Chapter I

Introduction

Over the last few decades there has been a proliferation of literature engaging with the experiences of diaspora and migration in different nations. Diasporic experiences of immigrants in Canada are of special interest, in fact immigration over one hundred years have shaped Canada with each new wave of immigrants adding to the nation's ethnic and cultural composition. To speak of Canada, hence is to speak of a nation made up of many 'nations'.

Canada is a multicultural country. The term 'multicultural' in the Canadian context has a specific meaning. As a concept 'multiculturalism' means that people of diverse origins and communities are free to preserve and enhance their cultural heritage while participating as equal partners in Canadian society though in reality the smaller groups of immigrants may feel marginalized or excluded at different points of time.

The groundwork for multicultural Canada was laid early in the country's history. Aboriginal society was also multicultural and multilingual. The first British and French explorers who came to Canada in the seventeenth century and eighteenth century interacted with aboriginal peoples to build a unique Canadian pattern with new foods, clothing and celebrations. During the final decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, many eastern and northern Europeans immigrated to Canada in search of land and freedom, lending additional colour and flavour to Canada's traditions. In recent years, individuals from all over the world have settled in Canada, making it truly a multicultural and multiracial country.
In spite of the Canadian society's beliefs in fair play and inherent worth and dignity of man, the society suffers from ethnic and social class prejudices and discrimination. The present thesis explores this notion of Canadian multiculturalism where the diasporic minorities are placed on the periphery and struggle to carve a meaningful identity for themselves often subjective.

Diaspora refers to any population sharing common ethnic identity who were either forced to leave, or voluntarily left, their settled territory, and became residents in areas often far removed from their former home.

The earlier diaspora of the new colonial and post-colonial world were often a product of people running away from religious, political or social persecution. However, people who migrated to different countries in the mid-1970s were going in search of a better life, greater promise of prosperity and material success.

The growing incidence of diaspora often gives rise to a sense of dislocation, disintegration, dispossession and absence of belongingness. The experience of expatriation not only gradually disconnects the individual from his roots, but also simultaneously polarizes his existence between nationality and exile.

Diaspora is an emotional and psychological state of strutting between two geographical and cultural states, struggling between regression and progression, dislocation and then relocation. This continuum of perpetual shift between two states of dislocation and then relocation makes one interrogate the sustainability of an individual in such a situation. Diaspora relates to history and culture and this experience of inhabiting two culture-specific spaces yields to subtle tension of dislocation and alienation.
Diaspora opens up new spaces for cross-cultural negotiation, and contributes to radical effects of dislocation upon identity articulation. The complexities and ambivalence associated with diaspora tend to create a tension between two localities and a spatio-temporal duality. It seems that diasporic subjects have to constantly situate themselves between home-ness and homeless-ness. Diaspora, in this sense, refers not only to a process of migration, but also to a double relationship between two different cultural homes. Since diasporas develop relationships that cross and span cultural, national borders, the trajectories of their identities, as a result, occupy no singular cultural/national space but are situated in a web of social and cultural links. After relocating themselves in a new land the immigrants face various political and cultural forces that threaten their sense of identity as a fixed, pure and closed structure, which has been uprooted from its original territory by their migration. What happens to the identity of diasporas who are placed on the periphery is the central concern of the present thesis.

As Stuart Hall observes, the diaspora’s existence “is defined, not by essence or purity, but by recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity” consequently diaspora identities “are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference” (402). This indeterminacy of the fluid diasporic identities, in the words of Jacqueline Lo, “disrupts neat homology between cultural, racial and national identity” (qtd in Singh 56).

The formation of diasporic identity is a big step in the larger transformation of the history of diaspora. Michael Foucault’s concept of heterotopia when applied to diasporas reveals a new
paradigm. Spaces can be divided into socially or politically constructed binaries such as own versus the other. Heterotopia refers to the spaces that are governed by these politically and socially constructed binaries as 'other'. These 'other' spaces are the spaces of crisis, subjugation or colonization. Heterotopia when applied to diasporas from its bipolar property becomes multipolar. Diaspora being the result of the coming together of the own and the other, it is the manifestation of a reality which remains in a state of flux between the settled binaries of own versus other and works towards diluting, shifting and displacing these binaries. Like Foucault, Salman Rushdie and Edward Said also visualize displacing binaries and see hybrid position as a vantage for creative potentialities. Edward Said, whose work inspired 'colonial discourse analysis', observes.

the development and maintenance of every culture require the exist of another different and competing alter ego. Each age and society recreates its 'others'. Far from a static thing then, identity of self or of 'other' is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies[...]the construction of identity is bound up with the disposition of power and powerlessness in each society[...]human identity is not only natural and stable, but constructed, and occasionally even invented outright.(332)

All cultural identities differ from one another in one way or the other. Every perceptive consciousness is rooted in its own socio-cultural, racial, class or gender identity.
The diasporic writers all over the world are centering the voices of the marginalized, the displaced, the rootless expatriates and the immigrants. Diasporic writers translate reality and personal experience in two different systems which is why their work can be regarded as an enrichment of both cultures, the native which they inherit by birth and the adopted. The diasporics are transrelations—a term coined by Wolfgang Iser—which suggests a co-belonging dialogue that situates diasporic subjects both inside and outside a culture. The diasporas are normally written as Chinese-Canadian, Japanese-Canadian, Asian-African where the hyphen in a way suggests their dual identity wherein they wish to retain the features of both sides.

The articulation of diasporic identity is therefore in the process of transrelation between two or more cultural formations. Cultural transrelation is a flexible strategy which allows the diasporas to have interaction between two cultures. Cultural transrelation seeks to compare and connect different cultural elements in the articulation of new identities. Identity articulation is not a simple combination of different cultural or historical elements but a complex thing that defamiliarizes cultures. Different from the traditional models in which identity is defined by fixity, transrelation involves carving out new identity. This transrelation is shown in the way where diasporic writers use words of two different languages in their novels. As identity is something ever-evolving, suffering the hardship of separation, dislocation and dismembering, diasporas strive to establish a new sense of belonging, they try to relocate their identity. Some of the diasporic writers go back in time to overcome their characters’ seemingly fractured identity to reassert their place in a multicultural society.
There exists a marked difference in the perception of first generation and second generation diasporic writers. The first generation diasporic writers exist in an in-between state, caught between two worlds, two sets of traditions, differing religions, lifestyles and social expectations. For these people, the main reasons for migration were education and economic interest, but regardless of the causes they all had to face the same hardships of settling, adjusting or assimilating in an increasingly hostile atmosphere.

Owing to their new awareness of racial, ethnic, national and cultural differences intensified by their diasporic experience, a large number of Asian diasporas in Canada attempt to keep intact their original identities, languages and cultures. For example, one of the early Chinese diasporic writers, Charlie Jang, kept on writing in Chinese and expressed a deep loyalty to Chinese tradition. His works display an intense desire to keep distinct the Chinese culture and values in Canada. Like Jang, many early diasporas tried to preserve their culture by building a sort of cultural wall around them.

For the second generation diasporic writer the confusion of cultural identity is wider. In comparison to the early generations, the younger generations of diasporic communities are real cultural border-crossers, for they are concerned with articulating their identities over the borders of different cultures. In most cases, what they see at home and what they experience outside is in direct collision with each other, they are constantly reminded of their otherness as they are not able to live up to the conflicting expectations of the two cultures. Due to their different kinds of experience there appears a marked difference between the writings of first generation diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Michael
Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry and those of the second generation diasporic writers such as V.S. Naipaul, Hanif Kureishi, Bharati Mukherjee, Kiran Desai, Anita Rau Badami, Chitra Divakaruni Bannerjee, Joy Kogawa, M.G. Vassanji. The characters in their novels are multilingual and conversant with the cultural codes of the West. The writers link the Third World with the First emphasizing how the experience of the one has for so long been bound up in that of the other. The diasporic writers select the clash of immigrant cultures as their theme wherein they narrate their own experience as well.

In Canada in spite of professed multiculturalism, the minorities are placed on the periphery and are treated as foreigners. Caught between two different socio-cultural systems that cannot be fully integrated into either one, Asian diasporas in Canada are subject to a process of constant transrelation due to which their identities are always in the process of construction as their identity has to be re-negotiated in relation to each instance of cultural transrelation.

Contemporary Canadian writing by diasporic authors from a wide variety of diasporic communities traces the connections to various locales in Africa, Asia, South America etc and perceives home as several locales embedded in the memory of a migrant and his/her own biography or that of her parents or grandparents. There has recently emerged a pronounced shift of emphasis in contemporary Canadian diasporic writing, as many novels are set outside Canada and some even show reverse migration by the protagonists as in the case of Anita Rau Badami’s *The Hero’s Walk*, Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey* which is set in India. Their increasingly empowered voice and vision have pluralized and globalized contemporary Canadian literary production. The spaces
they have created in their diasporic writings require constant construction and reconstruction. Joy Kogawa and M.G. Vassanji are second generation diasporic writers who live in Canada. Canada is a post-colonial country but not in the conventional sense of the term. The country was first ruled by Britishers and then by Americans in whose territories the natives were ill-treated. Immigration to Canada over the past hundred years has increased, due to Canada’s multicultural policy. For Himani Bannerjee:

multiculturalism is a way of managing seepage of persistent subjectivity of people that come from other parts of the world, people that are seen as undesirable because they have once been colonized, now new-colonized. So we are not talking about the Germans or Finns and Swedes or the French [...] We are talking about the undesirable. (149)

Though the Canadian concept of multiculturalism is quite broad, yet the mainstream-centered discourse still continues to be in line with the hegemonically dominant power structure. The present thesis explores this side of Canadian multiculturalism.

Joy Kogawa, a second generation Japanese-Canadian, was born in Vancouver in 1935. Like other Japanese-Canadians, she and her family were interned and persecuted during the Second World War. A Member of the Order of Canada Kogawa has received honorary doctorates from many Canadian universities and was the recipient of a NAJC National Award from the National Association of Japanese Canadians (2001). In 2008 she was awarded the George Woodcock Lifetime Achievement Award, honouring an outstanding literary career in British Columbia. Her family’s original Vancouver home was purchased by the Land Conservancy of British Columbia, and saved from imminent demolition in 2006, a
testament to the significance of Kogawa’s work for the history and culture of British Columbia.


In this dissertation *Obasan* and *Itsuka* have been taken up for analysis as these novels discuss in detail the reality of Canada’s multicultural policy. Where *Obasan* describes the plight of Japanese-Canadian who were interned after the Second World War, *Itsuka* is a sequel to *Obasan* and presents the Japanese-Canadians ultimately successful struggle for redress and consequent reconciliation, Kogawa discusses these events through the protagonist, Noami Nakane, who was a child at the time of internment. The novel traces her journey from a silent woman to a person who values the importance of speech.

*Obasan* is more focused on the story of the protagonist’s personal life. In *Itsuka* Kogawa shifts the focus outwards to Noami’s getting drawn into the redress movement and in the process moving towards a more comprehensive approach to life. The struggle of immigrants in a land which actually rejects them is more subtle yet quite detailed in both the novels.

M.G. Vassanji is an Asian African whose ancestors had migrated from Gujarat, India, in the nineteenth century. He was born in Kenya and grew up in Tanzania. He then went to the United States, where he earned a doctoral degree in Physics. Currently a
full-time writer and editor, Vassanji lives in Toronto. He is the author of several acclaimed novels. Vassanji portrays the experiences of both first generation migrants and second generation migrants in his novels. His novels to a considerable extent deal with the realities of East Africa where he grew up and spent his early years the living conditions as well as the topography. He recreates the experience of migration and of dispersal consequent upon colonization, and even after the independence of African countries from colonial rule. He also reveals important differences in cultural assimilation by immigrants settled in developed, developing or underdeveloped countries: where the first generation migrants cling to their traditions and customs in the new land, whereas the second generation migrants have no problem in assimilating with the adopted land.

Vassanji’s first novel *The Gunny Sack* (1989) won the Commonwealth Writers’ prize. It is set in Africa and describes the first generation migration from India to Africa and the second generation migration from Africa to the U.S. and Canada. Against the backdrop of Africa’s war of independence the story of Salim Juma, the protagonist of the novel, is narrated. The past of his whole family is presented before him with the help of a gunny sack. The novel shows how the Indians in Africa first felt superior to the natives and even helped the Germans to curb the natives and how after independence of Africa their position changed, their properties were nationalized, and how in that changed situation some of the Asian Africans migrated to other countries.

Vassanji’s third novel *The Book of Secrets* (1994) also has the same theme, of retracing a past by the protagonist Pius Fernandes who traces the story of a colonizer Alfred Corbin and Corbin’s connection with a native woman Mariamu.
Vassanji's second novel No New Land (1991) deals directly with the plight of immigrants in Canada. The novel is a flashback where Nurdin Lalani, the protagonist recounts his family's story. Beginning once again like The Gunny Sack, Vassanji presents a difference which exists between the first generation and the second generation migrants: the first generation migrants do not want to leave their adopted land whereas the second generation migrants feel no hesitation to leave it and settle elsewhere. The novel in detail presents this contrast where the protagonist, a second generation migrant, strives hard in Canada to meet the challenges that trouble him.

In Amriika (1999), his fourth novel, Vassanji portrays the struggle of Ramji an East African student who comes to America to study. The theme of rootlessness operates on a personal level in this novel. The In-Between World of Vikram Lall (2003), the fifth novel by Vassanji, deals with the story of Vikram Lall. The novel has a confessional tone where Vikram accepts his wrongs and finally migrates to Canada.

In this thesis The Gunny Sack, The Book of Secrets and No New Land have been taken up for detailed analysis, as in all these novels the respective protagonists' identity crisis is more complex. The thesis will discuss the identity dilemmas of the main characters' and focus on how they agonize over their physical and psychological struggle in a colonial or postcolonial society.

In examining Joy Kogawa and M.G. Vassanji's novels this dissertation analyses the processes by which the narrators gather and reveal their families' histories as the protagonists reconstruct their families' identities.

Apart from certain parallels between the quests for identity in a multicultural context on the part of the protagonists' of Joy
Kogawa and M.G. Vassanji, there are also considerable thematic similarities between the novels of these two writers. This dissertation explores how similar journeys find narrative expression in radically different ways: where in Obasan the protagonist is reluctant in the beginning to trace her family story but in the end gets to know about it fully. In Vassanji’s novels The Gunny Sack and The Book of Secrets the protagonists try their level best to trace the history which is organized as family history in The Gunny Sack and is woven round a colonizer’s story in The Book of Secrets.

Most critical works on Obasan and Itsuka focus on the subject matter, for example, Linda Hutcheon, Russell Rose, St Andrews emphasize the importance of ethnic heritage in self-exploration. The critical works on The Gunny Sack and No New Land tend to focus on the plight of immigrants, for example, Neil Bissondath mentions that Vassanji’s characters are victim of racism in the adapted land. The present thesis explores the role of silence in Obasan and Itsuka and that of immigrants’ struggle in a new land in Vassanji’s The Gunny Sack, The Book of Secrets and No New Land.

The thesis will draw upon Homi K. Bhabha’s assertions regarding the ‘location’ of culture that enables minorities to “negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference” (The Location of Culture 38) and Stuart Hall’s definition of identity in “Culture, Identity and Diaspora” where he says that “identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiple, constructed across antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization and are constantly in the process of change and transformation” (4).
These assertions are applied to the interpretation of all the five novels taken up for analysis. The protagonists strive to create a 'Third Space' for themselves which will encompass the heritage of their native land as well as their adopted land. The main characters are Japanese-Canadian in the case of Joy Kogawa and Asian African, African Canadian or Asian-African Canadian in the case of M.G. Vassanji. The novels explore the protagonists' quest for identity which is in the process of construction. The present study is divided into four chapters. Two chapters are devoted to Joy Kogawa and the other two chapters deal with the works of M.G. Vassanji. In all these novels both personal and national histories define and shape the diasporic experience. An attempt has been made to see how people are dislocated and re-located, and face identity-related problems in complex multicultural societies.
References


