

### **The Multifaced Janus: Multiculturalism in the Poetry of Cyril Dabydeen**

As most countries, Canada has laws that declare that every individual is equal before and under the law, protected from any discrimination, promising “freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association and [the Constitution of Canada] guarantees those rights and freedoms equally to male and female persons” (qtd. in Linda Hutcheon 369). The law that ensures these rights has been approved by the Canadian Senate and House of Commons as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which is a specific law for “the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada” (369).

The theme of multicultural policies has never been of consensus among the literary community. Many writers, critics, and theorists celebrate the act while others criticize it severely as a tool of oppression of immigrants, in special those belonging to what Himani Bannerji calls “‘visible minorities’, (the non-white people living in Canada)” (3). Interestingly, the works of the Asian-Caribbean writer Cyril Dabydeen have been read both as a celebration and a criticism to the policies of multiculturalism by those who have an optimistic view of the multiculturalism policies and those who question these policies, respectively.

Dabydeen’s writing captures what he has defined in an interview to Frank Birbalsingh as “the mixed feelings and ambivalent attitudes of displaced and marginalized people living in exile” (“Here and There” 106). Dabydeen calls himself Janus-faced, someone who feels the need of looking in different directions. About this

self definition he affirms that “[t]his sense of being Janus-faced will no doubt continue to dictate how I write” (*Imaginary Origins*, 11).

The first of January was dedicated by the Romans to their God of Gates and Doors, Janus. A very old Italian god, Janus has a distinctive artistic appearance in that he is commonly depicted with two faces: one viewing what is behind and the other looking toward what lies ahead. Thus, Janus represents the contemplation of past happenings while looking towards the future. Some sources claim that Janus was characterized in such a peculiar fashion due to the notion that doors and gates look in two directions. Therefore, the god could look both backward and forward at the same time. Very early statues of Janus (around the Second Century B.C.) depict him with four faces.

As Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins states “More to a view of a four-faced Janus, the work of Dabydeen has a curious cardinality bringing a southern past to a northern present and articulating east / west axes—of old / new world, right / left wing—in their various conflicting lines” (Milléo Martin’s translation)<sup>1</sup>. Dabydeen’s multiple faces reflect his concerns about the problems of immigrants. Being himself an immigrant, Dabydeen asserts about the immigrants’ history and role in Canada:

For these latter day newcomers, the frontier took a different meaning: (...) they too were drawers of water and hewers of wood, roughing it as domestic servants, factory and farm-workers, security guards, railway conductors, and more recently as teachers and doctors—all the while expressing a vitality of spirit stemming from the active imagination that is the birthright of all (*A Shapely Fire* 9).

For the recognition and acceptance of the minorities that have built and continue to build the country, Dabydeen assumes the voice of the immigrants in the quest for dignity and identity. Born in South-America, he also expresses his anxiety about Brazil since his early poetry. In the poem “Brazil” he writes: “I have watched Brazil / on the

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<sup>1</sup> Fronteiras Flutuantes: Poesia Canadense Contemporânea. Work in progress.

screen like a wound / that needs dressing” (*Imaginary Origins* 53). His poetry crosses boundaries and makes references to the problematic of immigration and the issue of multiculturalism, which are not only a Canadian concern.

Dabydeen’s poetry portraits of the immigrant’s situation in Canada in relation to the issue of multiculturalism and its policies. In his early poetry, Dabydeen’s used to attack the policies of immigration more openly, as can be observed in the poems “Lady Icarus” and “Señorita”. In his more recent poems, like in “Multiculturalism”, the poet has brought certain elements that allow different readings that can take the poem as a celebration of the multiculturalism policies and also a criticism to them. In his critical prose, he has been discussing the importance of the contribution that immigrant writers have in Canadian literature.

Many writers, theorists, and critics have tried to define a Canadian identity, celebrating the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, while others severely criticize it. The ideal of a multicultural society proposes a reflection on what Linda Hutcheon calls “an innovative model for civic tolerance and the acceptance of diversity that is appropriate for [Canada’s] democratic pluralist society” (15). Hutcheon’s optimistic view of the multiculturalism policies is expressed when she says: “what we now call Canada has always been multicultural, (...) it has always negotiated the space between social tension and cultural richness” (3). In her defence of the Multicultural policies, she tries to convince the reader that in spite of the cultural strikes, the many cultures that have inhabited Canada have always overcome the differences and lived in peace and harmony.

Hutcheon leaves the reader with the impression that the relations among the diverse cultures that have formed the nation since its colonisation have been harmonious. She criticizes previous writers who have written optimistically about

Multiculturalism, by claiming that their “idealistic optimism has to be reconsidered” (2), putting multiculturalism policies under question. In the quest of proving to be herself in favour of the said minorities, she explains why she has avoided the term “ethnic” in the title of the introduction, in an attempt to create an image of freedom of relations of power and value, once that ethnic, from the Greek, means ‘nation’, or ‘people’, what “would suggest that all Canadians are ethnic, including French and British” (2). The use of ‘ethnic’, in this sense, would mean a challenge to the social hierarchy and cultural privilege of English and French over the other cultures, a sense that she does not want even to suggest. Other strand for ‘ethnic’, which comes from usage, associates the term with ‘pagan’, ‘foreign’, and it has to do with the social positioning of the other. But naming the authors of her collection by their ethnicity, she puts their ethnocultural backgrounds in evidence, positioning them already in the social hierarchy. Interestingly, all the cultures are names as ‘something Canadian’ while English and French are always English and French, as if they were the ones beyond what to be Canadian is.

Hutcheon is aware, though, of the problems of multiculturalism. She points out the discordance among writers within the same ethnic group about the success or function of multiculturalism policies and social reality (4). But she tries to soft the situation writing that even this discordance is positive because Canadian writers have “written into our consciousness [...] what it means to be Canadian” (5). And she closes this point by stating that “there are ways of seeing the world, and of writing in and about it, that may be different from our own ways – whatever they might be – and valuable because of that difference” (5). Her option to show the conflicts and then point them out as positive and raisers of rich discussions is the mark of her optimism that continues to appear all over the introduction.

Hutcheon recognises the problematic of the policies of multiculturalism, but she is still optimistic in relation to them and believes that more than negative points, the policies bring positive possibilities. She cites improvements such as the availability of multilingual media and services, the increasing academic interest in Canada's diversity, the foundation of a Canadian Ethnic Studies Association, and the increasing of the publication of journals, articles, and books on the topic. But it seems not to be enough, and not what the ones who criticize the policies of multiculturalism mind as really important. A history of intolerance, segregation, and events that mark the history of a whole immigrant culture cannot be erased by governmental financial compensation for the persecution, or support to festivals and celebrations which end to stereotype and fossilize cultures, reducing them to singing and dancing and exotic food. The ideal of this "innovative model of civic tolerance and [...] acceptance of the diversity" in this "democratic and pluralistic society" seems to end up, as Hutcheon asserts, as policies that "allow room for the aspirations of those who do not happen to be of British or French heritage" (15).

As a response for the suppression of the 'minor cultures', the power of the word has been used against the oppressors. Himani Bannerji ironically writes about the multicultural policy of Canada: "We demanded some genuine reforms, some changes—some among us even demanded the end of racist capitalism—and instead we got 'multiculturalism'" (3).

In this scenario Cyril Dabydeen has developed his poetry moving from the earlier poems' open-chest attack on the multicultural and immigration policies, to a later more sophisticated poetry, full of references that make the poems richer in possibilities for readings. He has written many works about the thematic of the immigrant who tries to live in Canada to achieve a better live, but faces the problems of deportation and

persecution by the agents of the law, as well as the immigrant who has his original identity demolished under the oppression of the dominant's one. In his poems "Lady Icarus" and "Señorita" emerge the poet's consciousness and anxiety about the problems immigrants face and the erasure of the 'minor cultures', the 'minor identities'.

"Lady Icarus" tells the story of Maria, who came from Ecuador "wanting / desperately, to stay / in Canada" (13-15). She is probably an illegal immigrant, what forces her to run from the officers who come to order her deported. She tries to escape using a "rope / of sheets and blankets" (20-21) to descend from the apartment where she is hiding. But the rope breaks and she "plunge[s] / to sudden death" (25-26). The story of the poem is not an exception among the immigrants who try a new life in Canada. They tell stories of fear, misery, desperation, anxiety and prejudice. Sometimes the stories have happy endings, most of times they do not. Maria does not reach what she comes to. She tries hard, "tempting gravity" (4-5), the power that insists in pushing her down from her dreams. She resists, and her reward is death.

Dabydeen explores another form of death in "Señorita", which is a poem that tells the story of a woman from the Dominican Republic who "had attended school / in Canada, [and] is interested in Lope de Vega / and extols the Golden Age of Spain" (3-5). In the conversation between the voice of the poem and the woman, the voice questions the woman about literary figures from the Caribbean and Latin America such as "Pablo Neruda and Nicolas Guillen" (6-7). But she seems only to know the names, but is not interested in Third World culture, the very same culture from where she comes from. As the voice insists about poets of the Dominican Republic, she limits to answer: "Ah, do you / not see I have been educated / in Canada?" (18-19), and smile. In this case, a more tragic kind of death is presented: the death of culture, of identity, which is lost forever, replaced by the dominant's ideologies.

The link between these two poems may be summarized in the rope that breaks in the first poem. But it is a rope that breaks to unite the poems in a paradoxical relation. It can be suggested that the word 'rope' may represent another word, 'hope', which is written similarly to rope. If 'rope' is pronounced by someone with Brazilian-Portuguese accent, the 'r' turns into an "h", and the word 'hope' emerges. Now it is not the rope that brakes and sends Maria to death, but it is a feeling of hopeless that dooms not only Maria to death, but also the her identity to be forgotten. In this sense, the anxiety of the poet facing the immigrants' reality of suffering and prejudice is thrown in the readers' face in order to show that the policies of immigration must be treated with much more attention and care because they deal with people's lives and their cultures and identities.

The political tone of the poems comes with the irony that is suggested in the last lines of "Lady Icarus": "we stand on guard for thee / oh so glorious and free / O Canada O Canada" (27-29). How can someone stand for a country whose govern puts immigration legitimacy before life, dignity, origin, identity? We have experienced the same indignation facing brutal events as the murder of the little João Hélio, in Rio de Janeiro. Events like this put the hopeless face of the human behaviour in evidence, and how unimportant human life is to certain people. João Hélio is just a random victim of a society that perpetuates a system of discrimination and unfairness where the ones who commit crimes are not punished, as well as the real guilty ones, those who rule the nation, and do not make any great effort to make the lack between classes less dramatic, and keep holding the power firmly in their hands, no matter the price.

The oppression of the 'minor cultures' is not less tragic and brutal. The voice's indignation before such silent violence is so intense that it can barely be refrained. The voice externs his anger in a contained cry: "Five million people there – / surely there must be poets!" (21-22). It is here where Dabydeen and Bannerji share their anxiety, in

the territory of politics and power struggle. About this relation of power and disempowerment, Bannerji claims that the communities and their leaders were “created by and through the state” (3). In this sense, the state controls people’s lives with its laws and regulations, and the policies of multiculturalism are one more of the state’s tools to control and keep the minorities in their delimited spaces. Bannerji further asserts that “[a]s the state came deeper into our lives—extending its political, economic and moral regulation, its police violence and surveillance—we simultaneously officialized ourselves. It is as though we asked for bread and were given stones, and could not tell the difference between the two” (7). The control of the state comes so strongly and in such a way that it alienates the individual at the point of making him/her unaware of the implications of the state’s actions.

Dabydeen’s poem “Multiculturalism” is maybe the most read in Canada, including the National Library of Canada, in Ottawa, in events that celebrate multiculturalism, despite its negative references that remind the title of Himani Bannerji’s article “The Dark Side of the Nation.” The references allude to ‘dark’ events of Canadian history (like “CPR... heaving with a head tax”) to the immigration of Chinese people to work in the Canadian Pacific Railway in a regime very close to slavery, and to a tax that was imposed to them when the railway was finished. There are also references to social struggle for equal rights and violent repression of these social movements, as in “The heart’s call for employment equity / The rhapsody of police shootings in Toronto.”

The poem also makes reference to images of unity, like “As we are still Europe, Asia, / Africa; and the Aborigine in me / suggests love above all else” refers to the native peoples, as well as to the nations where immigrants and colonizers came from, and to the possibility of harmonious relations among these cultures. The same



sense of unity and of an ideal society can be read in “Or galaxies of province after province, / A distinct society too”. The inclusion of the ‘visible minorities’ in the society is seen in the line “a turbaned RCMP” (Royal Canadian Mounted Police). Also, the reference to the worldwide known pacifist Nelson Mandela visiting Ottawa reinforces the idea of acceptance of diverse cultures.

At the end of the poem, there are expressions that can be interpreted in more than one way. The expression “YOU LOVE ME” (in upper case letters) brings the sense of a country that accepts and love immigrants, but can also express irony as regards the oppression that the immigrants face. The expression “Welcome” seems to be an invitation for immigrants, but the juxtaposition with the ‘dark’ history of immigrants in Canada gives the word a suspicious tone. The final reference to the Canadian hymn—“OH, CANADA!”—closes the poem with further irony, allowing different readings. The last line of the poem suggests a celebration of the country through its hymn, but it also has a tone of irony due to the references about the problematic of immigration and prejudice against minor cultures.

As Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes, “the past is not just the ethnic costume that one wears on ceremonial occasions but a visible badge that cannot be got rid of easily” (130). It is in this sense that Dabydeen’s work confronts the reader with the facts of the past that have determined the present. His works have a certain tone of optimism, and at the same time keep remembering historical facts which show that society has been built with certain acts that people should not be proud of. As Dabydeen’s himself states, his work is an “engagement with memory (...), coupled with reflections on a changing self as it responds to Caribbean as well as Canadian temperaments and landscapes as they are internalized” (*Imaginary Origins* 11). The development of his poetry does not

overshadow his engagement with social struggle, but highlights it and also the poet's concern about multiculturalism.

“Lady Icarus” and “Señorita” were written and first published before the enactment of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, but they suggest strong criticism to the policies of immigration and the problems immigrants face. According to Arun Prabha Mukherjee, “Dabydeen’s poetry can be called a poetry of subversion” (128). Dabydeen presents the contradictions between the colonizer’s version of history and the everyday life of the immigrants. His earlier poems present poetry of resistance to the ‘two solitudes’ oppression, denouncing persecution, prejudice and the silent murder of ‘minor cultures’ and identity. His more recent works continue to show events and behaviours that continue to perpetuate a culture of oppression, disempowerment and prejudice, but he makes it subverting the dominant’s system, culture and language, using them against the dominant. Cyril Dabydeen, with his ‘poetry of subversion’, continues to bring to discussion what multiculturalism can mean and to whom this meaning makes sense.

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