectively or individually- are expressing the intellectual and artistic acts of a people whose forebears were first brought to the Caribbean from the Indian in 1888 under circumstances. In this context it is not surprising that the sense of angst continues to be felt, vague as it might be, but crucial to the depiction of one’s life and lived and felt in Canada or, of true feelings such as the sense of celebrations. This latter nevertheless being valid as imaginative experience. (“The Bowl to Apollo”, 107)

Along with Dabydeen the fellow Caribbean Canadians namely Itwaru, Harold Sonny Ladoo, Reshard Gool share the same sort of feelings in this regard. Apart from the Indo-Caribbeans who are otherwise called East Indians, the African Canadians like Claire Harris and Dionne Brand fit into
this group. The experiences depicted by these writers reflect the hardships as well as the physical and economic deprivations that drove them from the country of their origin. Most of the Caribbean Canadian writers show social orientation and commitment. Their writings are not merely verbal jugglery or “play of signifiers” but are firmly rooted in their earth and terrain. But some among the group tried to move away from the social orientation as they were largely driven by the ideology of postmodernism which believed in the total indeterminacy of the language.

Micheal Ondaatje is a writer who is more concerned with the “metropolitan centre” in his Booker prize winning novel, *The English Patient*, and other works. The novel deals with the closing stages of World War II in North African desert and Italy. The invented episodes portray the emotional and Psychological entanglements of four main characters. There is commingling of the real and unreal and his focus is peculiarly on the disintegration of personal identity as he does not take many pains to link it with social identity. His is a deviation from the norm as far as South Asian Canadian literature is concerned. Ondaatje’s is a typical example as he always wants to be in the limelight and his ideological compatibility with the Eurocentric theories made him acceptable to the mainstream “Can.lit”.

Neil Bissoondath has been a critic of multiculturalism as it discouraged integration and assimilation which were essential for having a national
identity. He wants to deliberately erase his cultural identity and hence join the main stream of Canadian society. His famous diatribe on the liberal policies of multiculturalism is fully expressed in his *Selling Illusions: the Cult of Multiculturalism*. He considers the so-called liberal and radical policy as reactionary and anti-national in the sense that it may even pave the way for separatism and ghettoisation which are not desirable for the well-being of a nation. He even wants literature to be apolitical and its social significance is not very much important to him. So he is against projecting the sensibility of his own people and voicing for an exclusive politics of ethnicity. It can even be deemed that it is a prudent attempt to be free from the process of “othering” and how far he has been successful is not clearly known. But in his stories he deals with issues like displacement, disorder and persecution leading to displacement, and ultimately to uncertainty or a kind of imbalance that are typical of the immigrant writers. Though the Trinidadian rejects labels and hyphenated identities, his works project the chief concerns and predicaments of the immigrants. This sort of ambivalence can be taken as a general feature of writers of “exile”.

A writer like Reinsci Cruz, though not from the Caribbean, is a South Asian poet from Sri Lanka whose poems span a wide variety of themes that are common to this branch of literature. Uma Parameswaran finds that “the differences between his native Sri Lanka and Canada are developed through two characters, the Sun-Man and the Winter-Man, and through parallel
images of sun and snow, elephant and ice, coconut and peach, etc."
(Sac Lit 53). Uma considers his comments on polarities between the two
cultures as gently satirical. Similar expressions are also made by Cyril
Dabydeen also. In his poems and stories snow is a metaphor for the slippery
nature of the new land and its people where as in sunshine or in tropical heat
everything appears to be so transparent.

Unlike Ondaatje and Bissoondath there are others who tried to voice
their resistance to the dominant ideology and their protest against ills of the
society. They severely criticized the hegemonic plans of the ‘insiders’. To
them, as Arun Mukherjee says, “writing is not just a matter of putting one’s
thoughts on paper. Writing is also about social power” (Oppositional
Aesthetics Xiii). Writers like Himanni Bannerjee and Arnold Itwaru try to
formulate a kind of resistance culture and Cyril Dabydeen, though not a
vociferous critic, voices his opposition not so bitterly or angrily but in a veiled
or sophisticated manner. These writers are in league with the living situation
of men and women: it is concrete rather than abstract as it is not divested of
the lived reality of its subjects. What makes their writing distinct is its
different way of looking at reality and life and they are not at all driven by
post modernist and Eurocentric aesthetics. Along with Mukherjee they also
believe that literature is not a “confection” to be admired for its taste and
shape. Following Kenneth Burke, they understood that literature is
“equipment for living”. It is not a verbal icon and well wrought urn to be simply looked at with awe and admiration and more.

Caribbean Canadian writing, which is a part of South Asian literature, can also be considered post colonial in the positive sense of the term and not merely in the sense of carrying the colonial burden. Homogenizing vastly different writers and their writings is not desirable as not all of them face the same problems. Mainstream or Canonical Literature in the settler colonies like America, Canada, New Zealand have to be analyzed using different parameters. Though most of the texts cannot be considered post colonial as per the scheme devised by the Empire Writes Back theorists they can be called so as they are literature of resistance and protest. These texts can be post colonial as they subvert the Eurocentric modes of writing and also in a way theorize, interpret and investigate colonial oppression and its legacy and they are also informed by an oppositional agenda. They also deal with issues like migration, slavery, suppression, resistance and representation. In the strict sense of the term they didn’t “write back to the centre” but “writing home” as Mukherjee says. It has been proved beyond doubt that colonialism reshaped the existing structures of human knowledge and no branch of learning was left untouched by the colonial experience. Language has been a central concern in post colonial studies. McLeod has rightly argued that “it epitomized the increasingly popular view that literature from the once colonized countries was fundamentally concerned with challenging the language of colonial
power, unlearning its world view and producing new modes of representation.” (25).

Ashcroft et al looked at the fortunes of the English language with a history of colonialism, noting how writers expressed their own identity by refashioning English in order to enable it to accommodate their own experiences. Raja Rao, the famous Indian English novelist, argued that he tried, “to convey in a language that is not one’s own, the spirit that is one’s own” (vii). V.S. Naipaul asserted that English language was mine, the tradition was not. What made these writers belonging to the erstwhile colonies remarkable are their attempts to question challenge and indict the colonialist excess. Immigrant literature from Canada which is a deviant of the mainstream literature is post colonial not so as the mainstream is because in most of the settler colonies, intellectual life was regarded as an extension of the European centre. Immigrants from South Asia, the inadequately noted speakers, which include Caribbean Canadians do not fully fit into the scheme of the theory put forward by Ashcroft et al regarding the development of ‘national literatures’. But as the very conception of the nation has undergone sea changes after the demise of feudalism and with the emergence of capitalism and socialism, this becomes much more pliable to include all kinds of literature produces in the erstwhile colonies and countries with a history of colonial occupation. South Asian Canadian literature becomes post colonial because it often appears to be literature of combat and resistance. Arun
Mukherjee, while talking about the difference between commonwealth literature and post colonial makes these comments,

> While common wealth literature has validation of universal human values, post colonial literature is read as been read as an expression and “resistance” to the “colonizer”. Postcolonial texts are seen as challenges to the mainstream curriculum because they are said to challenge the western hegemony. (Oppositional Aesthetics xiv)

Some of the immigrant writers tried to retrieve a submerged continent of experience in their writing and thereby upset the complacency of the dominant by challenging their set of mores and fixed modes of looking at reality. The very fact that they have questioned the established literary canons, stale habits of ordering knowledge, beauty and power makes them writers with a commitment and concern.

These writers had an unconventional relationship with the dominant literary tradition and they tried to interrogate many of its age old practices. To them, literature is one thing which has to be understood in relation to language, self and society. According to Arun P.Mukherjee, “South Asian writers seem to possess a double vision which comes only when one is alienated from the dominant group” (A Meeting of Streams 9). This is true, of course, in the case of Caribbean Canadian writers also because they also carry the burden of colonial experience with them. Mukherjee thinks that they write
more about racism, poverty, discrimination, colonial exploitation, imperialism and ideological domination than about man’s response to nature, the woes of age and death, and other staple subjects(9). Instead of valorizing and romanticizing the past, they often dwell in the miseries of the present.

The question these writers often raised was who is entitled to speak for whom. Uma Parameswaran has extensively discussed the issue of the Voice appropriation made by the South Asian writers (67). When many things are misappropriated the appropriation, a counter strategy, becomes the major defense of expatriate writers. Uma Parameswaran is of the view that most diaspora work, set in Canada, focus on sufferings and discrimination, racism and underemployment faced by the diaspora in Canada (307). Bharati Mukherjee, an Indo-Canadian, who later migrated to U.S.A, has vehemently attacked the kind of internal racism prevalent in Canada. A person from Asia and Africa is often branded as a shoplifter, a prostitute and such other things and this defeats the very purpose of multiculturalism.

Irony is a major device used by these writers. Linda Hutcheon sees Canada speaking with a doubled voice, with a forked tongue of irony (1). Irony is semantically and ideologically slippery beast, according to Linda (11). She further argues: “Although usually seen as either a defensive or offensive rhetorical weapon, irony—even in the simple sense of saying one thing and meaning another thing- is also a mode of speech-that allows
speakers to address and at the same time slyly confront an “official” discourse: that is to work within a dominant tradition also to challenge it—without being utterly co-opted by it” (1). But in the case of the writers under discussion this becomes all the more direct and challenging kind of exercise as they have been trying to formulate a new kind of aesthetics that has something to do with the real voice of the people or vox populi.

As socially committed writers, they thought that their immediate task is for retrieving the historical reality. Instead of simply searching for innovative style and design to impress the readers, they become folk historians, making an attempt to draft a “history of the people” thereby making them visible in the community life. We do not have as Arun Mukherjee points out, “the artist as hero creating the isolation of his soul”, the characters of strange and eccentric vision. But we have in them, “an encounter with history and hence with one’s otherness” (*Post colonialism* 48). Validating the culture and state of which they are part of, writers like Itwaru and Dabydeen create an independent critical consciousness. In the case of Itwaru who is more radical it becomes oppositional consciousness which paves the way for “Oppositional Aesthetics”. Their writings leave an insidious impact on the complacent conformity of the canon and thereby they send shockwaves to the sensibility of the so called mainstream aesthetics.