Quest for Literary Selfhood in Contemporary Canadian English Literature

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Abstract

Despite being exceptionally rich in land, resources and developmental indexes, Canada has been struggling since long for establishing its due social and cultural identity. The challenge primarily comes from the engulfing influence of Canada's southern neighbor i.e. The United States of America, in the guise of Pan-Americanism or North-American continentalism. Literary authors and critics have been at the fore-front in feeling and resisting this adverse and overshadowing influence, and have launched from time to time powerful movements to assert their literary selfhood as a nation. Critically evaluating the aesthetic and literary endeavours of enlightened Canadians for this purpose, this paper focuses on the contribution made for achieving that goal during roughly the last half century. It contends that despite having distinct creative and imaginative identities, literary and artistic movements are inherently influenced by broader contexts — social and political phenomena in particular. The contexts that have most substantially influenced the above-mentioned quest for literary selfhood include multiculturalism, Trans-Canadianism, political egalitarianism and literary liberalism.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Trans-Canadianism, Literary selfhood, Canadian English literature

Canada's known history is marked by divergent colonial, continental, hemispherical and global pulls, either occurring successively or existing simultaneously. Despite being the largest country of the two American continents, having the longest border in the world between two countries with the United States, topping the list of the most multicultural and immigrant-friendly nations, and having both English and French as its official languages, it has retained for centuries an unparalleled allegiance to Britain. Notwithstanding the fact that the period of Great Britain as a colonizing empire is over since long and it is no more even a major contender for global power and influence, and that Canada's

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southern neighbor – the United States – has been substituting all earlier influences everywhere in the post-Cold-war uni-polar world, the traces of British colonialism in Canada are irritatingly explicit. Out of the more than fifty members of the commonwealth and certain other former British colonies including the USA itself, nowhere can we explore British reminiscences so vastly and thoroughly as in Canada. Queen Elizabeth II is still the constitutional monarch; all allegiances including oath of citizenship are sworn in her name. Roads, parks, cities, rivers and buildings are named after English celebrities and places: Milton, Shakespeare, Winston Churchill, Keats and Thames etc. Cambridge, London, Stratford and Waterloo, are towns in a span of less than a hundred miles of Ontario. Canada is officially declared to be bilingual, having both English and French as official languages. But in reality French stands nowhere near English in the comprehensive national set-up of modern Canada. Out of the 13 federating units – 10 provinces and 3 territories – French is the official language of Quebec only and the co-official language of New Brunswick; while in the rest of the country English is not only the sole language of official communication, but is practically almost the only language of all forms of communication. Even in Quebec and New Brunswick, English has been getting increasing popularity among the public, fast expanding through immigrants who feel it easier and more convenient to communicate in English than French.

In the field of literature, the ascendancy of English has been more obvious, consistent and almost uncontested throughout the colonial period of Canadian history. Most of the eighteenth and the whole of the nineteenth centuries are marked by traits of British hegemony in the spheres of arts and literature, like all other areas of thought and feeling. Writers, readers and critics in Canada were all impressed and directly influenced by what was conceived and produced in Great Britain. Initially, Canadians accepted this dependence with a sort of passive gratitude as they were not familiar with any notion of cultural or literary autonomy. Consequently, British models and standards were followed by writers as well as critics of English literature, or to a great extent all literature produced in Canada during that period. It was in the last three decades of the 19th century, also referred to as 'the Confederation Era'[1] that Canadians started realizing for the first time that they needed and deserved to have indigenous heritage and identity in all areas, particularly culture and literature. Aware of their inherent assets of vast land and abundant natural resources,

and elated by an unprecedented sense of emerging autonomy, Canadians deemed themselves qualified for a proud national identity. Though desirable in all areas of thought and action, this identity was more readily achievable in the domain of arts and literature.

> *"Never before had Canadians been as ready as these first three decades after Confederation to welcome a native literary movement, and this public responsiveness undoubtedly had something to do with the marked increase in the quantity and quality of literature during the period. For thirty years, Canada's cultural development almost kept pace with her political and economic expansion... periodicals and books came from the presses testifying to the new spirit abroad in the land*."[2]

But as literary spirit was a follow-up of political and economic developments, it couldn't realize the ideal of true indigenousness or cultural independence during this period. Canadian literary genius soon realized that they didn't have much room for a true and comprehensive cultural and literary independence. They didn't have the native roots or solid bases for structuring indigenous models in these areas and had to content themselves by trying to glorify their own land and people on the British canvasses. Canadian writers started contributing enormously to the treasure of English literature from the Commonwealth, but their urgency for Canadianism was gradually lost in the more easily rewarding zeal for military and political pursuits, of course under the proud patronage of the former colonial masters.

This situation, however, changed significantly by the middle of the 20th century. With its rapidly increasing political, military and economic ascendancy, the US was obsessed with a craze for Americanization of almost everything, essentially involving a deviation from the British and European standards. The British, or the Europeans in general, push the button down to switch electricity on, but the Americans push it up for that purpose. The former drive on the left hand of the road, while the latter use the right one. In the calendar of the former date comes before month, while the latter do the reverse. Similarly, the Americans sought and attempted the same sort of innovative experimentation with language and literature. Interestingly, what they did with the English language was quite appealing to the fast growing number of the users of this only medium of global communication. They capitalized on some inherent flaws in the structure and spelling of the English language and came up with easier and more convenient

substitutes. 'Center' instead of 'centre', 'color' instead of 'colour' and many more cases of deleting the unpronounced vowels are just a few examples. The establishment of UN headquarters in New York assigned an unparalleled cosmopolitan status not only to that city and state, but to the American nation at large. Consequently, for the last roughly half a century, American English has been contending for primacy against British English, and has in no way been utterly unsuccessful.

In the field of literature, however, the situation has been, and still is, much more complicated. Here the Americans could neither find nor project visible and discernible flaws in the British model, and, subsequently, readily acceptable excuses for deviation and divergence. Resultantly, they felt compelled to find out deeper courses of thematic divergence which were not only conspicuous enough to signify innovation and indigenousness, but were also substantive and appealing to other communities of readership and authorship in English. Of course, it did take them time to make the difference felt; the attempt, however, has definitely resulted in the establishment of a distinctly 'American' literary tradition, more markedly different from the British or European tradition in subjects rather than in styles. This American Tradition has competed with the British one throughout the twentieth century, seriously challenging the primacy of the latter only in its second half. By the turn of the century, however, the balance of influence had changed gradually but clearly. The British were no longer a notable nation on the emerging scenario of the global village, while the United States was monopolizing all spheres of human thought and activity in the post-Cold-War uni-polar world. Life in Great Britain had become too stagnant, dull and monotonous to stimulate thought and feeling and, consequently, produce genuine themes for art and literature. Hence, during roughly the one and a half decades of the twenty-first century, the American tradition has been enjoying an undisputed ascendancy in almost all forms of literary creation and criticism.

Canada as a nation, however, has never rejoiced in the growing strength of the United States. Despite complying by inevitable obligations to be in harmony with their manipulating neighbor, Canadians owe an unshattered allegiance to the Britishers for safeguarding their land against the continental giant and for granting them independence without much struggle. This realization seems to be the most important reason for Canadians attempting to retain all traits of British culture. In economic, political and military spheres, Canada has to accept the American

terms as a junior partner and coordinate continentally as a matter of compulsion, as Britain has since long ceased to have any impact in these areas. Culturally and literarily, however, the British impressions are still distinct and defined, and Canada has been trying to uphold and protect them against the continental onslaught.

> *"Much of Canada's history can be interpreted as the effort to evade or to reconcile two competing pulls from outside – the pull of the colonial tie with Great Britain, and the pull of the continental tie with the United States. The effects of this struggle have been as apparent in our cultural as in our political history."*[3]

In its 'unreciprocated love affair with Great Britain'[4] Canada has been suffering from a dull colonial dependence even in the long phase of its post-colonial history. The British share in Canadian culture and lifestyle is in no way proportionate to the actual British presence in today's multicultural Canada. It is true that white people are still more than other ethnic groups in number; but all whites are not Britishers and many of them don't appreciate this undue and unnecessary adherence to British norms, standards and values. But, despite being disproportionate and unreciprocated, the British influence in Canada has never been realized publicly as a manipulating agent. Hence, notwithstanding the emerging desire for a distinctive and comprehensive national identity, Canadians have not been willing so far to adopt any course of abruptly terminating the British legacy.

During the second half of the twentieth century, however, the United States had become too strong politically and militarily to let its northern neighbor be open to conflict of interests or even to remain ambivalently neutral. Its association with Canada has been based on an appreciable and largely bilateral economic coordination on one hand and mostly implicit endeavours for the latter's military and political subjugation on the other hand. Unlike the largely accommodative attitude towards Britain, these contrasting impressions of America assumed the form of a serious national debate in Canada by the mid of the 20th century, resulting in the establishment of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (Commonly referred to as Massey Commission) mandated to assess Canadianism v/s foreign influences in the nation's cultural and intellectual life. Submitted on 1st June 1951, the Commission's report validly reflects the feelings of cross-sections of the

Canadian society of that time. After taking elaborate cognizance of the economic patronage of the United States and its positive impact on Canadian market and industry, the report clearly speaks of the cultural impact.

> *"In the area of radio broadcasting and the new medium of television, the report is anti-American. 'In the early days of broadcasting,' it notes, 'Canada was in the danger of cultural annexation to the United States'. So far Canadian broadcasting has 'met with tolerable success in combating commercialization and excessive Americanization of Canadian programmes'. Again and again commercialization and Americanization become synonymous…The Massey Commission found itself trapped, then, between fear and envy of the United States."*[5]

These mixed feelings of fear and envy – a sort of reverential awe – signified Canadian notion of the United States almost throughout the 20th Century. Canadians at large wanted to benefit from the material advancement of the United States in the form of mutual coordination, of course with the former as junior partners. They, on the other hand, earnestly desired not to let these utilitarian bonds lead to a cultural merger. But the continental literary *Tradition*[6] was too possessive and imposing to readily allow such a concession. The American cultural imperialism in the guise of continental tradition became more threatening in the cold-war era following the Second World War and subsequently the USA becoming the epicenter of world politics due to the establishment of UN headquarters in New York. Having co-conquered the world, America was not willing to afford even a resilient cultural neutrality in its neighbourhood, let aside any type of antagonism. They wanted Canada to give her cultural reigns in the hands of her southern neighbor as a binding form of 'southern-man's burden'. This demand for hegemony got enormously strengthened with the US becoming the only monitor of the uni-polar post-cold-war era consequent upon the disintegration of Soviet Union. Liberal Canadian statesmen of the period – notably Pearson and Trudeau – took strong exception of this American mentality and demonstrated stiff resistance on political front.

Explicitly, it seems that the abhorrence of subjugation didn't take the form of any evident resistance on the fronts of Arts and literature. Nevertheless, literary writers and critics in Canada couldn't keep themselves completely aloof of the overall Canadian sentiment of resentment towards American continental arrogance. Successive American writers played instrumental role in arousing this sentiment of resentment because they adopted an attitude of

asserting themselves as divinely assigned and continentally burdened with the responsibility of enlightening – or, more accurately, dragging along – their northern neighbours. The emergence of this approach was first witnessed in the early nineteenth century when 'the United States itself was still suffering the literary pangs of colonial status'.[7] One of the main exponents of this attitude was J. F. Cooper who published a series of five novels called the Leatherstocking quintet, with focus on Canada. Cooper calls Canada "that polar region of Royal sunshine' in contrast to 'this infant country' of America with its 'unfettered liberty of Conscience."[8] Though keenly bent upon differentiating between the two neighbouring countries, Cooper at the same time is not willing to strengthen the impression that the difference and divergence necessarily means inherent segregation. "Still, from his perspective as a post-revolutionary writer, Cooper shows little sense of difference between the two worlds that comprise the continent. There is a single continent, and 'Providence is clearing the way for the advancement of civilization across [it]"[9]

Cooper's tradition was continued in the nineteenth century by writers like Dean Howells and Henry James. The former looks at Canada as a remnant of the savage past as well as of dull submission to colonialism and hence more tranquil than the bustling south of the continent. He depicts it as a sort of innocuous Europe on North American continent more conducive for lovers of Nature or isolationist pleasure-seekers than the pulsating rest of the Continent. His two major novels *Their Wedding Journey* (1872) and *A Chance Acquaintance* (1873) both project the same theme of American pleasure-adventurism in Canada. The latter extends the domain of American arrogance to an inherent manipulative Continentalism and wonders at any doubt about the rationality of having a trans-continental identity. He deems it natural to have this identity defined and guarded by the US, and rejoices in the possibility of Canada's merger into the US in larger interest of both, particularly the former. He contends that though

> "*It is of good profit to us Americans to have near us, and of easy access, an ample something which is not our expansive selves… I suppose no patriotic American can look at all these things, however idly, without reflecting on the ultimate possibility of their becoming absorbed into his own huge state."*[10]

These approaches of American literary elite of that time (a time when intellectual and literary convictions were fast and deeply influencing political directions and decisions) were not just notions

of artistic fancies; they rather validly reflect the 'annexationist sentiment'[11] as well as 'buoyant continentalism'[12] which have been haunting the relationship of the two neighbours till today.

As already pointed out, the twentieth century saw a much stronger and consequently a more aggressive USA. The Soviet Revolution of 1917 and the emerging threat of communist cosmopolitanism provided the United States with an unprecedented opportunity of becoming the hegemonic captain not only of the continent, but of the western half of the world. Hence, evidently the continental perspective broadened not only into a Hemispheric[13] one, but more accurately and simultaneously into an Occidental one. For maintaining this captaincy of the West, however, America did not tend to Occidentalize itself; it rather attempted – and did so quite successfully – to Americanize the Western hemisphere.[14]

Naturally, Canada was the most convenient target and the first recipient of these American maneuvers. As the emerging American literary, aesthetic and cultural traditions initially pretended to be a more enlightened extensions of the British and European forms, Canadian authors and critics overlooked their growing influence during the first half of the twentieth century.

> *"While at the beginning of the twentieth century literary theory and criticism had been busy tackling the question of whether there was a genuinely Canadian literature at all, a new cultural self-awareness arose in the late 1950s. As internationally Canada was poised between the traditional model of Great Britain and the overwhelming cultural, economic and political influence of the United States, cultural unity and self-confidence in its own literary and cultural achievements developed slowly. Unlike the United States, Canada lacked founding myths and master narratives that could be applied to the nation as a whole because of the international dualism of English Canada and Quebec."*[15]

The sixth decade of the twentieth century, however, witnessed a great change in Canada – both in English Canada as well as in Francophonic and Francocultural Quebec. The General Elections of 1962 resulted in a new political beginning wherefrom commenced a new phase of more enlightened, liberal, confident and proud Canada. The public vote therein signified the termination of the decade-long monopoly of totalitarian Conservatives and ushered a new era of Liberal sway over the country's political arena in the form of five consecutive Liberal governments. It was in this glorious era that Canada was led by

two of its most visionary and dynamic prime ministers: Lester B Pearson – 1963-68, and Pierre Trudeau – 1968-79. The former's daring quest for a proud and competitive identity for his country and for freedom from continental imperialism is evident from the national missile program, creation of the Canadian Forces and refusal to contribute troops for the Vietnam war; while the latter's national will can be adjudged from measures like establishment of relations with China, a free and indigenous policy regarding nuclear technology and its proliferation, and an open and liberal immigration policy. Canadians for the first time rejoiced in a sense of proud national selfhood and started registering their due presence in the comity of nations. In the very middle of this comprehensive national renaissance, proud Canadians celebrated the centenary of the Confederation in 1967. These centenary celebrations gave a loud voice to the Canadian sentiments of confidence and optimism and injected a new national zeal across the country. So this is a landmark year from which onwards we will explore the elements of selfhood in Canadian literature. In other words our notion of 'Contemporary' for this research takes its broad start from this year.

Canadian literary genius, awaiting a congenial national spirit since long, responded appropriately and tried to avail this national pride and zeal to the full. We can safely contend that in the quest for Canadian national integrity and selfhood, artists and men of letters were much ahead of political and social leaders. In the period of Canadian history just preceding the period of our focus we can trace ample substantiating instances. "Speaking of the period from 1920 to 1960, Margaret Atwood stated in her introduction to the New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse (1982) that 'this, for me, is the age that the unusual Canadian cautiousness and dislike of hyperbole prevents me from calling golden."[16] The year 1920 commences a new period because of the disastrous conclusion of the First World War (1914-1919) and the auxiliary but highly significant Soviet Revolution (1917); while 1960 roughly denotes the Canadian aloofness – politically and militarily – from American adventurism everywhere, particularly in Vietnam. Hence what prevents Atwood from calling this phase 'Golden' is not just the 'unusual Canadian cautiousness' but probably also an implicit awareness of the fact that artistic and literary aspirations, though vital and soaring in themselves, couldn't flourish due to the lake of a corresponding political will and, consequently, a befitting national spirit.

Hence the period of our focus may be rendered as 'A Golden Age' in which the already ripening Canadian literary genius, consistently haunted by the possibility of merging into the Continental Tradition, found the much needed political and national will and patronage for self-assertion. Hence we find an unprecedented zeal for Canadianism: a contagious sense of urgency among Canadian intellectuals to re-discover and redefine themselves. This was the age which moulded the subjects and styles of great authors and critics like Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Michael Ondaatje and many more, while senior authors and critics like Northrop Frye set new directions and destinations for themselves accordingly. At this critical juncture of the Continental history when American literary authorship felt compelled to restrict themselves to themes of war, patriotism etc. in response to political and neo-imperialistic urgencies of the time, and when the traditional colonialist empires like Britain and France were more concerned about themselves rather than their influence in Canada, Canadian authors and critics enjoyed an unprecedented atmosphere of peace, prosperity and progress. More significantly, they availed it to the optimum for exploring and experiencing new imaginative, artistic and critical approaches which impressed literary perspectives and scenarios not only nationally or continentally, but rather attracted global attention and appreciation. Notwithstanding the continuity of the essence of this national confidence and the subsequent cultural and literary Canadianism from 1960's till date, there have been significant turns and twists in this while, which necessitate as well as facilitate its division into distinct phases. These phases are based on multiple factors: ranging from indigenous thematic innovations to structural and stylistic preferences, or from responding to political and social episodes to adopting or discarding the aesthetic standards of different literary and critical theories. For our current research, however, we can divide this period of approximately the past half century into two major phases: the last three and a half decades of the twentieth century, and the past 14 years of the twenty-first century – whose commencement roughly coincides with the crucially significant turning-point of 9/11 in 2001.

As already stated, a confident and self-conscious Canada entered into the first of these phases in a way of divergence rather than detachment from its past auxiliary role. The smoothness of this divergence was made possible by writers who were already sufficiently established and instrumental to have real impact on the one hand, and were appropriately innovative, imaginative and

enlightened on the other hand to steer the nation towards new cultural and artistic destinations. The most important among these symbols of continuation is undisputedly Northrop Frye – the critic and literary theorist whose *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) was not just a follow-up but rather a molder and even a forerunner of the cultural renaissance of this glorious period. It truly manifested the unbridled Canadian zeal to discover as well as confidently debate self-defined literary standards and aesthetic ideals, independent of either any mark of British or European tutelage or the long-overshadowing Continental tradition. Among creative authors, Robertson Davies (1913-95) and Mordecai Richler (1931-2001) were popular figures who oversaw as well as steered the transition (though the pervasive Canadianism of the latter is marred by an extensive focus on and subjective depiction for the Jewish community). The former authored great novels, mostly in the form of trilogies, having three successive settings. The settings are not merely stages for action: they have rather persons and spirits of their own, and play enormous roles in molding the character's attitudes and sensibilities. Interestingly, the three settings are firstly a Canadian segregated village, then the fast expanding city of Toronto with a focus on its intellectual and academic richness, and finally Europe as a contrasting other. The US is utterly missing as a major arena, while Europe doesn't mean Britain only or even the two major colonizing empires of Britain and France. Switzerland, for instance, enjoys a focal position for its being the birth place of Karl Jung and hence its contribution to the evolution of literary theory and criticism. His masterpiece *Fifth Business* (1970) is widely believed to be a trend setter in many ways, brilliantly amalgamating most of modern techniques of complex literary depiction like symbolism, interior monologue and stream of consciousness. Richler, on the other hand, has successfully experimented innovation by applying his psychoanalytical impressions of the Jewish community of Montreal to all those facing the problem of social and cultural adjustment in alien lands.

Interestingly, multiculturalism, social tensions and adjustments, cultural adaptations and communal harmony are some of the dominant themes of Canadian literature in the given period, while its aesthetic and artistic debates include subjects of realism, romanticism, postcolonialism, structuralism etc. It was markedly different from the American trend of that time where war, science, economy and nationalism v/s globalization were major themes, while stylistics and narrative techniques dominated structural discourses. In Theory and Criticism particularly, Canadian authors

steered global movements and debates in many ways, not only surpassing their southern neighbours, but also becoming more akin with French, German, Swiss and Russian theorists than the British or American ones.

Attracted and encouraged by Canada's 'Liberal' immigration policy during the period in focus, enlightened youngsters with superb literary potentials started moving to Canada in an unprecedented number. Settling quickly and conveniently in the genial and welcoming community of the new Canada, they soon started contributing to its literary treasure. Smaro Kamboureli has listed dozens of outstanding immigrant writers of this period in her monumental work, *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literatures in English*. They include outstanding writers of diverse origins and backgrounds like Michael Ondaatje (Sri Lanka), Rohinton Mistry and Sadhu Binning (India), H. Nigel Thomas and Neil Bissoondath (West Indies) Yasmin Ladha (Tanzania), Hiromi Goto (Japan) and M.J. Vassanji (Kenya). Though all of them have tried to be distinct and innovative both in perception and depiction and have left some lasting impressions on the literary setting of modern Canada, Ondaatje, Mistry and Vassanji are the brightest stars of this galaxy. The first two are masters by virtue of their fictional masterpieces, while Vassanji's grandeur vests primarily in his peculiar versatility: a nuclear scientist (holding doctorate in nuclear physics from MIT) becoming novelist, short-story writer and critic.

The title of Smaro's work – 'Making a Difference' – testifies not only to the fact that multi-culturalist components in general and immigrant voices in particular have not only had great impact on the vast canvas of contemporary Canadian literature, but have also played a major role in making the overall Canadian English literature markedly different from American as well as British literature at large. Similarly, the word 'Literatures' in her subtitle is significant in the sense that it highlights the unparalleled variety within the umbrella notion of 'Canadian literature' or "CanLit" as Canadianists are prone to call it. 'CanLit' is itself a highly significant term as it doesn't just abbreviate the longer form; it rather denotes the self-searching mentality of Canadian authors and critics of that time.

> *"CanLit, then, is not a term to be taken at face value. It resonates with the same ambiguities characterizing literature at large, but also with the complexities – even nervousness – associated with its own history and location. The specific trajectories of CanLit bespeak a continuing anxiety over intent*

> *and purpose, its ends always threatening to dissolve. This accounts for its intense preoccupation with its own formation: its topocentrism, its uneasy relationships with the British, the Commonwealth and the Americans; its uneven responses to the (post)colonial and its so-called minority literatures; its desire to accommodate global cultural contexts; its obsessiveness with identity; and its institutionalization and celebration through cultural, social and trade policies. These diverse preoccupations attest to CanLit's specificity, but also to its nervous state."*[17]

It was during this Golden Age that Canadian writers were better able to look inwardly and have an introvert scrutiny of themselves. This introversion enabled them to find their weaknesses, particularly inherent apprehensions and hallucinations resulting either from the reminiscences of colonialism or from a complex awareness of self-nothingness or emptiness in face of more substantial others – both friends and foes. These untold fears and complexes led to the unusual cautiousness and tendency to be watchful and on guard. Northrope Frye called this the 'Garrison Mentality' a term which was masterly expanded and exploited later by Margaret Atwood. Her keen concern about this 'Garrison Mentality' prompted Atwood to found Canada Writers Trust in 1976 in collaboration with other celebrated fictional and non-fictional writers like Pierre Berton, Margaret Laurence, Graeme Gibson and David Young.

An inevitable repercussion of the above mentioned mentality was a sort of anti-romantic realism, a quality that has so brilliantly corresponded to the dull monotony and lack of adventurism in modern Canadian social history, but was nonetheless not conducive for the national zeal of the golden period. Speaking in the overall context of English literature, Victorianism meant debate, discussion and intense reasoning; modernism signified recourse again to a sort of 'wonder' – though one of intellectual or aesthetic orientation in sharp contrast with the sentimental or impressionistic 'wonder' of the early nineteenth century Romantic movement; while postmodernism reflected a complex course of disappointment with modernist tendencies and innovative experimentation with literary creation in accordance with emerging standards set by contemporary theories and criticism. When we apply this chronological division to post-confederation Canadian literature, we find these currents either disproportionate or overlapping, prompting some contemporary critics to point out un-bridged gaps and vacuums, some even concluding that the middle phase of modernism is utterly missing

in the Canadian perspective and that "Canadian literature evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern".[18] But it is not easy to set a canvas of Victorianism for Canadian literature, or, broadly speaking, cultural, social and even political history of Canada. Canada shifted from colony to confederation in the very middle of Victorian era, and hence ensued a phase of post-colonialism – or, more accurately, a sort of pseudo-post-colonialism – which was longer than anywhere else in the Commonwealth and which merged into post-modernism in the second half of the twentieth century, without corresponding in any significant form to modernist tradition in its first half.

Avoiding any further discussion on the absence or otherwise of truly modernist Canadian literature, we connect back to the golden period with the understanding that it embodied the spirit of postmodernist realism. This convenient assumption, however, shouldn't tempt us to overlook the literature produced in Canada during its highly productive first half of the twentieth century, the period of generic spread of modernism in Europe as well as America. Many seeds that flourished in full literary themes during the period in focus were sown in this age. This age initially introduced the divergent pulls between nationalism and continentalism. If celebrated writers like Hugh Maclennan, in works like *Barometer Rising,* attempted to focus on the ways extraneous factors were affecting life in Canada, other important authors like Morley Callaghan "advocated that young writers bring their realist aims to bear not upon a distinctly Canadian landscape but rather on North American way of life".[19] As such realism in name and form continued from the earlier period of twentieth century into our contemporary one, but with a newness not only of face but of mind and heart as well.

Affiliating art and literature to social and political canvases is itself a significant form of realism. As this is one of the core concerns of modern literary theory and criticism, the prime status of literary theory in contemporary Canada essentially testifies to its inherent realism. Today's literary Canada may be more known to the general public of the world because of Alice Munro the Nobel Laureate, but modern Canada – or as such the contemporary one, was truly introduced to literary circles abroad by virtue of monumental works of great critical geniuses like Frye, whose *Anatomy of Criticism*, though published in 1957, attracted global attention and appreciation during the last quarter of the century. Its 'systemization of literature'[20] and 'codification of criticism' introduced new patterns of literary appreciation worldwide. Hence,

Frye may be considered globally as a critic and theorist who expanded the canvass of literary criticism by raising new questions and introducing new issues for appreciating literary compositions; in Canadian context, however, he can be more appropriately celebrated for introducing new thematic and structural standards for writers rather than readers of literature.

In the above-mentioned capacity, Frye is not a case in isolation. His impact and popularity testify to the fact that unlike the traditional pattern of critic-author relationship in which the latter conceives and creates while the former engages in a responsive debate, in the contemporary Canadian literary scenario critics have the potential as well as the power to play a leading and steering role in many respects. The bold challenges posed by late 20th century Canadian critics to the traditional hegemonic critical standards of both European and American orientation, placed them on a position of innovative authority to undertake thematic and structural experimentation with unprecedented freedom. Interestingly, the most successful models of this experimentation were produced by Eastern immigrant authors or those hailing from minority communities. Ondaatje's *English Patient*, for instance, capitalizes on dissimilar characters, queer settings and themes, and out-of-sequence plot. Published in 1992, this masterpiece attracted instant attention and appreciation, winning Booker Prize and Governor General's Awards the same year, got filmed in 1996 and won nine Academy Awards in 69th Academy Awards. Almost the same is the case of Rohinton Mistry whose time of climax coincides with Ondaatje's: 'When his second book, the novel *Such a Long Journey*, was published in 1991, it won the Governor General's Award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book, and the W.H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award. It was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize and for the Trillium Award. It has been translated into German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Japanese, and has been made into the 1998 film *Such a Long Journey*.' (Wikipedia). Interestingly, however, this literary masterpiece was received negatively in India and was removed by the administration of University of Mombay from syllabus of English literature in 2010 under pressure from Hindu nationalist leader Ball Tackeray and his extremist organization Shiv Sina. The popularity of these works reflected the broadening of Canadian aesthetic vision from regional to global. Ondaatje's setting had just a few Canadian glimpses with a predominantly European setting, while Mistry's works – not only *Such a Long Journey*, but also his much celebrated collection of

short stories and other novels are based exclusively in a specific Indian setting and have nothing to do with Canada.

All Asian Canadian writers, however, didn't follow Mistry who was able to Canadianize his Indian setting by giving universal and inherently human touches to his autobiographical or self-communal impressions and experiences. Many of them sought a more explicit and aggressive representation on the multicultural canvas by taking as their focal subject the pulsating theme of 'the politics of settlement'. They wanted to have a collective literary voice and a literary mark of their own which is able to retain the essential identity of individual contributors along with smoothly converging without absolutely merging into the comprehensive flow of Canadian literary aesthetics. This resulted in what Georgiana Banta calls 'Anthologizing the Immigrant Experience.'[21]

The outpouring of so many anthologies both in prose and poetry during the last quarter of the 21st century reflects the fact that in Canada immigrant writers from Asia and Africa felt a common urge as well as found a common cause for literary coordination. They found themselves as well as their communities faced with harsh realities in the ruthless 'politics of settlement' in Canada. Unable to register any viable impact in the political arena, they found recourse to literature as the most convenient form of recording both their feelings and thoughts, not as mere depiction of imaginary fantasies, but rather as imaginative versions of haunting mundane realities. This attempt not only significantly redefined and broadened the domain of literary aesthetics in Canada, but also assigned an unprecedentedly serious role to literature as primarily a historical and social rather than cultural record. In *A Meeting of Streams* Vassanji comments on the role of these writers:

> *"They complement each other in time and space, and together they span the literary record of a collective experience. As such they are like no other records. A future historian of that culture will have no recourse but to walk through imaginative recourse."*[22]

By the end of the 20th century, the collective voice of these oriental immigrants was not only clearly and loudly audible in the multicultural buzz of modern literary discourse in Canada, but war also gaining sufficient strength and influence to redefine Canadian aesthetic ideals and artistic themes. This redefinition was not in the form of attributing any new identities or contexts; it rather capitalized on the inherent fluidity of Canadianism and all its connotations. This collective voice rejected any attempt to

generalize or stereotype people or values in Canada as bound to fail or make impact any more. In his foreword to the critical anthology *Floating the Borders: New Contexts in Canadian Critics*, Vassanji has contended this case quite clearly:

> *"What is Canadian literature? Indeed, what constitutes a Canadian identity? In the past, when it was simpler to do so, several attempts were made to provide an overarching sensibility to define these concepts. One notable attempt was Margaret Atwood's Survival. I recall how thrilled I was by its bold comprehensiveness, its panache; and yet it did not take much more thought, beyond this initial reaction, to realize that Survival's formulation seemed to apply to others, not to me or to any group of people I knew intimately. I could not envision myself, or any children I brought up, or anyone I knew who had emigrated from the same place as I did, as having a sensibility or psyche described overwhelmingly by the anxiety of survival."*[23]

The difference between Vassanji's impression and appreciation when he read *Survival* as a youngster (the book was published in 1972 and Vassanji was 22 only) and his sense of its inappropriateness in the contemporary Canadian context (the note was written in 1999) is highly significant for our current discussion. It validly reflects the resilient efforts by Asian and African authors and critics to resist absorption into the assumed stream of comprehensive Canadian sensibilities – or aesthetic culture for that matter. The clause 'when it was simpler to do so' in the second sentence alludes to the fact that homogenization of sensibilities or imposing cultural Unitarianism even with the slogan of multiculturalism now goes not only against the taste of recent immigrants or minority communities, but is rather unacceptable to the integrated Canadian aesthetic tradition. There was a time when people like Jim Wong Chu – the critic and poet immigrant from Hong Kong – felt in 1960's and 70's the need to launch a movement in order to get Asian writers recognized in Canada, resulting in the groundbreaking publication of *Inalienable Rice-A Chinese & Japanese Canadian Anthology* in 1979. By the end of the twentieth century, however, immigrant and minority writers were successfully steering literary currents both in creative and critical authorship. Unlike the time Vassanji read Atwood with great reverence, in contemporary Canada voices of people like Vassanji are not only equally powerful and popular, but have rather got primacy in directing the national literary and aesthetic flow.

This fluidity, flexibility and pervasiveness is what signifies and distinguishes Canadian aesthetic tradition from all other aesthetic traditions – continental, hemispheric, Western or global. In this inclusive and accommodative stream, art and literature marvelously coordinate with mundane realities of life like politics, economy, immigration and settlement. All themes, subjects, styles and settings conveniently find room, and not only diverse but even adverse trends like classical, romantic and metaphysical get blended. More importantly, author, critic and reader have established an unprecedented intimacy and are willing to exchange roles and positions of influence. This infinity of Canadian aesthetic tradition has inspired simultaneous national appreciation and subsequent global acclaim for works of literary geniuses of Western or Continental orientation like Alice Munro on the one hand and for members of recently integrated or vulnerable communities like Rohinton Mistry, Shyam Selvadurai (writer of *Funny Boy* 1994), Paul Yee (author of *Ghost Train* 1996) on the other hand.

Unlike the dominant Western zeal for glamourizing the real, Canadian aesthetics essentially rejoice in searching for an imaginative ideal world, queer, thrilling and somewhat gothic, either in the ideal of counterculture or the speculative cyberpunk subgenre of William Gibson. There is a peculiar brand of gothic romanticism in Canadian aesthetics which is markedly different from American science fiction and cyber-criminal themes as well as from mystery-magic gothism of works like *Harry Potter*.

Accepting the influence of immigrants and adopting multiculturalism as a national motto is another important evidence of the predominance of postmodern realism in contemporary Canadian literature. Canadian multiculturalism signifies the triumph of a tolerant and broader nationalism over a comparatively dogmatic Continentalism. If trans-Canadianism was a sort of trans-culturalism, meaning that everything produced in Canada and everyone living in Canada should have a Canadian identity, multi-culturalism adopted a more progressive and more proactive approach by defining the Canadian identity to absorb and reflect all the constituent identities present in Canada rather than imposing a Unitarian identity of its own. This journey from cultural Canadiansm to Canadian multi-culturalism is the most distinctive theme in Contemporary Canadian literature. And, quite naturally, less established communities like immigrants, Mennonites and Aboriginals have rejoiced in availing their natural inclination to project this theme.

> *"We are at a particular historical moment in terms of the study of Canadian literature where Canadian literature as a field is marked, on the one hand, by a recent emergence from institutional precariousness and, on the other hand, by the increasing visibility of minority literatures whose claim to specificity can be seen as threatening the coherence of the field."*[24]

The above quoted statement, however, was given at a time when Canadian literature was not yet confronted with the new form of continental and occidental pulls resulting from the terrorist attack of 9/11/2001 on American soil. Both in preemption and retaliation, the Americans refused to confine the conflict to ideological, military or political domains. They projected it as a clash of civilizations and asked the world to give unconditional support to the United States in its new global venture. This support essentially included favourable projection and propaganda in all forms of media and channels of communication, including art and literature. Consequently, Canadian literature for roughly a decade has been under tremendous pressure not only to accommodate these urgencies but rather to give them primal and pivotal status.

> "*With decolonization, culture replaced civilization as the coded term for the self-assumed superiority of the West. Out of the "culture wars" of the twentieth century, civilization made a comeback, asserted in Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis and reaffirmed, for the Western triumphalist imagination, by 9/11 and its aftermath."*[25]

Canadian writers at large have so far resisted the pressure quite successfully. But as Canada has been increasingly getting involved more directly and extensively in the conflict not only politically but also militarily during the reign of consecutive Conservative governments, it becomes harder to keep literary text independent of political exigencies. What bothers Canadian writers the most is the fact that they find the ideals of the imperialistic campaign of The New World Order to be in clash with their cherished concepts of Canadian multiculturalism and the spirit of TransCanadianism. They feel that a new form of Canadian nationalism and patriotism is imposed on them which negates inclusiveness of Canadian society and creates classes of outsiders within the Canadian nation'[t]he trance of Canadian civility operates usually by comparison with outsiders, as well as with what we might call internal outsiders, who are seen as less civil than we are'.[26] This ideology of white man's inherent superiority naturally though very

implicitly implies that the brown easterners are only to be taught, not to be read or appreciated – a thesis which clashes not only with the inclusive Canadian aesthetics but also with its much trumpeted zero tolerance for any form of racism.

> *"The trance of Canadian civility, with its assumptions of Whiteness, Britishness, masculinity, and anxious belatedness, needs to be challenged, not just once but constantly, for what Malcolm X famously said about racism is true of all forms of discrimination: like Cadillac, there is a new model every year."*[27]

Fortunately for Canadian multiculturalism, the voices of tolerance and inclusion are still more powerful in the arenas of art and literature, claiming proactive instrumental roles for literature in molding national thought, feeling and perception, and staunchly refusing to follow the tracks adopted due to political exigencies or temporary rise of dogmatic exclusionist hawks. As evident from the following quotation, many of today's writers are urging their community to launch an organized movement for performing their due role in safeguarding the tolerant inclusive image of Canada, so conducive for creation of genuine art and literature.

> *"So what part can we as literary scholars and cultural producers play in transforming this Canadian trance into something less insulating, less self-congratulatory, into something more dynamic and inclusive, something more truly TransCanada? I would suggest that we need to shift out of the sedative politics of White civility and into a mode that I call wry civility – that is, a reflexive mode of civility that works towards awareness of the contradictory, dynamic structures of civility itself in our ongoing commitment to building a more inclusive society."*[28]

Notes and References

[1] Title of the second chapter of Pacey's listed work
[2] Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 36
[3] Ibid., 5-6.
[4] David Staines, *Beyond the Provinces: Literary Canada at Century's End* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 7.
[5] Ibid., 33-35.
[6] I am using the word in the sense given to it by T.S. Eliot in his critical masterpiece *Tradition and Individual Talent* (np: 1998)
[7] David Staines, Beyond the Provinces: Literary Canada at Century's End, op.cit., 37.
[8] Ibid., Quoted by Stains of the listed work from The Pioneers – the first of Cooper's Leatherstocking novels.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Henry James, *Quebec.1871,'Portrait of Places* (London: Macmillan, 1883), 362-63.
[11] Terms used by Stains the first one for Henry James while the second one in reference to Walt Whiteman. See David Staines, Beyond the Provinces: Literary Canada at Century's End, op.cit., 43.
[12] T.S. Eliot, *Tradition and Individual Talent* (np: 1998)
[13] The first one (a) with capital 'H' Meaning the North, South and Central America, while the second one (b) meaning 'the western half of the earth'.
[14] Used in the sense of leadership of the Capitalist block and of championing the checking of communist advances in vulnerable lands.
[15] R.M. Nischik, (ed). *History of Literature in Canada: English-Canadian and French-Canadian* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 20 08),291
[16] Ibid., 159.
[17] Smaro Kamboureli (Edi) "Preface", *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* (n.p.: Oxford University Press, 1996), viii.
[18] Colin Hill, *Modern Realism in English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 14.
[19] Ibid., 201.
[20] "Anatomy of Criticism", Wikipedia. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatomy_of_Criticism
[21] R.M. Nischik, (ed). *History of Literature in Canada,* op.cit., 392
[22] Nurjehan Aziz, (ed). *Floating the borders: new contexts in Canadian criticism*. (Tsar Publications, 1999), 65.
[23] Ibid., "Foreword" by Moyez G. Vassanji in Nurjehan.
[24] Lily Cho, "Diasporic Citizenship: Contradictions and Possibilities for Canadian Literature". In Smaro and Miki (Ed). Trans. *Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature* (Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2007), 94

[25] Ibid., Diana Brydon, "Metamorphosis of a Discipline: Rethinking Canadian Literature Within Institutional Contexts", 7.
[26] Ibid., Daniel Coleman, "From Canadian Trance to TransCanada: White Civility to Wry Civility in the Conflict Project", 31
[27] Ibid., 36
[28] Ibid.