Addressing the Current Crisis in Canadian Multiculturalism

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Abstract

The paper seeks to examine the case of multiculturalism in the context of Canada. It aims to introduce the various political and philosophical debates which have enveloped the notion, and then build an argument to suggest the ways in which the ideal of a multicultural nation-state is a "problem", citing two examples from diasporic literature. Since it is fashionable to tag theoretical concepts with an expiry, a suggestion towards what comes after multiculturalism is made where "post-multiculturalism" is discussed in the light of cosmopolitanism and interculturalism as the two possible alternatives.

Key-words: multiculturalism, nation-state, cosmopolitanism, interculturalism, diaspora, Canada.

The UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) states, "Culture should be regarded as a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group", and that, "respect for the diversity of cultures, tolerance dialogue, and cooperation, in a climate of mutual trust and understanding are among the best guarantees of international peace and security".[i]

Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka, in *Multicultural Citizenship*, defines culture as societal culture which encompasses "the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life" for a given people. With Canada's history of continuous immigration since the early 15th C that started with explorer John Cabot, and with Canada sporting the highest per capita immigration rate in the world[ii], Prime Minster Pierre Elliott Trudeau announced that Canada would adopt The Policy of Multiculturalism under a Bilingual Framework in 1971, in order to identify and respect the diversity present in the various micro-cultures that were thought to be essential in defining Canada. The Canadian Consultative Council on Multiculturalism was set up in 1973 and it again met in 1977 after which the law on multiculturalism was passed in 1988.

Therefore, multiculturalism was recognised in the area of policy in order to deal with the management of difference, where Canada consolidated its homogeneity by simultaneously acknowledging and managing various kinds of differences that include ethnicity, race, religion,

languages, cultures, etc. It marked a shift in the history of the nation where differences were unrecognised and were expected to become a part of the mainstream cultural practices and ethos of the nation.

As a philosophy, multiculturalism finds its roots in the Kantian notion of universal hospitality in his 1795 essay, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch". In this essay he lays down a premise for attaining peace in the world and states that, "The law of world citizenship shall be limited to conditions of universal hospitality". In principle, it dwells on the idea that people share common spaces and they need to express tolerance and hospitality towards one another in order to live amicably. Multiculturalism also expresses a similar liberalism of thought in which national cultures are expected to be inclusive of difference. Jacques Derrida[iii] finds the Kantian discussion of hospitality hyperbolic and discusses the inherent contradiction present in being universally hospitable. He suggests that hostility is a prerequisite for hospitality because only through a recognition of difference, can one understand the other and terms it, "hostipitality", adding an unsettling dimension in the project of multiculturalism raising questions about otherness and acceptance.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor comments on the politics of recognition and identity stating, "With the move from honour (in traditional societies) to dignity (in modern societies), has come a politics of universalism, emphasizing the equal dignity of all citizens, and the content of this politics has been the equalization of rights and entitlements. What is to be avoided at all costs is the existence of 'first class' and 'second class' citizens. Naturally, the actual detailed measures justified by this principle have varied greatly, and have often been controversial. For some, equalization has affected only civil rights and voting rights; for others, it has extended only into the socioeconomic sphere. People who are systematically handicapped by

poverty from making the most of their citizenship rights are deemed to have been relegated to second-class status, necessitating remedial action through equalization…" (1994. p. 37-38, 44 and 51). Therefore, multiculturalism works towards creating a homogenous core of the nation against which differences are measured and groups are allowed to retain differences while maintaining allegiance to the core. The issue of Aboriginal Rights has dominated the Canadian political discourse much before other minority communities made their presence felt. Since the claim to land is a unique condition of the aboriginal existence, they are distinct from the other migrant communities that are a part of Canada's cultural spread. Multiculturalism seeks to assimilate the aboriginals by granting equal rights and opportunities but fails to understand the fact that they would lose their unique identities as communities once they become a part of the mainstream. In fact, multiculturalism is seen as a distraction from the demands for a separate nationhood for Aborigines/ indigenous groups.

Some theorists believe that global diasporas are a result of the policy of multiculturalism which in turn challenges the jurisdiction and supremacy of nation-states. The issue of residential segregation casts a shadow on the Canadian ideal for integration. Statistics Canada's Ethnic Diversity Survey report[iv] stated that ethnic conclaves had more than 40% of a same-group ethnic population, and that was viewed as ghettoization. These ghettos allow communities to practice their own distinct cultures, while affirming allegiance to the larger national culture. Presence of various religious minorities also results in a debate between what is public law and private practise. For example, international media has covered issues related to wearing of religious symbols by immigrant groups in Western societies as something that causes much uproar and debate.

The women's movement in Canada has talked about race, class, religion, aboriginality and sexual orientation amongst a host of other issues and in that way it is more conscious than most movements worldwide but multiculturalism, as a policy, although provides a set of laws for governance, fails to address the unique issues with respect to the way in which women are positioned in various communities. A homogenising of categories like immigrant, racial/ religious other, or on the basis of gender is what only touches the tip of the iceberg as far as the problems regarding multiculturalism are concerned. Somewhere in today's policy formation and assimilation, Canadian multiculturalism is more of a lip-service by the media where cultural markers in terms of diversity in food, clothing and lifestyle are hailed as examples of how the policy has succeeded in attaining its goals.

In an attempt to distinguish between policy and practice, Stuart Hall argues that the more illustrative term 'multi-cultures', which points towards heterogeneous and diverse nations, is more apt in terms of usage; and the term 'multiculturalism' should be used as indicative of government policies which are formulated in order to manage this diversity. In a similar argument, The Chicago Cultural Studies Group prefers the term 'critical multiculturalism', rethinking the possibility of questioning and analyses, rather than a mere acceptance of policies.

Canadian historian and sociologist Gerard Bouchard distinguishes between minorities and majorities present in countries, based on the history of migration in order to categorise and classify communities on the basis of newer or older claims. Taylor and Bouchard were asked to set up a Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences in 2008 by the government of Quebec to deal with the issue of religious accommodation in this primarily Francophone province of Canada. The commission conducted conferences in various regions of Quebec. It provided platforms to individuals, organizations, and experts on Quebec

identity, religion, and integration of various cultural communities to voice out their concerns. Their conclusion was that, even though Quebec is a pluralist province, the Canadian policy of multiculturalism 'does not appear well-suited to conditions in Quebec'. Quebec also went through a referendum in 1995, trying to separate itself from Canada by demanding a separate nationhood and the result was that 49.42% voted in favour and 50.56% voted against separation, and Quebec was not allowed to disassociate itself.

Nephew of V.S. Naipaul, Quebecoise author Neil Bissoondath wrote *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* in 1994 which highlighted the failures of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. It established the fact that multiculturalism resulted in ghettoization across Canada and that disallowed any real bond that the immigrant might have established with the nation-state. Multiculturalism has "preached tolerance rather than encouraging acceptance; and it is leading us into a divisiveness so entrenched that we face a future of multiple solitudes with no central notion to bind us" (p. 192). What was left back home was sacred and that is where the sensibilities of the immigrant were rooted. Resisting the hyphenated identity of an East Indian-Trinidadian-Canadian living in Quebec, he believed that the Canadian Multiculturalism Act resulted in exoticisation of difference and thrived on uniqueness which was detrimental to the progress of the nation-state.

Indo-Canadian poet Lakshmi Gill in her poem "Letter to a Prospective Immigrant" details the harsh weather that Canada is known for. Almost in the Sussana Moody, or later Margaret Atwood style of writing; she uses nature in order to point out how hostile Canada is for an immigrant, and more so if it is a woman. In lines like, "Make no mistake: divided, you fall.", "This is no cotton candy country, no penny arcade; come prepared", and "They need an orgy, communion, sacrifice, expiation...hell does not give, but takes.", there is a warning about the

boundaries and restrictions to the proliferation of differing customs and beliefs, in a what is clearly a profit-driven relationship that is non-symbiotic.

Paul Gilroy notes in his *Postcolonial Melancholia* that it can be a "market-driven pastiche of multiculturalism that is manipulated from above by commerce" (2005, p.147). At the same time, various cultural or ethnic groups can claim allegiance to their own local communities in order to create a unique identity for themselves.

In such a scenario there is a need to raise the following questions:

1. Should a call for a separate nationhood by the Aboriginals in Canada be answered?

2. Should ghettoization of immigrant/ religious minorities be encouraged?

3. Are women expected to carry out a role different from men in maintaining cultural links?

4. In the light of these three questions, which have focussed on the three primary concerns regarding the failure of multiculturalism as are raised by this paper, what notion of identity should a Canadian national ascribe to?

The May 2008 publication of the Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*[v] was a report that recognised that "old approaches to the management of cultural diversity were no longer adequate to societies in which the degree of that diversity (rather than its existence) was unprecedented and ever-growing. The responses to the questionnaires sent to member states, in particular, revealed a belief that what had until recently been a preferred policy approach, conveyed in shorthand as "multiculturalism", had been found inadequate."

In 2010, Will Kymlicka said that, "there is a surprising consensus that we are indeed in a post-multicultural era," with multiculturalism being reduced to the "panoply of customs, traditions, music, and cuisine". Post-multiculturalists suggest cosmopolitanism and interculturalism as the two possibilities that need to be explored in contemporary times.

Cosmopolitanism views all citizens of this world, irrespective of their political leanings, as members of one large community. The first philosopher of cosmopolitanism seems to be Diogenes, who in the 4th B.C. stated that "when he was asked where he came from, he replied, 'I am a citizen of the world'". Marx and Engels tag cosmopolitanism as an ideological reflection of capitalism. They regard market capitalism as inherently expansive, breaking the bounds of the nation-state system, as evidenced by the fact that production and consumption had become attuned to faraway lands.[vi] Cultural cosmopolitanism is a concept under debate as it is not possible for an individual to completely disassociate from any nationalist or other identity-related politics. At the same time, although minority rights are a point of concern in multiculturalism, they stand to lose under the threat of cosmopolitanism which shies away from any cultural attachment. Cosmopolitanism seeks to fashion an identity based on a homogenous identification with global concerns and cultural ethos. The biggest critique of this theory is in the blatant homogenisation that it seeks to propagate in every sphere of identity formation and for that reason it hasn't gained enough momentum in contemporary socio-political discourses as a concrete alternative to multiculturalism.

The crisis in Quebec was instrumental in pushing for interculturalism as the new model of forming public policy, rather than multiculturalism. It emphasized on fostering interactional relations between members of different cultures, while allowing for space to strongly assert their individual cultural identities. Charles Taylor believed that Quebec would like to indulge in an open-ended collective project of defining its relationship with Anglophone Canada, rather than simply an acknowledgement of uniqueness and diversity. Martha Nussbaum in her work *Cultivating Humanity*, describes interculturalism as involving "the recognition of common human needs across cultures and of dissonance and critical dialogue within cultures" and that

interculturalists "reject the claim of identity politics that only members of a particular group have the ability to understand the perspective of that group".[vii] Thus, interculturalism resists policy formation and is a dialogical process, rather than a set of guidelines. It looks forward to such an exchange where members discuss their respective cultures to learn about and question their own, as well as each other's cultural practices.

Australian academic Prof. Vijay Mishra suggests that "a nation's dominant community … is never part of the multicultural mosaic; everyone else is" (2012, p. 28-29). In that sense multiculturalism poses to be a threat to minority discourses on culture. In discussing multiculturalism, this paper has substantially argued how, in the context of Canada, the policy does not seem to be working anymore. However, an alternative like interculturalism, as promoted by Quebec, could be seen as a recourse for the contemporary post-multiculturalist Canada.

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Endnotes

[i] www.unesco.org/confgen/press_rel/021101_clt_diversity.shtml
[ii] According to *Canada's Immigration Program* (October 2004), Canada has the highest per capita immigration rate in the world.

[iii] Jacque Derrida / Anne Dufourmantelle. *Of Hospitality. Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Trans. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000. x + 160 pp. The two important lectures conducted in Paris in January 1996, are the "Foreigner Question" and "Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality".

[iv] http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=4508
[v] http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/publication_whitepaper_id_en.asp
[vi] http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmopolitanism/
[vii] http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/interculturalism