Chapter IV

Bissoondath’s Views on Multiculturalism in Canadian Context Identity

4.1 Difference between Diaspora and Multiculturalism

The term Diaspora fundamentally connects with dispersal of Jews from Israel to other countries. Diasporic literature came into being as an outcome of both good and bad experiences of those who migrated and made an attempt to plant themselves in the culture of the country of their adoption. The experiences they underwent helped outline the incredible portion of the subject matter and thematic concerns of diasporic literature. Advancement in the life in the 20th century impelled people to cross the boundaries for better prospect and wealth. All these people who have emigrated felt compelled to deal with certain basic issues, like problem of identity, longing for own culture, feeling of uprootedness, racism etc as they tried to settle in foreign culture. What made matters worse for them was the sense of aloofness they faced due to dress, language and similar other barriers. Multiculturalism connects with condition of living in current times due to the impact of Globalization. Therefore, the origin or root lies in Globalization. Multiculturalism is a recent phenomenon in which standard works are no more than thirty years old. Yet some concerns that are vaguely clubbed together under the title of ‘multiculturalism’ including group representation and rights, the rights and status of immigrants, the recognition of minority nations and the status of new sociological movements.
All contemporary states have to deal with the issues arising due to multiculturalism for immigrants maintain safe distance when it comes to endorsing multiculturalism as a policy agenda or official ideology. They do this as they encounter incompatible allegiances with groups of people who share identities and identity-conferring practices that differ from those of the majority in the states of which these immigrants are a part. The reasons for these difficulties are multiple and intricate. Human history has witnessed the journey of people across the globe, but only in comparatively current time this movement has come to be categorized as ‘border crossing’, immigration, emigration, or even colonization. The reasons and types do vary for the movement of populations and we can classify them quite specifically in current contexts. Culture also plays a decisive role in multiculturalist argument as is so evident that it hardly needs stating. The importance of culture is not adequate to recognize a theory as a multiculturalist theory. It does not follow the theory of ‘my culture’ vs ‘your culture’ should be provided similar respect. One cannot enforce the use of language or culture in order to establish equivalence or homogeneity to disallow rights to immigrants belonging to ethnic minorities. The respect for culture involves an obligation to identify the standing and claims of other cultures. The difference between both the terms is apparent as diaspora connects with several aspects whereas multiculturalism is a situation arising out of globalization.

4.2 Multiculturalism: a product of Globalization

Multiculturalism is considered as an expanded term of human civilization due to socio-economic growth during the past two decades of twentieth century. It seems that
the eternal process of development especially with the advent of new technologies, the universe has come to be reduced to some sort of a global village. The presence of multinationals and commercial facets of life lent a thrust to mobility, communication and migration from one part of the globe to another. It is unfeasible for modern man to locate to himself in the stiff frontiers of his restricted class, or community. He has to admit and be an integral part of that mobility and communication in order to accomplish his wants as well as to update himself. The outcome has a direct connection with the concept of multiculturalism.

The term ‘multiculturalism’ presents the prospect of containing people from variety of culture, at a time. The earlier moribund notion based on a belief that people from more than one culture cannot live in one place or communicate effectively with one another. The term of multiculturalism provides clear opportunity for staying and working collectively and communicating with one another regardless of caste, community, colour, religion and nationality. Multiculturalism in itself has surfaced as a recent development towards the end of 20th century and the years that have passed in the current millennium and harbor different human beings in it. Multiculturalism implies a healthier streak of empathy, which enables recognition of one another. Even in face of this happy development, multiculturalism insists on definite indispensables or essential circumstances. The first aspect of this concept of multiculturalism is that despite the diversity of individual practices in tune with a separate traditional perspective with regard to customs, there is this new perspective of living together.

The context of a multicultural existence is despite different racial and religious backgrounds. The notion of multiculturalism becomes viable when lack of the
individuals who are a part of it when we attempt to value the good in other cultures, in complete disregard of their shortcomings.

In earlier times, it was not feasible to even envision the notion of multiculturalism. However, things have changed in our present times so much so that many nations in the world today have become multicultural and have come to respect it. Sections of our people have come to believe that multiculturalism has grown at the expense of native cultures but this is surely quite untrue. No one likes to give up his/her native culture in order to become a part of a multicultural society. Multiculturalism does not indicate the erasing of an individual’s own native culture but to look for ways in which he/she could identify similarities between his/her native culture so as to establish a meaningful relation with those professing other cultures. In short, multiculturalism does not demand the erasure of other cultures but preordains the creation of a cultural mosaic and a celebration of unity in diversity.

The creation of a society of this kind is what may appear to some to be utopian in nature but the fact remains that there are numerous countries where cultural diversity creates no major problems at all. Canada is one such country. It is not as if they do not have problems in handling diversity but the beauty lies in the way in which they handle it maturely. The creation of a new society wherein all reside together, overlooking diversity of beliefs, ways or life and religious practices, is indeed something, which would be for the betterment of all. This kind of society cannot receive recognition based on political or geographical name; but will receive due credit based on its human concern. The idea of such a society would present before us a definite system of behavior and living for the entire humanity. It is in this kind of a
model society in which person would happily reside not as representative of a given nationality but as someone who believes in happy co-existence and a dignified life, earning the right to die in dignity when the time come. Such a society would defy boundaries recognized as ‘ugly reality’ today.

Anyone who migrates to a new country is firstly in for a culture shock, which takes time to quieten down. There is the usual quest for work and this brings in newer forms of experiences quite diverse from what he/she had encountered. The process of acculturation takes time and even so the yearning for home, for experiences he/she was accustomed to do not go away.

Elderly people take longer time to be acculturated. The longing to be back in familiar environs does not lie down. Immigrants feel two different times of pressures: one is to assimilate and the other is to continue living as usual following all cultural practices that they were accustomed to. This delays the process of acculturation and assimilation.

4.3 Multiculturalism doesn’t mean brotherhood; – but material concern

“Multicultural” is frequently used as a synonym for “ethnic” or “immigrant”. However, official multiculturalism was an answer to the idea of a third force in Canadian society. Multiculturalism has developed during the span of past two decades, defying all conventional ideas. While the federal government implemented multiculturalism in 1971, Prime Minister Trudeau elucidated that it “should break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies” (Canadian, Parliament House of Commons, Debates, 8 Oct. 1971, p.8545). He accentuated that “national unity if it is
to mean anything in the deeply personal sense must be founded on confidence in one’s own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others” (Canadian, Parliament House of Commons, Debates, 8 Oct. 1971, p.8545). Regrettably, attempts to generate assurance about individual identities appear to have destabilized the national identity. Sociologist Reginald Bibby is of the opinion that through the promotion of hyphenation and diversity multiculturalism has produced mosaic lunacy. One more critique is that the Multiculturalism Act, though “activist in spirit, [and] magnanimous in accommodation, curiously excludes any ultimate vision of the kind of society that it wishes to create.” (Kaplan 1993, p.372) Several events of immigrants entering in Canada from various places exhibit certain basic problems like building big houses and blocking neighbour’s views and Canadians compel immigrants to follow their [Canadian] rules and regulations. Neil Bissoondath, observes:“We are not a country of ancient customs an multiculturalism seems to have taught us that tradition does not admit change: that traditions, in Canada, turn precious and immutable.” (Kaplan 1993, p.378). Although Canada recognizes itself as a nation of immigrants, Canadians have ironically deprived themselves of their own separate identity. Few Canadians would have difficulties in dealing with immigrant cultures. Intimidating retorts to immigrants, chiefly from unknown non-European resources, consecutively, construct bothersome offense amid the new immigrants. However, no one, be it older or newer Canadian, is able to appreciate the worth of multiculturalism.

Canada has travelled a fair amount of distance from the replica of Canadian cultural mosaic, a cliché accustomed to articulate greatly required harmony through multiplicity, and at present pretty conceited in its self-esteem as a multicultural
country. Whereas few writers and critics are evidently accommodative of the policy of multiculturalism, others nurture some type of self-obligatory ghettoization. They regard the multicultural erroneous belief that may be a portion of the Canadian Society rather than a construct of the Canadian state. The Caribbean emigrant writers like Bissoondath depict a new Canadian literary backdrop, which loves to maintain a safe distance from a hyphenated identity.

4.4 Bissoondath’s views on Multiculturalism: A Caribbean – Canadian perspective

In his works, he inspects the multi-ethnic backgrounds of his contemporary Canadian characters focusing on their emotional and accessible worlds. His essays are an assertion that the policy of multiculturalism (mosaic) is an absolute catastrophe for both the country and its immigrants. It has reached its zenith and hence needs to be restricted. Bissoondath opines, through his writing that Canadians come across each other’s multicultural mosaic tiles chiefly at festivals that are condensed to “the simplest theatre” at the level of “a folkloric Disneyland”.

In his writings, he senses that such a condition gives rise to an identity crisis in Canadians of diverse cultural contexts. It accentuated cultural disparity and by doing so, it supposedly impeded the assimilation of immigrants into the Canadian majority and thus, reluctantly harmed the secular nation state identity of Canada. After initial duress, the reassimilation and reformation of the immigrants’ cultural identity dislodges him/her from his/her native culture. His/her language enables him/her to assimilate to the new culture. Bissoondath, in his book on Canadian multiculturalism entitled Selling Illusions: the Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada, identifies cultural
typecasts parallel to boutique multiculturalism as seen in Canadian multiculturalism, where civilization is perceived as a product in that a cultural crowd is going to conserve its unique cultural identity. He brings in hypothetical multicultural fallacy in a real relation to an unusual aspect in a highly artificial and frequently calculating approach. In doing this, he absurdly promotes the very notion he initially embarks to condemn.

Critics do not consider the literature written by Bissoondath and other writers like him as Canadian literature. They are of the view that a majority of writers in Canada write regarding their particular homes i.e. their relevant countries of origin that lie outside Canada. Bissoondath should be considered as a writer who perceives the unusual cultural identity of Canada. The utilization and constraints of multiculturalism are argued disputably within the requisites of distinction and resemblance. There are two chief types of disputes - one concerns looking at differences as liberty (and perceiving similarity as domination), while other upholds that multiculturalism averts parity by carving differences. To Bissoondath, the principal agent of a contrasting perspective entitled as an acknowledgment disparity can be as tyrannical as healing, as it appears. He raises a strong voice on the significance of culture. His caption for cultural disparity comprises the principal misidentification. He says, “I am still being judged on the colour of my skin and not simply as a human being with strengths and weaknesses. I am still, even with my best of intentions, being viewed racially – and that is offensive to me”. (Bissoondath 1994, p.95). He considers cultural distinction, since the fundamental postulation in multiculturalism on the one hand can be taken as a resolution for the problem of identity, and on the other hand, it can be viewed as a
catastrophe of identity to be dealt with a diverse conduct. He disparages legend or myth festivities of cultural multiplicity that enable complicity in turning a consent regarding general ethics, which he reckons as a prerequisite for assimilation. Bissoondath does not deny the subsistence of cultural disparity though, with the expression of what he considers, as an exposition of multiculturalism. Having promoting harmony in multiplicity, Bissoondath points out that the notion of cultural differences that appear as deep-rooted are in fact shallow. He believes that since Canadians having majority colours fade away even in the finest type of literary expression. Considerably, his universal idea accentuates that identicalness is not only an affair of privileges but also connects with commitment. In addition, it is with reference to the types of commitment that the Canadian citizenship involves that he visualizes issues within the existing composition of Canadian identity in the context of multiculturalism.

Bissoondath’s work on multiculturalism – *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994) requires consideration since it adds to the argument on Canadian multiculturalism. He considers Canadian multiculturalism as a craving from an immigrant to assimilate into Canadian ethics and approaches to life. On the one hand, the book relates to Bissoondath’s individual investigation of a politically stimulated public policy with insightful confidential implications. However, on the other hand, it is concerned with a policy of consummate fanaticism. As right since his immigration to Canada, he has constantly declined the role of culture, required to evade the burden of hyphenation – an encumber that would tag him as an East Indian – Trinidadian – Canadian residing in Quebec. He asserts that the policy of
multiculturalism, with its prominence on the earlier or inherited homeland and its assertion on ‘THERE’ is more significant than ‘HERE’ disgruntles his total assimilation to Canadian culture.

The Multiculturalism Act, Canada, 1971 commands the residents into a cultural mosaic of multiplicity and forbearance. In the quest to conserve the inheritance of Canada’s majority; the policy however, generates agitation on many points, converting public into political devices and twisting historical dissimilarities into typecasted products. It persuades exoticism, indicating the divergence that segregates the immigrant from the Canadian rather than connects him. Thus, Bissoondath’s rational view in the context of multiculturalism is that the immigrant encounters the dilemma of cultural assimilation.
End Chapter Reference:


Ibid. p. 201.


Ibid. p. 378


