

Shirt and the Happy Man: Theory and Politics of Ethnic Minority Writing

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Abstract / Resume:

Ethnic minority writing in Canada was once a neglected field not only by Canadianists promoting a canon for a national literature, but also by theorists who focused on the great works from major European languages as the standards for explaining all the writing of the world. The recent growing interest by both groups in the works of ethnic minority writers in Canada, along with the literary awards some of these new writers have won, has created the need to review the role of theory in the re-evaluation of minority writing. This brief essay raises several questions about the relationship of high theory to ethnic minority writing. Among the topics considered are the instinctive mistrust of theory by some minority writers, the political use of theory to create a space for minority authors, postmodern ideas, intertextuality, and the use of foreign languages in English or French language texts. The issues of resistance to theory and the politics of literary production is placed in the context of the debate over the appropriation of voice, storytelling and realist traditions.



There is an old Italian folktale from Friuli in which an old king is searching for a truly happy man. He sends ambassadors and wise men far and wide to find a happy man. They repeatedly find men who are not really happy. The king has been told that in order to save his son who is dying of sadness he must get him to wear the shirt of a happy man. After many months of failure the king stumbles onto a young man singing in a vineyard, and discovers indeed that this is truly a happy man. His son is saved. But when the king starts to take off the young man's jacket he stops suddenly. The happy man has no shirt. (Calvino)

Like many Italian folktales this story ends with an ironic twist, and reminds me of my experience with literary theory and ethnic minority writing. We look repeatedly for the shirt of the happy theory to cloak the nakedness of the minority text only to discover that there are no happy theories for our texts, or that happy theories have no shirt to cover the minority work chosen.

In this essay I will try to articulate some of the problems, which I have encountered when applying theory to ethnic minority writing. To me the relationship between the two areas has

been an ambivalent one. The very fact that I frame the theme of this paper, ethnic minority writing and literary theory, in this binary manner betrays my uneasiness with this relationship. When I try to examine my own resistance to theory I find that there are many aspects, which account for my reaction.

1. The Instinctive Reaction

My Mediterranean peasant sensibility makes me distrustful of any sophisticated ideas or systems from the centres of power. For centuries the only things my ancestors received from the centres of power in Europe were oppression and war. Emigration was a way of escaping these conditions and the destructive politics which produced them. Will powerful theories and dominating ideologies be any different? Will they really allow for cultural differences and individual dissent?

For decades the writing of non-English or non-French immigrants in Canada was ignored, dismissed and very often lost. It seems that these texts did not fit in with current ideas about what a national literature was. More recently this has changed. There is a growing interest in the work of ethnic minority writers. It seems that these once marginal texts will be saved from obscurity and valorise once they can wear the shirt of a happy theory. Like the archetypal king our task seems to be to find the happy man and get the shirt to fit. And like the old king, scholars of ethnic minority writing may look in vain for the happy man and for the shirt.

Is my instinctive reaction an irrational one? Is it territorial and exclusionary? Is it in the end a political one, a question of power? While everyone is free to read and judge the works of minority writers, who will be the major interpreters and evaluators? How will the literary institution mediate questions of race, ethnicity, identity, appropriation, authenticity, and legitimation? Are sophisticated theory and complex terminology only new ways of disenfranchising ethnic minorities from the discourse? Is there an agenda of social action which goes along with the study of ethnic minority writing, or is it simply to become another academic area insulated by the objectivity of scientific research? Similar questions are being asked in women's studies where theory is seen as both a liberating force for women's intellectual and social agenda and a source of power, which can corrupt the basic ideals of feminism.

Smaro Kamboureli in her article, "Theory: Beauty or Beast? Resistance to Theory in the Feminine," (1990) explores the debate over the role of theory among women writers in Canada. Beginning with Paul de Man's seminal *The Resistance to Theory*, Kamboureli suggests that part of writers' reluctance to embrace theory is that it is difficult to define and to control the different ways in which it manipulates the meanings of a given text. For some this slippage in meaning is a positive quality, which allows us to re-evaluate many texts both canonical and marginal. Kamboureli argues that "one of the primary goals of women writers interested in theory is their desire to position themselves as subjects of discourse, hence the readiness with which they question the very theories they practise. Indeed, the fact that they find suspect any appropriating tendencies that might be inherent in the ideology of a given theory is one of the main characteristics of their attitude towards theory, whether feminist or not. (9)

Many ethnic minority writers find such arguments appealing since this approach to theory may allow them to enter the discourse from which they had been excluded in the past. Nevertheless, speaking for some women writers Sharon Thesen expresses her suspicion of theory because, instead of liberating writers, it seems to be censoring them with new ideologies and prescribing the treatment of subjects, especially controversial subjects, and thus coercing writers into present an unrealistic picture of society. This is all part of the fear of the writer's loss of control over language and the intended meaning of a given literary work. For Thesen the deconstruction of a text so that it can mean anything the theorist suggests, even the opposite of the intentions of the author, is a very dangerous tendency in the theory of de Man and his followers. Like several minority writers Thesen questions the apparent liberating possibilities of theory for the creative writer while at the same time observing the growing power of ideologies and the proclivity to totalising all meaning into master theories. She sees legitimate concerns about social inequality being buried and the possibility for individual difference and dissent being lost. (1991)

One of the few ethnic minority writers to articulate her resistance to theory, Arun Mukherjee has placed her arguments in the context of the cultural imperialism of Western literatures.

The universalist methodology, in its exaggerated focus on form and character, neglects referentiality and context, thereby failing to assign inventiveness to writers who structure their works on other principles. The universalist critic, armed with his ready made categories of narrative technique, symbolic patterns, motifs...overlooks the formal complexities that arise when a work openly or cryptically utilizes the collective shared knowledge and experiences of a society: experiences of colonialism, legends of heroes and villains, deeply-held belief systems.... The universalist critic's lack of interest in the context also means that the fiercely political confrontation in the works from the Third World are de-radicalised. (1988, 13)

Ethnic minority writers have become aware of the disparity between, on the one hand, the promise of the new theory for being non-authoritarian, more inclusive and devoted to free and open criticism, and on the other hand, the silencing and totalising new master narratives of theory.

2. What Scientific Objectivity?

There are problems which arise when we apply many contemporary literary theories, especially the post-Saussurean variety, to ethnic minority writing. The fact that I have been stumbling over these problems for years is of some assurance to me that my reaction to theory is not merely an irrational antipathy.

My resistance to theory, at least my ambivalent reaction to theory, is one which I share with many ethnic minority writers themselves. On the other hand, not all ethnic minority writers resist theory; some have embraced it as an ally. And whenever I question the relationship between their writing and theory they attack me for my lack of support of their work, or my lack of understanding. Caterina Edwards, who was a witness to one of these verbal attacks, has observed that for Italian-American writers the use of literary theory in their work, especially postmodernism, seems to have been a way to create a space for themselves in the massive body of American literature. In the U.S. there are several groups contending for space on the literary

map: Afro-American writers, natives, Hispanics, religious and regional groups. In Australia the domination of Anglo-Celtic culture is being questioned by the voices of Aboriginal authors and migrant writers. Is theory playing a role in this debate over race, ethnicity, appropriation and legitimation? In Canada, because of the historic competition between English and French writers, the situation for the ethnic minority writer is different. Nevertheless, theory, or the debate over the role of theory, has become part of the discourse on the nature of ethnic minority writing.

It would be naive of me not to recognize, therefore, that there is a clear political dimension to the use of theory in the reading of ethnic minority writing. This political aspect is clearly at the centre of such books as *Feminism and the Politics of Difference* edited by Sneja Gunew and Anne Yeatman. Near the end of the introduction to this book they state:

[Vicki] Kirby warns, reading is not simply retrieval or diagnostics; nor must we forget Trinh's injunction that every decoding is interpolated by ideology. Such considerations appear to be suspended in the interaction with minority texts even by sophisticated readers. The suggestion that minority writers are inappropriately read in terms of postmodernist strategies is one of the more patronizing gestures of 'well-meaning' theorists. They [the minority writers] simply have, so it is argued, primitive stories which renders them fair game for salvage operations. (xxiv)

I do not presume to defend the patronizing gestures of well-meaning critics, but I can try to explain my position on some of these questions. We will briefly look at two problems which are often related to postmodern theory: intertextuality and the use of other languages in minority texts.

3. Intertextuality

More than 20 years of training and work in Comparative Literature has taught me the importance of intertextuality. But my work with ethnic minority texts causes me to question all the assumptions of intertextuality, and such axioms as, "Works of literature are the products of other works of literature, and not necessarily a reflection of the life experience of the author."

One problem is that intertextuality now has at least two meanings. The first is a purely literary one; the second is sociohistorical. The first type of intertextuality comes from French literary theory and focuses on the relations between two texts or among several texts. Often this takes the form of studies on the influence of one text or author on other texts. Examples of this are studies on the influence of Shakespeare on German literature, or the links between T. S. Eliot and French literature. This study of "les rapports de fait" was the foundation of la littérature comparée.

For French theorists, Michael Riffaterre and Gerard Genette, intertextuality depends on the reader's perception of the text and is a measure of its literariness, that is, its value. How many literary allusions, or "les rapports de fait" are there in a work by Ezra Pound or James Joyce? This manner of close reading reduces the process to a literary salvage operation. This type of intertextuality often leaves ethnic minority texts at a disadvantage because these works are not based on previous literary texts. There is little "anxiety of influence" from Canadian, American or British masterpieces in the following ethnic novels: Kogawa's *Obasan*, Ricci's *Lives of the*

Saints, Marlyn's Under the Ribs of Death, Mistry's Such a Long Journey, and Austin Clarke's Nine Men Who Laughed.

In my reading I find that ethnic minority works are grounded in the real experience of the writer, his or her family and cultural background. Reading a novel by Frank Paci, a play by Marco Micone, or a short story by Caterina Edwards as a text grounded in the ethnic experience is not a diminishment of the work. It is not reducing such works to conventional realism or to a kind of literary sociology. This mode of reading does tend to privilege transparency over more freely imaginative writing. Does this mode of reading render these works less literary and thus of less value in terms of the literary institution? A careful analysis of ethnic minority writing leads us to question the assumptions of literariness, value, and the process of canon formation.

There is another type of intertextuality, the sociohistorical theory of Bakhtin, which sees each utterance as the interaction of several systems of signs. Julia Kristeva applied this theory of intertextuality to literary texts. Each text is seen as a network of sign systems situating the literary structure in a social environment. This reading of the text as an interaction of different codes, discourses or voices, not only permits the inclusion of the ethnic minority work, but may in fact privilege it. Bakhtin's term for this phenomenon was heteroglossia, a way of describing the different discursive strata within any given utterance. These strata are derived from what Bakhtin called 'the socio-ideological languages' in a culture and depend on the contesting voices of a historical context.

Writing which is characterized by contesting voices, cultures and languages is typical of ethnic minority literature. The phenomenon of heteroglossia in the minority narrative often takes the form of various voices arguing for different points of view. In John Marlyn's novel, *Under the Ribs of Death*, Alex Hunter and his Onkel Janos argue for assimilation into English Canada and for the rejection of their Hungarian heritage. Alex's obsession with, and movement towards assimilation is so strong that there is an implicit move in the other direction, a counter movement voiced by Alex's father, and some other minor characters.

In the past this conflict has been described in terms of dramatic irony, a literary reading of this narrative, which is supported by the fact that it ends with the punishment of Alex and Onkel Janos. If we read the novel as an intersection of conflicting ideologies, does this intertextual interpretation in terms of the social history of Winnipeg and Canada in the 1920s not make this a less literary reading? If we leave aside literary irony does this intertextuality not reduce Marlyn's novel to a sociological tract?

In Austin Clarke's short stories about West Indians in Canada the reading of the contending voices and ideologies is central to understanding the narratives. In the story, "Canadian Experience," the conflict between the unemployed immigrant son in Canada and the father back in Barbados is expressed through different views on success. The father's words question the whole enterprise of immigration and the values of Canadian society.

You call yourself a son o' mine? You, a son o' mine?
With all the property that I leaving-back for you? You

come telling me you going to Canada as a' immigrant?
To be a stranger? Where Canada is? What is Canada? (48)

It is clear that in addition to the father's words we are meant to hear the answers of his son in Toronto. The other voice may be that of the individual Canadian reader. All these strata intersect with the ideologies being questioned. Does the notion of intertextuality help us to better understand the conflict between father and son within the sociohistorical context? Is this reading less literary than one which privileges postmodern pastiche of other works? In trying to answer these questions one thing becomes clear, the short stories of Austin Clarke require readings which are political. As Clarke points out, these men have forgotten who they are (2-3).

4. The Use of Other Languages

Related to the problem of intertextuality is the practice of using other languages in many Canadian narratives. Sylvia Soderlind has identified this practice as a marker of postmodern writing in Canada, "the tendency to resort to foreign, or even non-existent languages at transgressive moments. [not] the incorporation of other natural languages as a means of defining a specific cultural identity...[but resorting] to languages that are not obviously motivated by either sociological or narrative concerns." (90) In her article, "Canadian Cryptic," Soderlind examines the Indian words used in Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man*, the African languages in Godfrey's *The New Ancestors*, and the Greek in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*. In Soderlind's interpretation these foreign words are used for a sacred function as pure signifiers and thus are not translatable. This reading is consistent with postmodern theory and the novels she examines are often identified as Canadian postmodern works.

What happens when we apply this approach to works by ethnic minority writers? Do we find other postmodern works? Many minority writers use words and sentences from their heritage languages in their works for a variety of reasons, but most often to define a specific cultural identity.

In Rohinton Mistry's novel, *Such a Long Journey*, the Marathi and Gujarati languages of Bombay are used not to create exoticism but to define the cultural environment of Gustad's world. When Joy Kogawa uses Japanese terms in *Itsuka* and in *Obasan* it is both because the English words are not adequate and to define a distinct identity. In both works the contrasts between the majority society and the minority groups draw attention to the incommensurable aspects of cultural difference and suggest readings which are political.

The ethnic minority writer believes in the transparent relationship between word and world. The word used in the work refers to an object outside the work. This is not a naive belief in the one-to-one relationship between the sign and the referent since there is also a strong sense and use of metaphor, a search for the new possibilities in language. Ironically this awareness of the value of transparent language arises out of the experience of the ambiguities of language, the use of different languages and the problem of translation between them. Very often the foreign words are translated rather than used for their incantatory value. A good example of this transparency can be found in Nino Ricci's novel, *In a Glass House*. Gelsomina is trying to care for Vincenzo's

baby sister and one evening finds that she doesn't know how to make her stop crying: "E niend', it's nothing," she kept saying, like a chant, "E niend', poveretta. E niend'." (19)

The Italian phrase is translated, "it's nothing." The chanting of the Italian phrase by Gelsomina dramatizes that she is upset along with the baby. The Italian words if they have any magic as signifiers are meant to soothe her and the crying baby. Rather than suggesting the cryptic incantations of the postmodern novel identified by Sylvia Soderlind, the use of foreign languages in the English texts of ethnic minority novels suggests the conventions of realism.

Along with questions of authenticity and identity the question of language use leads us to the problem of realism. Here we mean classical realism and the expressive theory of literature. In recent years these have taken a beating at the hands of the proponents of post-Saussurean theories.

Realism is an appealing mode of writing for both creator and reader because it offers itself as transparent. Unlike much postmodern writing, which explicitly draws attention to itself as a constructed text, the realistic work tends to efface its own textuality and its existence as discourse. Realism is most effective when it leads to the recognition of the already familiar. In ethnic minority writing realism is even more appealing because this experience is emphasized through the shock of recognition for the ethnic reader. The pleasure of the text comes not so much from the verisimilitude of the detailed depiction of events, as from the recognition of familiar experiences encountered for the first time in literature. In English Canadian literature we never saw images of ourselves as Italian immigrants, or South Asians, or Japanese, or West Indians; instead we were given images of others, the majority with whom we were required to identify.

The form of the classical realist text in conjunction with the expressive theory of writing and ideology privileges the interpolation of the reader as subject. The ethnic minority reader is given a reality, an existence, in society he or she never had before. The authority of the author with the ethnic signature reinforces this. Is this an essentialist trap?

This model of intersubjective communication, of shared understanding of a text which represents a familiar world is the guarantee not only of the truth of the text, that is, realism, but of the reader's existence as an autonomous and knowing subject in a world of intelligent subjects.

This realist reading of the ethnic minority text by the minority reader constitutes an ideological practice. The meaning is constructed by the reader, but it is a meaning he or she can recognize. Is the reasoning circular here?

I have often written that Italian-Canadian writing began in 1978, not because that was when a number of books were published, so much as because that was when a group of writers emerged who participated in a discourse which gave this writing meaning. This discourse needed not just writers, texts and readers, but language (languages), ideology and an interaction with theory, whether that was resistance or acceptance. For these writers these publications had political dimensions which helped them to try to define the nature of their relationship with Italy (Europe) and with Canada. Long denied not only a voice but also an existence in both Canada and Italy

these writers were not now about to subscribe to structuralist theories which proclaimed the death of the author.

This questioning of theory by some ethnic minority writers; this reluctance to abandon the conventions of classical realism is as much a political position as a literary tendency. Many of us are well aware that our subject positions are discursively constructed, and we want to determine the discourse, since it is the location of resistance. Our position is similar to many women writers; in the end all we have are our stories.

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