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**“THE MORE, THE MERRIER”,
OR MULTICULTURAL ECONOMIES IN
M. G. VASSANJI’S *NO NEW LAND***

Preliminaries

If, as George Elliott Clarke contends, Canada’s identity resides in its whiteness to the extent that it merits a proverbial formulation (“White Like Canada”) which renders Canada a paragon and paradigm of being white, those whose colour (real or imagined) departs from the snowy hues of Canada’s image must certainly be seen as tainting the pristine landscape of national identity. Clarke’s bitter judgment of the cultural and ethnic politics of a country that enjoys a widespread reputation as an exemplar of multicultural sensibility and policy, often “celebrated as a unique ‘success’ by Canadians themselves and touted, across the world, as Canada’s ideological gift to less enlightened liberal democracies” (Chariandy 2), may seem surprising or even objectionable. Yet as critics and writers demonstrate, Canada’s multiculturalism, and the identity Canada constructs for itself through its seeming embrace of cultural diversity, is embarrassingly enmeshed in racism and racialised rhetoric. In her *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* Eva Mackey shows how, despite its ostensible commitment to the combating of racism and its explicit engagement with “race relations”, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988 remains an instrument in the service of nation-building that reduces ethnic minorities to a symbolic significance stripped of political empowerment (80–82). This symbolic significance often comes to be couched in terms of an embellishing colour (or an appetizing flavour) that materializes alongside/against whiteness, “unmarked as culturally specific” and hence invisible despite being “normative and ubiquitous” (Mackey 107).

This hegemony of whiteness is maintained, as Erin Manning shows in her book *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home and Identity in Canada*, through a sort of double move of expulsion and incorporation, which simultaneously removes the non-white from the realm of its imagined

community (and its carefully crafted genealogy) in order to include them again yet on its own terms, redefined and packaged as a gesture of multicultural inclusion. Canada, Manning argues, finds itself compelled to bleach its murky past, the whitened recovery of which is necessary for a particular version of history to secure “the elusive (white) national identity” (68). What Manning points to is multiculturalism’s complicity in the erasure of blackness from Canada’s history, the production of its genealogy as the “white narrative of the ‘founding fathers’” and, consequently, the erection of its “bicultural” foundations. Discussing the “story of slavery” in the “history of blackness in Canada,” Manning argues that “The obfuscation of slavery in Canada alerts us to the ways in which blackness in Canada as a historical presence is a threatening invasion into the national imagination. The national imagination would prefer to recognize blackness as a liberal instance of multicultural diversity rather than integrate blackness within the nation’s problematic foundation(s)” (68). What is more, to cast Canada’s blacks as always “part of recent migration” rather than part of a remote, however problematic, past also allows Canada to self-create itself as an infinitely hospitable host whose never waning salutations secure its identity as a “nation of immigrants” (61). It is an identity that conceals, as much as it relies on, the creation of a rhetoric of belonging premised on expropriation. As Manning argues, “This version of Canadian history emphasizes the narrative of Canada as a generous land open to immigrants (where the other is welcome on *our* soil)” (68).

The focus on immigrants is also, as Himani Bannerji argues, a way of dispelling the unpleasant and sorry history of the dispossession of the First Nations peoples, dispossession that is by no means over or rectified. She points to the ways in which the discourse of official multiculturalism conveniently erases, or “cover[s] over the seething ‘Indian question,’ which continually erupts in the form of land claims and demands for self-determination and self-government” (“Geography” 292). Bannerji thus shows how multiculturalism, with its emphasis on immigrants, shares in relegating the indigenous peoples to a safely distant past inscribing them into the category of old Canadians to be juxtaposed against the new ones and maintaining its “colonial relations between Canada and its indigenous peoples,” and its own identity as a “colonial state” (“Geography” 293).¹ Talking about the non-white

¹ As Bannerji further argues, “According to some scholars, Canada’s dual state formation (a liberal democracy with a colonial heart) is matched by a dual economy. Theories of world system and dependency, usually applied to ex-colonized countries, are considered applicable to Canada. It is claimed that there is a metropole-peripheral economy within, while the country as a whole displays features of advanced industrial capitalism along with its dependency on foreign, especially U.S., capital. This convoluted state of affairs has given rise to peculiar social formations, whereby colonized nations continue to exist within the ‘Canadian’ nation state. Acknowledged as the First Nations, Native peoples are like Palestinians, who form a nation without a state and are subject to continual repression” (“Geography” 293).

populations of Canada, Bannerji points to their exterior character, their outside status always domesticated with a host of classificatory names: “... we are not part of its self-definition as ‘Canada’ because we are not ‘Canadians.’ We are pasted over with labels that give us identities that are extraneous to us. [...] They are familiar, naturalized names: visible minorities, immigrants, newcomers, refugees, aliens, illegals, people of colour, multicultural communities, and so on” (“Geography” 290–291). What is significant to note is that these labels reveal the state’s motivation behind their invention and use, a motivation that is governed by a desire to order and control what the state apparently perceives as in need of management. “This situation,” writes Bannerji in relation to the allocation of places through names within the polity, “reveals not only a raced or ethnicized state, but also – more importantly – a crisis in citizenship and a continual attempt to manage this crisis. It tells us that, in the polity of Canadian liberal democracy, there is always already a crisis of gender, race, and class” (“Geography” 291). Thus, multiculturalism, an offshoot of this democracy, is both a response to this crisis and a way of managing it. As Bannerji puts it, “It supplies an administrative device for managing social contradictions and conflicts” (“Geography” 291).

Canada’s precarious existence rests on its perennial deflection of its troublesome origins, its birth as a nation, which Bannerji calls a “creation of violent and illegal settlers” (“Geography” 292). To successfully deflect them, Canada needs a cover-up, a discourse able to transcend the unpleasant beginnings and their aftermath. This is where multiculturalism comes in handy. With the “ideological tool of multiculturalism” (“Geography” 292), Canada foregrounds the figure of the “immigrant” thus dispelling the nagging demands of the First Nations peoples. With the “immigrants” brought “nominally and opportunistically” within the “national imaginary,” the state assumes impartiality, receding to the background of the national scene where it can repose to negotiate its multiculturalism. In Bannerji’s words, “the state claims to rise above all partisan interests and functions as an arbitrator between different cultural groups” (“Geography” 292), dispelling from view its continual colonization of the First Nations people.

And yet, these ruses of power that Canadian multiculturalism deploys should not come as a surprise. In David Theo Goldberg’s cogent formulation, “liberalism’s primary response to heterogeneity within social formations is in terms of tolerating the different, thus presupposing the moral and political primacy of the homogeneous” (26). Within such a frame, Goldberg argues, “a fixed ‘we’ or ‘us’ at an unshifting center” (16) is presumed with “particular identities (notably race and gender) [...] deemed axiologically irrelevant” (16). In other words, celebrations of difference sanctioned by liberal forms of multiculturalism may simply work to conserve and buttress the privileges and hegemony of the centre. The “primacy of the homogeneous” is allowed (and expected) to thrive under liberal multiculturalism because, as Valerie

Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and Peter McLaren remind us, it is often forgotten (or purposefully obscured) that difference does not abide in a void but arises out of conflict and within relations. They thus insist that “difference needs to be understood as the product of social contradictions and in relation to political and economic organization.” (153). Along similar lines, Robert Stam and Ella Shohat point to liberal multiculturalism’s managerial drive whereby a fixed “we” allows for and carefully governs the distribution of difference (determining in what ways it may be disseminated). Thus, liberal multiculturalism “easily degenerates into a state or corporate-managed United-Colors-of-Benetton pluralism whereby established power promotes ethnic ‘flavors of the month’ for commercial or ideological purposes” (299).

What all these critics emphasise is that liberal multiculturalism’s evocations of difference may have nothing inherently radical or transformative about them and that they may work perfectly in accord with power’s domineering ways and self-concealing practices. Thus, for instance, Henry Giroux argues that liberal multiculturalism is “a pluralism devoid of historical contextualization and the specificities of relations of power [...]” (Giroux 336). Peter McLaren denounces it as “a politics of pluralism which largely ignores the workings of power and privilege” (“White Terror” 54). Teresa Ebert (cited by McLaren), points out how the liberal perspective self-conserves itself; she claims it “involves a very insidious exclusion as far as any structural politics of change is concerned: it excludes and occludes global or structural relations of power as ‘ideological’ and ‘totalizing’” (“White Terror” 54). Stam and Shohat, in turn, answering the neoconservative charge that multiculturalism Balkanizes the nation in its glorification of difference, emphasise the fact “That the inequitable distribution of power *itself* generates violence and divisiveness goes unacknowledged” (299).

One of the sites where “power and privilege” are mutually reinforcing and inextricably linked is the realm of economy. As Goldberg rightly points out, liberal forms of multiculturalism may not only work to ossify (and thus render unbridgeable) cultural differences (thus basically precluding any meaningful communication across the divide), but they also serve to conceal material differences that end up being suppressed under the spectacle of “cultural distinction” and thus reduced to the merely visual meant to satisfy the multiculturalist’s eye/I:

[...] multiculturalisms assume the mantles of institutional logic, self-promotion, and ideological practice in one of two ways. They may be – they all too often are – glibly celebrated in the name of standard pluralism that not only leaves groups constituted as givens but entrenches the boundaries fixing group demarcations as unalterable. Alternatively, if this indeed be an alternative, multiculturalism and cultural diversity are assumed as mantric administrative instruments that serve to contain and restrain

resistance and transformation as they displace any appeal to economic difference by paying lip service to the celebration of cultural distinction. (7–8)

Hence, as Henry A. Giroux, among others, argues, multiculturalism needs to go beyond “acknowledging differences” (328). After all, there may be nothing inherently radical (or transformative) about such acknowledgment. On the contrary, acknowledgments of difference have frequently served conservative (and reactionary) purposes. “Multiculturalism’s implied focus on culture,” in Sneja Gunew’s words (“Postcolonialism” 25), may divert our attention from issues and problems that cannot be solved (not even tackled) by celebratory recourse to cultural diversity. As McLaren puts it: “the celebration of difference serves as a *trompe l’oeil* that mystifies the connection between capitalist social relations and representations of ‘Otherness’” (“Wayward” 415). Because there is this tangible connection between the economic allocation of positions (within/under capitalism) and the shapes the Other is allowed (and made) to assume, McLaren and Scatamburlo-D’Annibale advocate a careful investigation of their mutual imbrications: “Because systems of difference almost always involve relations of domination and oppression, we must concern ourselves with the economies of relations of difference that exist in specific contexts” (153).

This paper seeks to tease out the ways in which multiculturalism feeds off and into economy, how it partakes of economic sentiments and dictates underlying consumer capitalism to the extent where passage into Canadian multiculturalism equals an assumption (and continual practice) of consumer habits, where admission is premised on (at times literalised) acts of consumption, where belonging remains a consumable identity. M. G. Vassanji in *No New Land* obviously reiterates the problems of Canadian multiculturalism so brilliantly analysed by Himani Bannerji, Eva Mackey, Erin Manning, amongst others. Yet, while these significant and highly engaging critical assessments of Canadian multiculturalism stress, in their different ways, the immigrant’s/Other’s externality and secondariness as defining of their status in Canada, Vassanji’s novel, by applying a more economically sensitive lens, yields a slightly different, supplementary narrative of the multicultural space. Redirecting our attention towards multiculturalism’s economic underpinnings, the logic of which posits immigrants as highly desirable rather than objectionable, the novel shows how, by casting the other into the role of underfed consumers, capitalism makes a deft, resourceful and profitable use of the immigrant excess. Extending its relation to the other beyond the “commodification of otherness” (hooks 21) in order to accommodate the other as an avid consumer of commodities, the common economic order emerges as a frame of inclusion. Within it, otherness sells well yet it buys even better.

Secondhand

The narrative of *No New Land* focuses on the Lalani family and the Indian Shamsi community, “an Indian Muslim sect, [...] somewhat unorthodox, hence insecure” (*No New Land* 13), to which they belong.² Forced to move by the growing anti-Asian sentiments in Tanzania which, in the aftermath of Uganda’s Idi Amin’s ethnic jingoism and frenzy, proceeds to nationalize Indian property, the Lalanis arrive in Toronto, greeted by Zera Lalani’s (the mother’s) sister, Roshan, who introduces the Lalanis to the life in Canada. The initial enthrallment with Canada as a land of “wealth” and “stability,” (*No New Land* 26) is soon replaced with more ambivalent feelings as Nurdin (the father and the novel’s protagonist) struggles to find a job, Fatima and Hanif (the children) gravitate towards the ambiguous pleasures of assimilation, and Zera finds herself compelled to manage not only her household but also her sister’s troubled marriage to a violent man. Meanwhile, all have to face and cope with minor and major forms of discrimination and racism, the culmination of which is, at least for Nurdin, an unfounded accusation by a white girl of attempted rape. The discontents of a diasporic life, marred as it is by frustrated hopes and painful experiences, are alleviated by the reassuring milieu of the Sixty-nine Rosecliffe Park which becomes a miniature Dar es Salaam and indeed a zone of comfort for the East African immigrants.³ It is here that the Lalanis befriend two young men (both from Dar es Salaam): Jamal, an upstart, smug lawyer in the making and an exile from Tanzania, and Nanji, Jamal’s former classmate, “shy” and “simple” (*No New Land* 78), teaching part-time at a local college. While both Jamal and Nanji animate the slightly stultifying life of the Lalanis, it is Nanji in particular, with his “anxious nature” and “all the moral weight of the world on his shoulders, reading the existentialists and despairing” (*No New Land* 75), whom the Lalanis come to “love the most for his simplicity and his humility and that helpless, lost look he bore” (79).

² The Shamsi are a fictional community “inspired,” as Vassanji says in an interview, “by the Ismailis” though “they are not identical with them. I guess they would be called the Khoja Ismailis.” Vassanji’s reason for fictionalizing this community was “to allow for a certain fictional freedom. If I were to write about a real religious group, then my dates would have to be exactly right. I don’t care for that degree of detail; it is not part of my fiction. The Shamsi could have been any other group from India but I just happened to pick this one” (Vassanji in Rhodes 116–117).

³ While the novel’s focus is undoubtedly on South Asian immigrants (with the category of “South Asian” being in itself far from homogenous, both culturally and economically) from Tanzania, Sixty-Nine Rosecliffe Park is host to a variety of cultures and a diversity of people: “The cookers at Sixty-nine are on, full blast. Saucepans are bubbling, chappatis nest warmly under cloth covers, rice lies dormant and waiting. Whatever one thinks of the smells, it must be conceded that the inhabitants of Sixty-nine eat well. Chappatis and rice, vegetable, potato, and meet curries cooked the Goan, Madras, Hyderabad, Gujarati, and Punjabi ways, channa the Caribbean way, fufu the West African way” (65). Vassanji, who was born in Kenya, raised in Tanzania, and who is of South Asian origin, has been mainly preoccupied in his writing with the South Asians of East Africa (within East Africa itself but also outside it). Thus, in the context of the novel, “East African immigrants” refers to South Asian East Africans.

The Lalanis’ arrival in Canada is in itself a witty reenactment of the narrative of the wintry initiation into the nation, one of Canada’s founding myths. Echoing the “environmental racism” of Canada’s early immigration policies (Mackey 46),⁴ Vassanji has the Lalanis pass through a climatic initiating trial, as they are greeted by, surprise, surprise, a hostile cold of a merciless winter they never encountered before:

Snow had fallen, a blistering wind blew squalls on the road and, as they stepped outside the airport building, it made sails of their ill-fitting secondhand clothes, which had seen better days on the backs of colonial bwanas and memsahibs on chilly African evenings. “So this is snow,” Zera remarked. It had been cleared into unimpressive mounds and at their feet was a fine powder blown about by reckless gusts. Toes freezing, faces partly paralyzed, eyes tearing, they stood outside, shoulders hunched. The two children were moaning and shivering, weeping, hiding behind adult coats, creating fresh pockets and exposing fresher areas of anatomy for the wind to snatch at. (35)

This first experience of the overwhelming winter could be seen as signalling the Lalanis’ inadequacy to Canada’s climatic demands; or as emphasizing their externality to the Canadian nation, a condition paradigmatic, as Erin Manning argues (*Ephemeral Territories*, chapter 3), to certain, most often racialized, immigrants in Canada. However, what it does above all is to set the stage for the Lalanis’ (and other immigrants’) subsequent accommodation within Canada. Obviously enough, Vassanji is far from endorsing the wintry rhetoric of the national that elevated survival into an initiating rite/right of passage. What he does instead is to show how winter is put to a different use in its demand not for the sturdy white bodies of northerners able to populate a land of the hostile clime, but for bodies in dis-dress, clad in scarcity and, therefore, impelled to buy. The wintry welcome Canada extends, then, is not to forecast the supposedly incorrigible biological inadequacy but a perfectly corrigible cultural deficit. What comes to correct it is the leveling pleasure and experience of consumption which, as the passage above intimates, is enough to make Canada’s winters survivable. Put differently, the officially multicultural Canada has to re-write the cultural codes of its national identity. Hence, winter no longer leads to “environmental racism” (selecting the fittest, rejecting the weakest), but offers an all-embracing gesture of welcome, that metes out its cold indiscriminately and spares no one. In its quiet extension of the imperative to buy (and buy the Lalanis will), it proposes, or so it seems,

⁴ As Eva Mackey argues, Canada’s immigration policy had skillfully deployed climactic adversity to its own racialised ends. In her words, “This policy drew upon an environmental racism similar to the Canada First Movement, excluding Blacks and Asians on the grounds that they were unsuited to the cold climate of Canada. The notion of ‘climactic unsuitability’ was enshrined in immigration law as a reason for barring non-whites until 1953” (46).

inclusion in place of exclusion, revealing consumption as a common denominator, an inclusive practice uniting all cultural difference in its common goal of taming the winter's cold. Equalizing by nature, winter re-emerges as a rehashed symbol of the nation that brings everyone together not simply in the shared experience of evenly disseminated cold, but in the unavoidable necessity of fending against it. After all, the difference Vassanji has the Lalanis display upon their arrival, is represented as a matter of ill-chosen clothes, which, once replaced with the more appropriate ones, will bring them into the national fold of the same.

Thus readied for leveling consumption, the Lalanis enter Canada's territory. Yet to allow these egalitarian sentiments to work, the Lalanis must uphold other, perhaps less obvious, differences. By implicitly juxtaposing Third-World frugality with First-World consumerism, Vassanji does more than merely point at economic disparities of the globalized world.⁵ Represented as not only inadequately dressed but also impoverished, the Third-Worlders emerge as ideal, *a priori* as it were, consumers of the West's abundance they have, symbolically/historically, helped to create. Thus rendered as always already in

⁵ It needs to be stressed here that despite the evocation of the "Third World" category, Vassanji is not insensitive to the many differences that exist within the place designated by this name. There are passages in the novel that demonstrate explicitly that Vassanji does not treat the Third World as a homogeneous entity (see also his novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*), nor does he treat so the South Asians in/from East Africa, who have generally been a privileged group within the East African landscape, a landscape highly diverse culturally and racially (for a discussion of the complexity of East Africa, and the position of Indians on its map, see, for instance May Joseph, Felicity Hand, Thomas Metcalf, Mariam Pirbhai). The South Asians' privileged status (fostered and maintained by the colonial powers), may, and often will, be replicated in places like Canada, granting them some material power that black African immigrants might not have (though the Lalanis come with relatively little money; what helps them is that they can rely on their family). Yet it seems to me that Vassanji is interested here not so much in the portrayal of class/social differences as they have been shaped and existed in East African countries such as Tanzania (and it also has to be remembered that these class differences would not always go along racial lines), or the way they may be replicated in the global North (in Canada or elsewhere) but rather in looking at his Tanzanian characters from the perspective of mainstream discourse on multiculturalism (hence the often ironic stance that the narrator assumes), a discourse that tends to homogenize the Third World (also often by racializing it). This, for example, is what Vassanji says in the interview with Rhodes: "Anyone who has carried a Third-World passport and tried to get into London in the '60s or the United States in the '70s and '80s knows what it means to belong and not to belong, what it means to be part of a ruling class" (111). To look at the diversity of people coming from a variety of locations within the Third World with a homogenizing gaze of the dominant discourse, does not need to mean being unaware of or insensitive to the many differences that are certainly there. One could describe Vassanji's narrative strategy with the help of Simon Gikandi who asks, in his *Maps of Englishness*, "what it means [...] to gaze at Englishness gazing at you [...]?" (19). Vassanji seems to do a similar thing by looking at Canadianness looking at you to see what this look sees. This strategy of looking at the Other through the eyes of the same is most conspicuous in the words of the "elderly black man" from the novel (see section "The more, the merrier" below) who sums up all the party participants dashing for the food they think they can eat for free with the following words: "The Third World, man" (54).

need of Canada’s goods (first-hand, winter-proof clothes), the Lalanis are also meant to demonstrate that *within* Canada the difference between the First and the Third worlds can be effectively overcome through unanimous acts of consumption attainable to all. In other words, Canada emerges here as a truly equitable space where the hierarchies of East Africa’s colonial relations are undone as necessity turns into choice in the act of consuming even-handedly available commodities. While, as Goldberg argues, “multiculturalism has become a profitable means of commodification (from «the united colors of Benetton» to ‘multicultural crayons’ for kids) [...]” (8), the narrative representation of the Lalanis extends beyond the artful pecuniary use of depoliticized images of cultural diversity. Here, the profits lie elsewhere. Depicted as ready for (inadequately clothed) and in need of (poorly clothed) new garments, the Lalanis will henceforth actively participate in the capitalization of their own difference replacing the thrifty recycling of their Tanzanian reality with affordable (and, unavoidable) consumption of/in the Canadian paradise. They will thus reveal multiculturalism’s complicity with commodity culture not only by emerging as indispensable in the generation of (national) profit but also by serving to demonstrate that the difference that might be seen as setting them apart is (merely) economic. The multicultural promise the Lalanis exhibit upon their arrival in Toronto is based on an illusion that this is the only thing that makes them different from Canada and that it can be levelled out, with other, less palatable differences dispelled from view.

You will want more

The day after their arrival brings an overture to the exhilarating pleasures of a new-found consumerism:

The next morning, in Roshan and Abdul’s Don Mills apartment, the sun shining brightly, deceptively, through the balcony’s sliding doors, an abundant breakfast on the table – with toast and eggs and juice and jam and parathas – Zera practically danced through the two kitchen doorways, going out this one and in the other, saying wow, this is big, gorgeous, a refrigerator, a television, new sofas, dinette.

“But you have everything,” she said to her sister, still dancing in the doorways.

“Aré, you should see how the others live ... carpet wall-to-wall, not an inch uncovered.” She emphasized, eyes flashing: “Not one bare inch, and console television and—”

“Wah,” said Nurdin, lounging on the sofa. “This is enough for me. This is all I ask for.”

“Wait,” said his sister-in-law, “you’ll want more. And you will get it. This is Canada.” (36–37)

This spectacle of material abundance Zera finds so delightful seems to juxtapose the discourses of “enough” and “more,” constructing Canadianness as a space of excess that can (should) never be depleted. Here, Canada figures as an inexhaustible reservoir of consumable commodities incessantly whetting insatiable appetites. It is not simply a land of plenty where the impoverished immigrants can appease their esurient Third World selves and satisfy their modest needs. Canada redefines the notion of “everything,” disentangling it from the burden of necessity (to live in Canada is to live in excess of one’s needs) and literalizing the meaning it is meant to signify. And yet Canada does more than merely sell the illusion of easy material achievement. It dismantles the enough/more juxtaposition replacing “enough” with “everything” and thus revealing a different sort of opposition. Canada is a perpetual move from “everything” to “more” that everyone can navigate, provided they allow craving to be constantly generated and satisfied. In its perennial will to have, Canadianness emerges primarily as an economic disposition: to “want” and to “get” equals Canada. Everyone is equal, provided they want.

Within this economic disposition, difference reveals its material underpinnings. No wonder, then, that it is Canadian/Western consumerism, driven by an irresistible fanfare of goods, that is made to serve as decoy whose desirability extends well beyond Canadian borders, a sort of beacon indicating the right (and indispensable) way into Canada’s culture:

What would immigrants in Toronto do without Honest Ed’s, the block-wide carnival that’s also a store, the brilliant kaaba to which people flock even from the suburbs. A centre of attraction whose energy never ebbs, simply transmutes, at night its thousands of dazzling lights splash the sidewalk in flashes of yellow and green and red, and the air sizzles with catchy fluorescent messages circled by running lights. The dazzle and sparkle that’s seen as far away as Asia and Africa in the bosoms of bourgeois homes where they dream of foreign goods and emigration. The Lalanis and other Dar immigrants would go there on Saturdays, entire families getting off at the Bathurst station to join the droves crossing Bloor Street West on their way to that shopping paradise. (40–41)

Given almost mythic proportions, a place of (Third World) dreams come true, Honest Ed’s welcomes all whose creed never embarks on paths other than the tracks of Saturday pilgrimages into the “dazzle and sparkle” of the city emporia. One of the first samples of the pluralised space of Toronto that the reader and the Lalanis get, Honest Ed’s and its idolatry by immigrants provide one of the novel’s most poignant (however ironically narrated) portrayals of Canada’s multiculturalism abridged to marketplace where individual cultures (supposedly meant to enrich the nation’s mosaic of difference) come to be erased under the unifying culture of buying. Yet in spite of its seemingly democratizing pull (you buy, you belong), it *has* to posit difference it will be able to transcend

within this consumptive kingdom come. The desire to have is the flying wheel of this difference; to satisfy this desire is to neutralize the difference to which it gives rise. In other words, the Third World, together with its incomplete bourgeoisie, has to be rendered essentially deficient and lacking in ways that turn it into an ideal consumer of goods always located outside its realm. It is then possible, Vassanji suggests, to foster dreams of unattainable goods together with the ready-made way (emigration) of attaining them. Asian and African middle class can never match the properly bourgeois homes of the first world without the emigratory experience into the redeeming space of a Western shopping mall and its goods, the acquisition of which authorizes entry into the national culture (of Canada).

The immigrants’ “frenzy of buying” to which they are allured to give vent in “this place so joyous and crazy” serves more than the simple acquisition of “new possessions” (41). While this frenzy certainly relies on the immigrants’ “dream[s] of foreign goods and emigration” (and hence on their material difference from the West which it thus implicitly reproduces), it is also a signifier of respectful equality, social justice at last dealt out justly and evenly:

The first few times they [the Lalanis] would stand in wonder before the racks, piles, and overflowing boxes and crates, fingering perfectly good clothes for sale for peanuts, as it were: shirts for \$1.99, dresses for \$4.99, men’s suits for \$14.99! Compare with the headaches you could buy in Dar with such difficulty: size sixteen shirts with size fourteen sleeves, pockets sewn shut, flies too short, shoes not matching, zips not closing. Even after converting dollars into shillings, at black-market rates, you couldn’t beat these prices. Cheap, cheap, cheap, as the sign said. No more haggling over prices; you just had to know where to go. And this was it. They began to buy. [...] Where else could you stock up your kitchen, buy your winter wardrobe, add the luxury of a few ready-made clothes, while looking for a job? (42)

Among the various commodities on sale at Honest Ed’s is the precious good of economic equality, likewise easily obtainable and indiscriminate. Countering the dishonest dealings of an African black market with the honesty of commercial transparency and fairness of Honest Ed’s,⁶ the narrative suggests the latter is a space where social disadvantage does not compromise consumerist bliss. The illusory openness is based on an interesting paradox: it upholds difference in order to be able to posit a difference-less consumer/immigrant.

⁶ This honesty is, of course, only putative, and here, as elsewhere in the novel, the narrator is being deliberately and purposefully ironic adopting the optics of the dominant discourse (see note 5).

Got many

This initial engulfment by the market's egalitarian and honest waves is soon followed, however, by a much less joyous emergence of insurmountable differences which seriously undermine the promise of inclusion the Lalanis see inscribed into the easily attainable commodities of the "shopping paradise":

After their initial excitement, the days of wonder when every brick was exotic and every morning as fresh as the day of creation, came the reckoning with a future that they'd held at bay but was now creeping closer. They had come with a deep sense that they had to try to determine it, this future, meet it partway and wrest a respectable niche in this new society. (43)

Try though they had, "wrest[ing] a respectable niche in this new society" proved much more difficult than shopping at Honest Ed's, for outside its egalitarian realm which may have seemed, at first, materially empowering, the Lalanis are relegated to Third World/class positions in which they are left to infinitely display/announce their difference and grapple with inequalities that come in its wake. In other words, if the "initial excitement" has generated an illusion that economic differences might be suspended in acts of frenzied consumption available to all, it has also soon exposed the stubborn endurance of what Pater McLaren calls "material dimensions of difference" (153) which remain un-dispelled amidst the "cheap, cheap, cheap" luxury of the "shopping paradise." Witness, then, Nurdin's frantic attempts to transcend the difference he exhibits:

Taking refuge in donut shops, using precious change to make phone calls doomed by the first word, the accent. I am a salesman, I *was* a salesman. Just give me a chance. Why don't they understand we can do the job. "Canadian experience" is the trump they always call, against which you have no answer. Or rather you have answers, dozens, but whom to tell except fellow immigrants at Sixty-nine. You try different accents, practice idioms, buy shoes to raise your height. Deodorize yourself silly. (44 emphasis original)

Nurdin's assimilative impulses reveal the existence (and persistence) of what Himani Bannerji terms "raced classes" (*Thinking Through* 9) and the truly perverse logic underlying it. Multicultural Canada exercises a paranoid gesture of simultaneous acceptance and rejection as it founds its national identity on an espousal of cultural difference which it finds itself impelled to resist, keep beyond the realm of "Canadian experience" and thus beyond the national parameters.⁷ The trump called so frequently excludes irrevocably and

⁷ Erin Manning makes a similar point when she argues that "The paradox of Canadian multicultural policy and 'national identity' is symbolized in the desire to make contact with the Other, even as we wish the boundaries of self and other to remain intact" (70).

essentialises difference which ends up being enshrined in/by the nation’s territory. Nurdin’s futile stratagems designed to pass for a “Canadian” are thus little more than grotesque mimicry that hides while it glaringly reveals not merely cultural difference, multiculturalism’s beloved doxa, but its absolutized nature. Indeed, this is what Nurdin fails to see but what the trump callers do not, namely, the naturalness (and thus immutability) of what he is *not*. Note the ruse of power that transforms natural difference into cultural difference only to reassert the former in the latter’s disguise. And the painful permanence of the rejection signalled by “Canadian experience” stems precisely from its deceptive promise based on its appeal to culture rather than nature as it suggests that because it is not a matter of inherent essences but contingencies, it can be gained and then duly offered.

To make that commonly used trump culture-related (even in its camouflage function) is strategic as is a more general tendency to, as Bannerji argues, dispel the material conditions and unequal relations within which the cultures summoned up by multiculturalism are supposed to exist. According to Bannerji,

The elimination of the concepts of class, gender and racialization and the construction of multicultural communities from above is particularly felicitous for all ruling classes and the states which express their ideological and socio-economic interests. In the case of Western elites and their governments, for example in Canada, Germany or the United States, it would no doubt be far easier for the states to tolerate or recognize cultural nationalism or religious fundamentalism than class based social movements among the immigrants and the “foreigners.” It is a safe bet to say that if the U. S. government had to choose between a revival of the left wing Black Panther Party and a growing power of the Nation of Islam as the burden of its tolerance, it would undoubtedly choose the latter and offer cultural sensitivity as an excuse. It is the culturalization of antiracist and other oppositional politics in the last decade or so that has largely made it possible for the government of the U.S. or of Canada to maintain the appearance of democracy. (*Dark Side* 7–8)

This culturalization of antiracism keeps re-surfacing in Nurdin’s continual attempts to secure a job other than the “daily jobs, invariably menial” (65). When culture-specific experience is no longer enough to keep Nurdin in the place he is allocated by “signified skin and [...] pre-scribed class in Canadian labour history” (Bannerji *Thinking Through* 12), other, equally disempowering, trumps are called. Thus when he finally explodes out of exasperation and confronts the racist discrimination hidden behind the veneer of cultural sensitivity, Nurdin only earns a ridiculous dismissal that couches insult in terms of superficial respect:

“I know I don’t have Canadian experience,” he breathed hotly and with emotion on the phone, “but how can I get Canadian experience if you don’t give me a chance? I’ve sold shoes for eight years! Eight years—”

“Perhaps you were overqualified, sir.”

That was a new one. Overqualified. Good for laughs, and it got many.” (48)

Bannerji’s point which Nurdin’s forever menial jobs so powerfully illustrate is that what goes under the name of culture, what is clad in cultural specificity, is less threatening and much more easily manageable than its material underpinnings. The cultural incommensurability that the infamous “Canadian experience” relies on and reproduces, not only others the non-Canadian cultures and ways of living them, but also, as Peter McLaren and Valerie Scatamburlo-D’Annibale argue, serves to reinforce material inequalities which continue to disadvantage those marked as different: “forces of diversity and difference are allowed to flourish provided that they remain within the prevailing forms of capitalist social arrangements” (154). Needless to say, within such conditions flourishing does not entail empowerment. Differently put, “Speaking [...] of culture without addressing power relations displaces and trivializes deep contradictions” (Bannerji *Dark Side* 97). What these critics point out is how diversity, in its celebration and accommodation of cultural specificity upholds material/class relations requisite for the furtherance of capitalism. Seen along these lines, multiculturalism in Canada is not only a cover for “surplus domination,” a “Eurocentric/racist/colonial” legacy of Canada’s historical constitution but also, significantly, a sort of machinery (also historically derived) for its “current aspirations to imperialist capitalism” (Bannerji *Dark Side* 97).

Nurdin’s desire to smell the same can be read as a useless attempt to cover the difference he embodies; yet it also simultaneously reveals the prevailing notion of difference as embodiment. Represented as embodied, difference is rendered unbridgeable and also serviceable and subservient to sameness that Nurdin wrongly assumes he can get and wear (as his own) because the difference he embodies must remain intact in order to make “reproduction of sameness” (Essed and Goldberg 1069) possible. Those calling the discriminating trump thus manifest that “the drive to insist on difference [...] is predicated on the underlying assumption that the values of sameness represent the prevailing social norm. [...] Commitments to discourses of difference are dialectically tied to the (embedded or underlying) socio-cultural investment in sameness” (Essed and Goldberg 1070). And yet out of the many goods available to Nurdin and other immigrants, sameness is neither for sale nor for consumption. It is precisely its exclusiveness that makes it all the more desirable. To get it and wear it becomes an object of desire that comes to be inscribed (by imposition) into the relationship between the country’s so called visible minorities and the invisible (white) Canadians, and has to remain

unattainable (lest the visible should become invisible too). The imposed desirability (you *have to* want it) of the same also works to naturalize difference and culturalize sameness. Since Nurdin is barred from having and enjoying Canada’s good(ness) (a sentiment conveyed in the dispiriting evocation and deployment of “Canadian experience” which by positing this experience as something one must/should have necessarily turns it into an object to be possessed), he is instead given the surrogate pleasures of consuming the perfectly attainable goods of a Canadian life style. Thus “grasping whatever odd job came his way, becoming a menial in the process” (88), Nurdin has to content himself with amassing things and experiences. The “children wanted a car, a brand-new Chevy, to go to Wasaga Beach, Niagara Falls, Buffalo” (89), Nurdin admits, thus demonstrating the exchange at stake: unable to procure “Canadian experience” he does not have, Nurdin is left to accumulate ample experiences of Canada. This exchange is significant because of how it positions Nurdin (and other immigrants) in the national imaginary: the former signifies inclusion, belonging through sharing (the same); the latter, on the other hand, signals exteriority, sharing while not belonging where what is shared is not only the joys of consumerism but also what Essed and Goldberg call “a consumptive demand for certain types of [...] products” (1072) – be they “new sofas” or an outing to Niagara Falls.

The more, the merrier

It is not surprising, accordingly, that left (and expected) to acquire and collect tokens of Canadianness and of the Canadian way of life, access to which leads through a consumption of goods and places, Nurdin and other immigrants find themselves engulfed by consumptive circuits, recruited, as it were, by vendors of Canadianness and of a promise of inclusion. This recruitment, brilliantly timely in its occurrence, is a display of Canada’s investment in “passive, apolitical consumerism” (Žižek 160) clad, as it is, in a rhetoric of welcome, integration, togetherness and shared experiences. Shortly after Nurdin’s bout of disappointments, he receives a call from a John McCormack:

“Hullo,” said a cautious voice at the other end. “Am I speaking to Mr. La-la-ni?”

“Yes, this is Mr. Lalani.”

“How are you, Mr. Lalani?”

“I am quite well, thank you,” he answered, exactly as he had been taught in childhood.

“Good! My name is John McCormack, and I would like to invite you to a party.”

“A party. ...” He thought it might be some church group. [...]

“A party,” said the friendly voice of John McCormack, a little more forcefully this time, bringing Nurdin back from his thought. “A party where new Canadians

can meet the old and learn from their experiences. A party to welcome the newcomers. This country was made by immigrants like you, Mr. Lalani.”

He gave directions. “Would you like us to invite anyone else you know, Mr. Lalani? The more the merrier, as we say.” (49–51)

Setting aside McCormack’s complete erasure of the First Nations and their plight, both past and present, this invitation becomes a balm for Nurdin’s humiliated soul in its warm, non-discriminatory embrace and the unconditional appreciation it extends. No wonder Nurdin is taken in by the touching story McCormack sells of the historical affinity of outsiders united in a fellowship of nation makers, all equal in their significance to the national enterprise. Implying an absolute indispensability of immigrants to the project of Canadian nation making (had it not been for “immigrants like you,” McCormack suggests, this country would not have been made), McCormack renders himself, and other “old” Canadians, as somewhat indebted, obliged to the newcomers who must now have their contribution repaid, returned by the magnanimous old Canadians (who, significantly, exclude themselves from the category of immigrants). The event itself is staged in terms of giving (back), for the party is tacitly represented as an act of generosity—sharing the experience and offering food and entertainment.

Yet this rhetoric of magnanimity, obligation and gratitude, underwritten by a sense of patriotism and common responsibility McCormack sneaks into his phone call invitation is soon dispelled by a reversal of sentiments signalled already in the grand interior of the party venue. Once in the Don Mills Inn where, in one of the “brilliantly lit room[s]” (53), the party is held, the Lalanis, together with Roshan and her husband Abdul, find themselves surrounded by breathtaking opulence and splendour, a spectacle of posh abundance that both humbles and subdues them. “Dazed,” “uncertain, bewildered” and “terribly impressed by what they saw” (51–52) at the same time, they mutter “wow[s]” (52), pondering the distinction they have been endowed with and the unanticipated admission into the chandeliered world of glossy affluence:

Tall ladies in furs, men in tweeds and leathers, fawning attendants. It could have been a scene from a movie or from a magazine ad. Yet from afar it looked easier to feel part of it, and they felt a glowing sense of privilege. The time was not far behind them when they could not have imagined being in such a place, so close to those people. (52–53)

It is significant to note here how the whole event encodes national belonging in economic terms. What begins as a prospect of a shared celebration of national togetherness forged under the all-embracing sign of Canada (we are all Canadians, some old, some new) ends up as demonstration of economic power. If the whole event symbolizes the Lalanis’ and other immigrants’ reception

and accommodation within Canada, one that is presumably based on solidarity, it also signifies the conditions of this reception and accommodation. Two mutually contradictory narratives emerge here. According to one, to become part of the Canadian community is to advance economically and thus socially, to be able to have and consume; to leave behind the economic backwardness of the Third World home for the First World of "plush red" (52) carpets. According to the other, Nurdin and his ilk cannot become part of this fellowship (even if they are momentarily "dazed" to feel so) since roles have already been assigned within the national economy – the party redefines belonging in terms of economic privilege and the exclusiveness this privilege grants. Hence, the paradox of the party devised by McCormack is that it promises an appreciative inclusion yet offers only a belittling exclusion. Nurdin is quick enough to notice his out-of-placeness, the material disparity between himself and the decor of the inn:

Nurdin thought nervously of his suit. A bargain, though the checkered design was not to his complete liking. And the sleeves were just noticeably long. If he had come alone or even with Zera only, he would have fled. This was not for him, an atmosphere that made him so conscious of himself, as if he was onstage and those people were the spectators. (52)

And yet it would be a mistake to suppose that Nurdin and other immigrants are simply invited to the party to be shown their own exclusion and secondariness to the nation and "old" Canadians. On the contrary, the event is devised in such a way so as to highlight their indispensability to the production of the national. Through its shrewd generation of the feelings of indebtedness and gratitude (for being elevated from their lowly origins into the magnitude of a red-carpeted world), it forges a bond (not to say bondage) which links, economically, the immigrants to the host creating thereby a condition of mutual dependency. The former need it for the production of the illusion that they have transcended the jejuneness and mediocrity of their Third World life. The latter need the former to work as conduits for the flow of goods and capital, as all-consuming locust that will leave nothing behind except for emptied space to be filled again with ever new things to be devoured.

The consumptive voracity of the party guests is represented in the "dining interlude" (55) when food comes "trundling along, pushed by the gilded attendants" provoking a "quick" "rush" amid much "jostling and cussing" (54), a rather sorry spectacle of immoderation and incivility (both in demand): "Pile up, pile up!" ordered Roshan. "There won't be another chance." Sure enough, turning around with heaped plates in their hands, they barely escaped the onslaught" (54). And before they *are* given this single chance to pile up their plates (being jostled out in the first round), they watch "a tall elderly

black man” (54) who, content with his “plate loaded” (54) enjoys this vista of appetite gone wild: “The Third World, man,” said the black man with a wink. He had found himself a seat nearby, and spoke with a full mouth as he took in the scene, mightily amused” (54). What this episode, clearly ironized by Vassanji, reveals is the telling conjunction of cultural distinction, material disadvantage and consumer capitalism interests. The feast organised by McCormack demonstrates how the appreciation of difference is, in fact, an appreciation of the Third World’s condition of scarcity, with the Third World practitioner of piling as the most ideal and desired consumer.

The extent of the immigrants’ instrumentality comes to be revealed at the end of the episode. First, the party guests are made to watch a “fashion show,” the theme of which is “The Complete Canadian Male or Female” (55). The show performs a number of interesting functions. Here again Vassanji brilliantly revisits winter as part of Canadian national imagery suggesting that to be a complete Canadian, i.e. to survive the land’s freezing climate, one has to have proper garments to tame it with. Winter is survivable since there are plenty of clothes to choose from and buy. This is perfectly in line with the sentiments underlying the show and the whole event. What completes Canadians (and Canadianness) is an act of consumption commodifying the immigrants’ relationship to the host (both the nation’s and the party’s). Being complete is a question of buying clothes that will transform *any body* into Canadian bodies. Without the “winterwear” and “underwear” (55) put on display and, after the show, on sale to the immigrants who have first been fed with “trays of salad, hors d’oeuvres, cold cuts” (53) and with an appreciative sense of social distinction, the show intimates one cannot be fully Canadian. The show equates Canadianness with consumption, which becomes evident when, “‘After this brief session,’ a bazaar was announced, where some of the previously exhibited ware was put on sale. Simultaneously a cash bar was opened and a dance began” (55). Swiftly transforming the party of Canadianness (with its free – or so it seems – food and entertainment offered in the name of congeniality and hospitality) into a marketplace where this Canadianness is no longer a shared (and shareable) sentiment and identity but an object of exchange, a commodity amongst others, the narrative suggests that if there are any cultures at stake in multicultural Canada it is, above all, consumer culture. This culture, while ostensibly feeding off cultural diversity, makes (and expects) the immigrants at the party (to) transcend the particularity of their cultures which become irrelevant in their joint partaking of the consumption of Canadianness, which, interestingly, has been tailored not simply to a variety of tastes but of incomes too. Everyone can become a complete Canadian because the clothes on sale can accommodate *every body* – it is only a matter of (a consumer’s) choice. And choice there is “from fur (‘the ultimate in elegance’) to artificial fur (‘affordable elegance, or to have your cake and eat it too’), leather (‘warm and cool in the fast lane’) and wool (‘elegance and

reserve’)” (55). There are not any wrong choices here, either. All lead to a complete Canadianness reduced to an object of choice *and* desire. Unified (and necessarily made uniform) in the act of completing their Canadianness, the immigrants are invited to assume that identity is something to be donned while belonging is posited as a purchasable item. Conjoining economic and national desire (where buying/having is belonging and vice versa) for which the immigrant becomes a useful conduit, McCormack betrays the nation’s multicultural interests.

The event’s profit-driven motivation and the simultaneous indispensability of the immigrants to its successful generation is fully revealed at the very end of the party as Nurdin and Zera (plus Roshan and Abdul) decide to leave what they now find morally offensive, that is, the display of underwear. Just as they are leaving the venue, a woman at the door “who had let them in” (56) ticking their names “in the guest register” (53) bluntly requires that they should pay a ten-dollar fee as they “ate food here and were entertained [...]” (56). Together with the denuded bodies of the models, the en-riching potential of cultural diversity comes into full view: “the more, the merrier,” as McCormack jovially declares earlier to the unsuspecting Nurdin, fully aware of the dictate of consumer capitalism whereby “More [...] requires more, and so on” (Botting and Wilson 33).

More and more

And yet to sustain its reproduction, consumer capitalism has to withhold the gratification of desire, suspend a complacent arrival at a destination (be it identity or commodity), keep things ahead of one’s reach yet firmly in sight and thus potentially graspable and always enticing. As Botting and Wilson argue, “for capitalism to sustain desire, it must necessarily fail to satisfy it. Something must be withheld from the consumer in order for him or her to desire and seek to enjoy more” (30). The promise of inclusion fostered by McCormack’s fraudulent party has to remain, inevitably, deferred forever. Indeed, couching/defining national belonging in terms of consumerism, or equating buying with becoming (Canadian), renders this belonging truly impossible. If consumption rests on an insatiable desire, a desire that “requires a constant escalation of objects and images to fuel desire” (Botting and Wilson 37), then the national fellowship evoked by McCormack in his phone call invitation, supposedly recreated at the party, and re-produced and replicated (also quite literally) through/as consumption, can only, likewise, be unattainable. Accordingly, national desire (a desire to be part of the Canadian nation) must also remain ungratified though constantly aroused.

What arouses this desire to belong to the community of “fellow Canadians” are the more or less ceaseless reminders of exclusion, acts of discrimination

and racism that recreate belonging as possibility, intimating (often painfully) that the immigrants can still (and always) consume their way into Canadiannes. Perhaps not without reason does Vassanji return, here and there, to eating and drinking, acts of consumption *par excellence*, markers of the consummation of the promise to belong incarnated in the morsels of food. Hence, for instance, Fatima's impatience with her family's Indian ways, in particular, their culinary habits she comes to consider shameful and lacking in Canadiannes:

They had come to watch the Canada Day fireworks. Parked the car half a mile away and trudged along with the crowd, to the lakeshore, all at Fatima's insistence. This was the thing to do, act like Canadians, for chrissakes! All this playing cards and chatting and discussing silly topics while glugging tea by the gallon and eating samosas – is not Canadian. [...] So while others of their building celebrated at the eighteenth floor open house, watching fireworks from a distance and perhaps getting a better view of them – and, yes, with tea and samosas, and gossip, and men teasing women – the Lalanis with Nanji had come to where the action was. Had eaten those fat, luscious french fries and assiduously avoided [...] the hot dogs for sale on the sidewalks. (129)

Fatima's anxiety about eating what does not betoken Canadianness is indicative not only of the valorization of (quite literal) assimilation as the most effective method of making one's way into normative culture (and thus also a vindication of sameness as the most coveted identity) but also of the novel's witty engagement with the idea of consumable belonging. Her naive belief in this culinary transubstantiation of food become flesh is shared by Nurdin, too, though, unlike Fatima, he is far from discerning its salutary effects. He persistently reveals profound concern about Canadian food's transformative powers, its demoralizing and destructive nature, the way it transmutes the other into the same. Thus his first tasting of pork is followed not only by pangs of conscience but also by visions of cultural deprivation: "He ate a piece and it was good. Even before he had finished swallowing it, it was going down his gullet, everything inside him was echoing the aftertaste, crying, 'Foreign, foreign'" (127). And, in the worst scenario, "you became, morally, like *them*. The Canadians" (127). Whether represented in terms of gain (Fatima) or loss (Nurdin), the novel's conflation of eating and becoming reveals its critical investment in consumption as a gesture of passage into things Canadian. Ironically (and perhaps expectedly), since, by nature, eating is a never-ending (because life-sustaining) undertaking, its infinite character also extends this passage: "the demand for more can only be reiterated to infinity," as Botting and Wilson remind us (37). Casting consumption (whether gustatory or commercial) at the centre of the experience of Canada and as a condition of inclusion into its realm, Vassanji's novel exposes the ways in

which official multiculturalism commodifies (eat and become) the relationship of immigrant others to Canada and Canadians.

Nowhere does this commodifying drive become more apparent than in the narrative’s most violently racist incident and, more significantly, in what comes in its wake. The incident concerns a minor character, Esmail, who, having found himself on the platform at a subway station, is attacked by a group of thugs and barely survives it. The “three louts” (94), who, at first, were “baiting the bystanders with taunts and sarcasm” (94), finally turn to Esmail:

The three louts had come up behind Esmail and began their abuse. “Paki!” one of them shouted joyfully. Esmail turned towards them, looking frightened. “What do you have there, Paki? Hey, hey? Paki-paki-paki. [...]” They leered, they jeered, crowding in on him in front, behind him the subway tracks. Bystanders looked away, embarrassed, uncomfortable. [...] Perhaps Esmail answered them back, or perhaps his silence simply goaded the gloating, prancing youths beyond control. Because at some point, Nanji became aware of shouting and pandemonium, the youths shouting, pounding up the stairs and out of the station. An alarm was raised, and suddenly people were gathered where Esmail had stood – but they were looking down onto the tracks.

Esmail, pinched in the stomach, had been thrown down and was crying in horrible, pathetic moans, “Save me, save me, I have done nothing.” People shouted encouragements: “Get up! Stand up!” But Esmail couldn’t get up. [...] Brakes screeched somewhere along the tracks in a tunnel, in which a light was now visible. An ambulance arrived, Esmail was removed, taken away on a stretcher. (95–96–97)

This “wanton and racial” (97) attack that “marked a new beginning in the lives of the Dar immigrants” (107) is soon skilfully deployed by the public, who, duly outraged by its atrocity, is nonetheless quick to capitalise on it. Before that happens, though, the narrator informs us somewhat sarcastically, that “the outrage expressed officially, though perhaps too piously, by police, newspapers, and ordinary citizens decided once and for all that the line had been overstepped, that this was beyond tolerable limit. Toronto the Good would not have it. It brought home, to everybody, the fact that the immigrants were here to stay, they could not, would not, simply go away” (107). The disparity between this official piousness and the public’s utter indifference to and disregard for the harassed Esmail as he was standing, as if invisible, on the underground platform, reveals the limits of an officially endorsed multiculturalism unconcerned with any structural transformations (what Goldberg calls a “redistribution of power and resources” (7)) that would extend beyond the facile celebration of difference, a celebration, which, moreover, may work to conceal difference’s oppressive effects, its “deathly dangerous” potential, as Goldberg puts it (12). What it likewise reveals is not only the shallowness of the piety demonstrated by “Toronto the good” but also the

immigrants' position on the map of the nation's multicultural. The indignation so excessively expressed interpellates the immigrants (their apparently unwelcome, because obstinate, presence) into objects of somebody else's tolerance (or its lack), rather than agents of the discourse of tolerance, or subjects of the construction of limits that are not to be breached. Differently put, the immigrants' bodies serve, quite literally, as instruments for measuring and calibrating the multicultural disposition of the "monovalent centre" towards its "plural peripheries" (Goldberg 13). Here, Žižek's assertion that multiculturalism is enabling of a discriminatory stance camouflaged in the garb of recognition and strengthening of an already entrenched privilege sounds particularly apposite. Žižek argues that

[...] multiculturalism involves patronizing Eurocentrist distance and/or respect for local cultures without roots in one's own particular culture. In other words, multiculturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a "racism with a distance" – it "respects" the Other's identity, conceiving of the Other as a self-enclosed "authentic" community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position. Multiculturalism is a racism which empties its own position of all positive content (the multiculturalist is not a direct racist, he doesn't oppose to the Other the *particular* values of his own culture), but nonetheless retains this position as the privileged *empty point of universality* from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures – the multiculturalist respect for the Other's specificity is the very form of asserting one's own superiority. (170–171)

Immigrants like Esmail obviously have no say in what is or is not to be tolerated, remaining the disabled objects/bodies of the discourse of tolerance and respect, and in what ways the multicultural respect for Otherness is to be distributed and extended. The multiculturalism depicted by the novel and theorised by Žižek remains adamant in its allocation of subject and object positions, its unique and firmly established *who is who* for which multiculturalism is but one costume amongst others. At the mercy of "Toronto the good's" indignation, the immigrants make it clear that the multicultural dispensation is, as a matter of fact, *about* "Toronto the good" and its/their feelings (obviously enough "Toronto the good" cannot have it if it wants to remain "good") whose superior morality, and its demonstration, is at the stake of the public discourse. Hidden behind a benign disposition and humanitarian instincts is a defence and preservation of self-image evidenced by the assailed body of an Esmail. It is interesting to see here how this incident not only illustrates Žižek's argument (the way respect and tolerance promote and feed into the "privileged universal position") but also how this position calls for racially oppressed bodies whose public visibility and suffering create contexts in which tolerance and respect can be manifested and substantiated.

If this incident (together with its consequences) functions as a showcase for multiculturalism’s complicity with hegemonic discourses and practices, it is also exemplary in how it brings money and difference together, demonstrating their mutually reinforcing and interdependent relationship, a relationship which Vassanji’s narrative seems to be highlighting:

The incident had such an effect that afterwards some would attribute to it the small but perceptible rise in car sales. Immigrants, if they could afford it, and sometimes even when they couldn’t, simply stopped using public transport. Many seized on the aftermath of this well-publicized incident to begin a new career—that of selling cars—and you could see more and more of the jolly-faced salesmen on the community TV channel on Sunday exhorting in a multitude of accents. (107–108)

Conducive to profits and consumption, at times beyond one’s means, the incident propels economy. Accommodated by the market and its logic, it joins the circuits of dissemination so essential to consumer capitalism. On the way, it can be surmised, Esmail’s tragic story comes to be buried behind careers and purchases all thriving on multitude whose commercial desires it helps to create and sustain. If, as Jean-Joseph Goux argues, “capitalist economy [...] must create this desire through [...] the production of the unpredictable” (Goux qtd. in Botting and Wilson 29), then this attack, processed (or refined) by multicultural sentiments, is capitalism’s dream object of supply.

Perversely enough, it is only by suffering a racist assault that Esmail can earn some recognition. He “took a long time to recover. But he became an instant celebrity. His photo appeared in all the newspapers, depicting various stages of his recovery. [...] In hospital he was showered with gifts and goodwill messages from many communities” (108). Reduced to merchandise, an object of desire, Esmail is left to enjoy a recognition that remains locked within the logic of capital, fuelling sales, nourishing mass consumption, generating profits. No wonder, perhaps, that the emcee at a demonstration against racism which follows Esmail’s release from hospital, while “poking fun at the government” also ridicules what he calls “multivulturalism” (111), a telling travesty of the term “multiculturalism”, one that reveals the profiteering and rapacious sentiments underlying its every day practice. Seen as such, multiculturalism as done in Canada, remains ineradicably caught in the logic of capitalism, the underlying logic of which is, as Botting and Wilson remind us, “a voracious want that is the norm of consumer culture” (33), that produces (and is produced by) an excessive consumption fuelled by an appetite that can never be appeased. What the emcee calls “multivulturalism,” Žižek names “the cultural logic of multinational capitalism.”⁸ Žižek argues that multiculturalism

⁸ The title of Žižek’s text is “Multiculturalism, or, the cultural logic of multinational capitalism.”

is “the ideal form of ideology of [...] global capitalism” because it mediates (or fleshes out) “Capital’s” relation to “the form of Nation-State in our era of global capitalism” (170).⁹ Multinational capital, no longer tied to any “mother nation,” colonises even its “country of origin” evincing, *indiscriminately*, the same feelings towards all countries. Thus the present day dispensation gives rise to “the paradox of colonization in which there are only colonies, no colonizing countries – the colonizing power is no longer a Nation-State but directly the global company” (Žižek 170). Ideologically, Žižek claims, it is multiculturalism that feeds and sustains such global capitalism. Žižek identifies multiculturalism with “the attitude that, from a kind of empty global position, treats *each* local culture the way the colonizer treats colonized people – as ‘natives’ whose mores are to be carefully studied and ‘respected’” (170). And one might recall here John McCormack as an exemplary exponent of this attitude with its superbly mastered diction of respect designed and calculated to en-rich. In Meyda Yegenoglu’s paraphrase of Žižek’s point, “Respect and tolerance for the ethnically different is a reaction to the universal dimension of the world market and hence occurs against its background and on its very terrain” (par. 10). Indeed, as McCormack, Esmail and others in the novel demonstrate, multiculturalism’s greatest value resides in its injunction to value other cultures.

It is instructive to see how “Toronto the good” implements this injunction frantically attempting to tease out some value from Esmail’s newly discovered passion for painting:

One of the numerous anonymous gifts Esmail had received was a supply of art materials. His legs continued to ache, especially in the cold, and he was, essentially, disabled. So Esmail started to paint. From what hidden resources, what buried memory, this passion drew its energy, even he could not have said. But passion it was. The first report of his work arrived when a social worker who came to see him saw the paintings. One newspaper printed a photo of the artist surrounded by his works. It said that he had an apocalyptic vision and a gift for colour. (112)

Nanji is quick, however, to detect an air of condescension behind the media promotion of what he perceives as Esmail’s rather coarse and shoddy painting:

⁹ And yet, following Bannerji’s important reminder of how the Canadian state retains its colonial conduct in relation to the indigenous peoples, it seems necessary to point out that Žižek’s understanding of the logic of multiculturalism, however insightful, may be complicated by contexts such as Canada’s, where the nation-state continues to colonise the First Nations peoples. Here, what would be interesting to explore further is the nature of the interrelationships of multinational capital and the nation-state on one hand, and the extent to which the still colonizing state, such as Canada, may be more than happy to have a “whipping boy” ready to exempt it from any blame and redirect the critical gaze away from itself.

This was a lot of hype, as Nanji reported to Jamal. “Esmail belongs to no school or tradition. He paints garishly, that’s his so-called gift for colour. And he paints these meek people praying [...] both his gift for colour and apocalyptic vision you can buy for a few dollars at any gift store at Bloor and Dufferin. They are patronizing him.” (112)

Disclosing what Žižek has called “patronizing Eurocentrist distance” typical of multicultural respect for the other, and the commercial interests underpinning this respect, Nanji recognizes the “commodification of Otherness,” as bell hooks names it (21), which mainly serves the appetites (both aesthetic and economic) of the same, whose enchantment with difference “does not require that one relinquish forever one’s mainstream positionality” (23). And yet in spite of the commotion surrounding Esmail’s frenzied penchant for painting (“[...] he painted as if there were no tomorrow” (113), the narrator tells us), his art does not earn a proper recognition (even if it earns some money for the media publicising it). Lacking the enthusiastic approval of culture pundits who visit Esmail’s home yet “hastily [depart]” (112) disappointed with his artless daubs, it is bound to remain a mediocre output hyped by sensation-hungry media. Unless, of course, Esmail travels back to Africa (which he does) and thus redefines his art as a “primitive” expression of the other’s atavistic impulses always so palatable to the ethnographic tastes of the West (hooks 25). For the point is not that Esmail’s paintings are good and are unjustly dismissed; the point is that they have the potential of becoming good provided they are transplanted back to where they belong so that they can *return* in eternal glory that befits exoticism. It is only from a comfortably distant Third World location that Esmail’s artistic work can transcend its mediocrity and thus be profitably commodified, that is, produced to the advantage and benefit of the West always eager to learn about (and take aesthetic pleasure from) the other. As we discover later on from a conversation Nanji holds with Jamal recently returned from Dar es Salaam:

“[...] guess what he’s been doing?”

“Painting”

“He’s in an artists’ colony just outside Dar, one of its main attractions.”

“Wow. So he found a place for himself.”

“And how. Students – American students, nice pretty girls – go an study his art. They write about it. Next month representatives of the colony are going to an exhibition and a conference in New York – East African retrospective or something. And Esmail will be there. He is painting nothing but masks now. He showed me.”

Perhaps *he* will be the great success. We’ll buy UNESCO cards with his paintings on them. While those immigrant Toronto poets and artists having periodic jubilees in the streets rot, out of context, their roots out in the cold – irrelevant to the world, any world, marginal. [...] (163–164)

Churning out insignificant, repetitive paintings, Esmail nourishes the West's desire for recognition, fuels its knowledge production, helps realize its longing for mastery and expertise, stimulates its pursuit of culture tourism, and propels its patronizing drives. Emblematic of "white consumption of the dark Other" (hooks 30), the West's re-appropriation of Esmail and his art "exoticizes 'otherness' in a nativistic retreat that locates difference in a primeval past of cultural authenticity" (McLaren "White Terror" 51) that cannot, it seems, take place without the transformative benefits accrued by the Third World relocation. The miraculous passage from kitsch to art that Esmail's tasteless daubs undergo is concurrent with *his* passage from Canada to Tanzania. Corroborating a popular sentiment that the Other is most admirable and desirable when far away, this, not at all unexpected, re-signification of Esmail's art and his position as artist does two things. On one hand, it helps to render this art into a commodity *par excellence* (its value materialised in consumption) betraying the intimate links between culture and consumerism. As Laura U. Marks notes, "To fetishize the authenticity of one's traditional culture plays into the notions that minority cultures can be packaged in easily consumable signs" (66). On the other, it demonstrates the abiding potency of colonial mentality with its "colonial desires for a primitive authenticity" (Marks 102) that may have just as well been an earlier, though by no means really different, version of "multiculturalism," a way of consuming the other packaged (prepared; re-signified) for the West's palates desirous of the "primitive."

Esmail's story also demonstrates the West's perennial adoration of the Other as victim, as an inexhaustible repository of surplus negativity waiting to be soothed and mitigated by the appreciative West. As McLaren notes, "multiculturalism frequently works to legitimize the 'logic of universalized victimization' to the extent to which the Other becomes good in so far as she or he remains a victim" ("Wayward" 411). The dizzying, because contradictory, discourses, that coalesce around the figure of the other in the multicultural context of Canada, reveal that multicultural economies are best sustained by the immigrants' marginality (welcomed within yet consigned to already allocated positions, the defining feature of which is a permanently aroused desire for food, commodities, distinction, belonging) or their remoteness that best facilitate the West's spectacle of care, interest, compassion and respect in which it can act as a patronizing (in both senses of the word) agent of the Third World impoverished (and all the more enriching for that) "primitivism." Whichever position the (immigrant) Other is made or expected to assume does not really matter that much because both are nourished and produced by the same multicultural sentiments that capitalise on the other in excess (whether that other is an avid consumer of sofas and carpets or symbolized in ethnic art mass-reproduced on UNESCO cards).

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