

Canadian Multiculturalism, Same as it ever Was?

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Abstract: After the Second World War ended, Canada was no longer mainly composed of its two dominant ethnocultural groups, French and English, but rather constituted by polyethnicity; meaning, Canadian culture was made up of many different ethnic groups. Since then, Canada has actively embraced multiculturalism and on 12 July 1988, the House of Commons passed Bill C-93, 'An Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada'. The Canadian multicultural experience has been much portrayed as a celebration of ethnicity where different cultural groups share their customs and learn from each other. However, it is recently being rumoured that the multiculturalism hype is not all it is cut out to be and segregates communities rather than integrate. According to Canadian authors Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka, "in much of the world and particularly in Europe, there is a widespread perception that multiculturalism has failed" (44). In this paper, I examine some recent common issues of concern, especially, racism and discrimination, through the literary expression of Canadian playwrights and writers such as George F. Walker, Cecil Foster, and Mordecai Richler. These writers are not meant to represent any ethnic group as a whole, but rather try to project a general feeling about the nation in individual ways. I will finally explore the idea of how perhaps multiculturalism in Canada is evolving into another state since migratory patterns and the social circumstances that Canada is facing in the 21st century have changed. Today, the idea of celebrating different ethnicities and customs is no longer as important as celebrating the transcultural or "transnational" aspects of relations between individuals and groups of immigrants.

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The use of Multiculturalism, as a term, within the Canadian perspective, is best stated by Harold Troper in *The Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples*, where he acknowledges that multiculturalism has been used to:

refer to several different, but related, phenomena: the demographic reality of a Canadian population made up of peoples and groups representing a plurality of ethnocultural traditions and racial origins; a social ideal or value that accepts cultural pluralism as a positive and distinctive feature of

Canadian society; and government policy initiatives designed to recognize, support, and—some might argue—manage cultural and racial pluralism at federal, provincial, and municipal levels.¹

In looking at Troper's description of multiculturalism, the first point that is noted is Canada's pluralist society. But how diverse is Canada's society? And how has the present changed from the past? We seem to forget that even previous to European settlement, Canada was already widely settled by various different aboriginal groups with cultural and linguistic differences: Canada's First Nations. Therefore Canada's pluralist society is not a present day phenomena, but rather an intrinsic characteristic to Canadian lifestyle that only keeps expanding with time.

Polyethnicity holds an inherent value in Canadian society and culture since Canada proclaimed its own 'Multiculturalism Policy' in 1971, making Canada the first country in the world to officially implement a legislative framework for multiculturalism. Then, in 1982, The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms included multiculturalism as an important part of the Canadian identity, which meant that the charter specifically recognized multiculturalism as a Canadian value. Finally, in July 1988 the Conservative government passed the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which formalized the government's multiculturalism policy "to recognize all Canadians as full and equal participants in Canadian society" by establishing legislation to protect ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious diversity within Canadian society.ⁱⁱ

Thanks to this policy, today Canadian society is widely known for its multicultural mosaic, consisting of different social communities who co-exist, regardless of differences in ethnic origin or religious belief. Around the world, the Canadian multicultural experience is much portrayed as a celebration of ethnicity where different cultural groups share their customs and learn from each other. However, according to some scholars, this heavenly state has presented "a major shift in the general trends regarding immigrant integration in the western democracies" (Banting and Kymlicka 44). Canadian authors Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka argue that "the present trend stirs away from multiculturalism and towards social cohesion and integration. Whereas the 1970s and 1980s exhibited growing support for, and experimentation with, multiculturalism, the 1990s and 2000s have witnessed a backlash against it, and a retreat from it" (Banting and Kymlicka 44). However, this global backlash and retreat is primarily promoted by European states. The dominant narrative about multiculturalism in Europe blames multiculturalism for a variety of ills. Some of these ills are "the residential ghettoisation and social isolation of immigrants, and the increased stereotyping, and hence prejudice and discrimination, between ethnic groups" (Banting and Kymlicka 45).

The works of the Canadian writers I examine here give us model examples of some issues of concern such as racism and discrimination that are very much present in Canadian society. Canadian playwright George F. Walker critically challenges the concept of multiculturalism in his play *Heaven*, where the interaction between various different ethnic groups has nothing to do with bliss, but rather turns out to be a bitter battle of long-held grudges and prejudices. Walker himself has experienced some of these grudges and prejudices, as he comes from a working class family in east end

Toronto. The play questions the concept of multiculturalism by making it apparently an ideology that could only be attainable in heaven.

In the play there are five characters, each representative of a specific ethnic group, that coincide in a nearby park, on the outskirts of a city. The park which happens to be the stage for this Canadian representative society is the perfect setting because it draws us away from an ethnic neighborhood or enclave, giving us an area where the characters are on neutral ground, therefore avoiding ghettoization and placing the real emphasis of the play on how these multi-cultural characters co-exist, interrelate and influence one another.

Critics argue that multiculturalism promotes ghettoization and balkanization, and encourages segregation and discrimination. It leads its members into a sole awareness of its own kind, highlighting ethnic, religious and cultural differences and in the end, distorting the view of a shared Canadian identity. In the play *Heaven*, Walker shows us some of the typical problems that can arise between segregated cultures or cultures that do not accept intermarriages. In the following fragment of the play, David, a Jewish rabbi, attributes the failure of Jimmy's marriage to the fact that he is not Jewish.

David: I never had anything against you...I was against your marriage that's all.

Jimmy: Against it? Is that what you call it. You were a fucking pain in the ass. We loved each other [my wife and I]. Get it? And all we heard was this crap coming from these two ancient tribes we were trying to escape. Your fucking synagogue was almost vibrating with collective distaste. And my old man died well, basically in a bigoted rage. The Catholic way. The Jewish way. All the ways. Fuck you. Fuck your people. Fuck your ways. My marriage isn't fucked because of her career, or my callous ways, it's from fifteen years of trying to keep all you assholes at arm's length. (Walker 47)

Jimmy, who is also the main character of the play, expresses his frustration with the restricting norms and conditions sometimes shown by ethnic groups, perhaps as a consequence of ethnic enclaves. Jimmy ascribes the failure of his marriage to religious differences and the socially negative reception of intercultural relationships. Banting and Kymlicka declare that the debate over multiculturalism focuses "primarily on the social integration of newcomers into the mainstream of Canadian life" (53) and two of the three traditional indicators they principally rely on to analyse this debate are residential location and intermarriage:

There is (...) little evidence of entrenched racial concentration in poor ghettos. A study tracking residential patterns in Toronto over time finds that black and South Asian migrants follow a traditional assimilation model: initial settlement is in low-income enclaves shared by their own and other visible minority groups, but they disperse in the longer term to higher cost neighbourhoods dominated by white people (...). While rates of intermarriage vary significantly across immigrant minorities, the 2001 census revealed striking proportions of mixed couples among some

minority communities (...). Hybridity is an increasing element of Canadian multiculturalism. (Banting and Kymlicka 53-4)

In his book *Essays on George F. Walker: Playing with Anxiety*, writer Chris Johnson closely studies Walker's work and critically analyses most of his plays. He explores the social and cultural contexts in which Walker writes and acknowledges that a central aspect in his plays is his "compulsion to place his anxiety on the page and on the stage". Excessively uncontrolled anxiety is Walker's approach to denouncing all of society's evils; racism, discrimination, and religious warfare. Walker uses savage satire on religious affiliation of any sort and comments on how Einstein called the dominant world religions the religions of fear. Kymlicka (2010) confirms that, in Canada, the place of religious diversity within multiculturalism has not yet been adequately debated or explored. In fact, he claims that "religion is now the most controversial domain of multiculturalism" (Kymlicka 18).

Jimmy: Speaking of Pakies... the Islamic faith. There are some pretty zany guys hiding out in that religion. The Taliban...How many women can you kill in the name of Allah. What's the record so far. Those thugs should be dragged into the new millennium no matter how much they kick and scream. You know Einstein called the big three, the Christian, Jewish, Islamic faiths. The religions of fear. They all gotta go. Really...We can't get anywhere holding on to them. They're anti-evolutionary...I used to say that to Judy...How can you be part of a faith that doesn't like you...Like my mother. And my sisters. Good Catholics...But their church despises them. On some fundamental level. It does. (Walker 81)

Jimmy is a human rights lawyer, with working class roots, who turns cynic and launches a one-man crusade against the hypocrisies of racism, religion, and the politically correct. Johnson refers to "Walker's working class roots as a central starting point for understanding...[his] point of view," and the use of vulgar and coarse language in his plays to depict hypocrisies. Walker also resorts to rushes of words, chopped chunks of language and exclamations to help get his point across. Sometimes repetition and hyphenation does the trick as well:

Jimmy: I'm a government lawyer, Judy. I'm a fucking dickless wonder.

Judy: Who doesn't listen, but I remember when you did. And to a whole lot of people, me included but immigrants mostly, you were some kind of hero. You helped those people when they couldn't get help anywhere else.

Jimmy: Yeah well...fuck them.

Judy: Fuck them? Why, Jimmy. How did we get to fuck them.

Jimmy: Mostly because of what they bring with them. Their tribal conflicts. So fuck the Vietnamese-hating Cambodians. And the Cambodian-hating Koreans. And the Jamaican-hating Trinidadians. And the Albanian-hating Serbs...hating Croats and whoever else...and yes while we're at it, Jude, fuck the white European male and everyone he hates. And all the Christian-hating Muslims and Muslim-hating Jews and Jew-hating Christians and gay-hating Christians and Muslim-hating Christians. And black and white and yellow and red and so on and so on.

Fuck and double fuck them all. And if it disappoints you that I feel that way well...fuck you too I guess. (Walker 58)

At the end of the play, although Jimmy is left confronting an afterlife that further defies his expectations of life, there is still a sense of reconciliation and an opportunity for multiculturalism. There is hope for a possible understanding of different cultural groups in a community or, as Walker suggests, in one single 'Heaven'.

Surprisingly, Walker is not the only Canadian writer who uses the concept of 'heaven' sarcastically to describe Canadian society in a book title. Cecil Foster, Barbadian-Canadian who immigrated to Canada in 1979, has written a collection of essays entitled *A Place Called Heaven: The Meaning of Being Black in Canada* (1996), which mainly explores why people of Black origin feel alienated from Canada's multicultural policies and how they try to overcome this feeling. According to H. Nigel Thomas, the essays that comprise this book "document and analyse the various ways by which Toronto's Blacks try to keep a step ahead of psychological and cultural death in the urban wilderness of hopelessness and contempt that the dream [of the Promised Land myth] has brought them to" (Thomas 488).

While Thomas asserts that "there is no such body of people called a Canadian Black community nor for that matter any possibility of creating one, Foster, ... argues the reverse... [and claims] that Blacks are linked into a community by the common experience of oppression" (Thomas 486-487). Foster also claims that Canada's racism against Black people is due to the part it played during colonialization. He illustrates this process by referring to the "dehumanizing mythology Euro-Canadians invented to dispossess First Nations."ⁱⁱⁱ However, he also admits that Caribbean and African Blacks are, to a degree, also at fault for the racism practiced against them because when they first arrive to Canada they accept menial jobs and therefore also accept to be treated as menial or as the colonized. Nevertheless, Banting and Kymlicka's research seems to demonstrate exactly the opposite. They state that "critics of multiculturalism sometimes argue that Canada's record of integration [within immigrants] is explained by ... the fact that Canada's immigrants tend to be more highly skilled than immigrants in other countries [and therefore] can more easily move into the labour market" (60).

Foster claims that

No matter how [Blacks] strut their perceived differences, most Canadians see [them] as forming one homogenous group. And how [Blacks] are seen and treated by Canadians at large might, in the end, be the deciding factor. For how [they] are perceived will govern how [they] react to the wider community, determine whether [they] can ever become genuine Canadians, [and] settle what conditions ... [they] live [under] as individuals. In other words, this ... implies how [Blacks] are to survive collectively as a community ... and [their] place ... in Canada. (Foster 21)

While Banting and Kymlicka concede the following:

The fact that Canada has officially defined itself as a multicultural nation means that immigrants are a constituent part of the nation that citizens feel

pride in; multiculturalism serves as a link for native-born citizens from national identity to solidarity with immigrants. Conversely, multiculturalism provides a link by which immigrants come to identify with, and feel pride in, Canada. (Banting and Kymlicka 60)

Mordecai Richler was born in 1931 and raised on St Urbain Street in Montreal. His grandfather immigrated to Canada from a Galician *shtetl* in 1904 to be a peddler on the Main, which later became the Jewish ghetto. Richler's grandparents immigrated to Canada long before English-French bilingualism became an official federal policy. Therefore, Richler was educated in English, not French which is the first official language spoken in Montreal, the second being English. This, along with the fact of being Jewish, caused Richler to experience double racism. However, in a fragment from his story "The Street", he says, "Actually, it was only the WASPS who were truly hated and feared. 'Among them,' I heard it said, 'with those porridge faces, who can tell what they're thinking?' It was, we felt, their country, and given sufficient liquor who knew when they would make trouble?" (Hutcheon and Richmond 36).

Richler expresses a view of multiculturalism as serving a political function. He claims that although "multiculturalism was a deliberate cover-up of earlier mistakes," since Canada was one of the countries that brought to safety the smallest number of Jews during the Nazi regime, only about 5000.^{iv} This has slowly led Canadians to "voluntarily support the myth". In the 1950s Canada opened its immigration policies to allow the entrance of less "preferred" immigrant groups. Soon after, Canada realised that, despite its tireless efforts to be a homogeneously WASP country with an adjacent French region, it could no longer deny its multiethnic population. Subsequently, Canada took the first step in expressing its multicultural identity and later on established its Multiculturalism Act. Once it was decided to actively adopt multiculturalism as a policy, it was performed

with the explicit assumption that cultural diversity is a good thing for the nation and needs to be actively promoted. Migrants are encouraged—and to a certain extent, forced by the logic of discourse—to preserve their cultural heritage and the government provides support and facilities for them to do so; as a result, their place in the new society is sanctioned by their officially recognised ethnic identities. (Lucking 243)

For Richler, the true ideology behind multiculturalism is the government's intent of incorporating ethnic groups into the definition of Canadian identity. However, he does admit that even though its purpose may not have been of pure good intentions, its outcome has certainly demonstrated welfare for Canadians. There was a time in Canada when not being of English or French descent meant being the Other. Hence minority groups had to choose which dominant ethnic culture they would abide by and this, for Richler, depended on what was good for the Jews:

Our parents used to apply a special standard to all men and events. 'Is it good for the Jews?' By this test they interpreted the policies of Mackenzie King and the Stanley Cup play-offs and earthquakes in Japan. To take one example – if the Montreal *Canadiens* won the Stanley Cup it would infuriate the WASPS in Toronto, and as long as the English and French

were going at each other they left us alone: *ergo*, it was good for the Jews if the *Canadiens* won the Stanley Cup. We were convinced that we gained from dissension between Canada's two cultures, the English and the French, and we looked neither to England nor France for guidance. We turned to the United States, The real America. (Hutcheon and Richmond 37-38).

Richler clearly describes how on special occasions minority groups identified themselves by either siding with the English or the French, depending on the circumstances and the events in play. On any other day, they just simply did not fit into the Canadian identity and went back to the status of the Other. Some immigrants decided on not going back to the Other status at all and opted for an in between, free flowing status, a neither here nor there status.

In the article "Neither here nor there: Canadian fiction by the multicultural generation", Carolyn Redl, makes a distinction between writers before the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 and writers after the Act, naming them the writers of the 'multicultural generation'. She explores whether fiction by transcultural writers of this generation differs from fiction written by earlier writers to determine if legislated multiculturalism has promoted increased tolerance of ethnic differences. Redl concludes that "Transcultural fiction written prior to the Multicultural Act depicts characters in the process of becoming Canadians ... [and fiction written since the Act,] depicts characters who are physically present in Canada and physically absent from another country. They are neither here nor there" (28), therefore lacking a sense of belonging to a single place, but rather belonging to more than one place at the same time. They are transnational migrants. Transnational migrants are not expected to have a single identity or national allegiance. In fact, most Canadians are "trapped on the cusp of two [or more] worlds, a fact symbolized by the hyphen [or set of hyphens] in their hyphenated ethnic labels" (23). Redl claims that the Multiculturalism Act originated hyphenated Canadians and now new Canadians are "automatically labeled by their countries of origin, Chinese-Canadians, Italian-Canadians [or Chinese-Italian-Canadians] and so forth, rather than simply Canadians" (23). Whether hyphenated or not, Canadians and multiculturalism are represented by (in Suwanda Sugunasiri's words) an "ocean fed by many a river in which flow the tears and joys of our 70 or so cultural groups, and the merging of those rivers has not left any of the waters unchanged."^v

In conclusion, whether or not the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 has moved beyond simple politics and into general practice in Canadian society is very much debated by many people. Even though Canada has always been, since its origins, a polyethnic country, it has not always been the ideal model of immigrant integration or co-existing cultures. However, examining research and analyzing Canadian fiction can give us a pretty good idea of the place that Canada occupies in its aim for successful integration of immigrants. In this paper I have examined both research articles and literary works by Canadian authors to try to determine whether multiculturalism plays any significant role in Canada's success or failure. Canadian playwrights and writers such as George F. Walker, Cecil Foster, and Mordecai Richler, address crucial issues inherent in a multicultural society, such as racism, cultural confusions and tensions, and project a general feeling about the nation in individual and pluralized ways. There is no doubt that Canadian literature is becoming more globalized and this is precisely why it is

important not to make a rash decision on Multiculturalism, with its various interpretations and wide variety of discourses. Some critics claim that the only remedy is either the abolition of multiculturalism altogether, or perhaps a post-multiculturalism. I agree that perhaps multiculturalism in Canada is evolving into another state. The migratory patterns and circumstances that Canada is facing in the 21st century have obviously changed. The idea of celebrating different ethnicities and customs is no longer as important as celebrating the transnational or “transcultural” aspects of relations between individuals and groups of immigrants. The voices and visions of Canadians have pluralized into a transnational culture creating one single globalized culture. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has expressed that living within multiple cultures is a reality of our times, but truly achieving the concept of a single human race is our purpose and destiny.^{vi}

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ⁱ *The Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples*, 'Multiculturalism'.

ⁱⁱ "The Canadian Multiculturalism Act." *Justice Laws Website*. Canada.gc.ca.

ⁱⁱⁱ Foster fully elaborates on this concept in *Where Race Does Not Matter*.

^{iv} In *None is too many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948*; Irving Abella and Harold Troper, 1991.

^v *Toronto Star, Saturday Magazine*, 7 January 1989, p. M24.

^{vi} I have translated the original quote by Zygmunt Bauman. "Muchas culturas: ésa es la realidad. Una sola humanidad es un destino, un propósito o una tarea de ideales."

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