

An Australian Learning Experience: Prejudice, Racism and Indifference in the Short Stories of South Asian Diaspora in Australia

Amit Sarwal

I

Australia—the world’s largest island and smallest continent is often distinguished from the rest of the world by its history—“a colony populated by people whom Britain had thrown out [but who] proved to be so loyal to the British Empire for so long” and its geography—“red earth and its alien flora and fauna” (see Ferguson 2003). Australia has, through migration, developed into one of the world’s most culturally diverse societies. This increased diversity has brought with it many new cultural experiences, and has undoubtedly made Australia a more multiculturally vibrant and animated place. Manfred Jurgensen claims that “with the arrival of the white man this country became multicultural on a permanent basis” (80). As a settler society, with the exception of 2.7% of the Indigenous population, “everyone is either a migrant or a self-conscious descendant of a migrant” (Van der Veer 2). Despite this ethnic and racial diversity, as a result of the White Australia Policy (1901-1973), Australia has struggled with racism or negative stereotyping of the “Other” (Castles 53). Jeremy Sammut commenting on the practice of racism in White Australia writes:

In the light of prejudices that long lay behind the White Australia policy, the nation’s transformation into a harmonious multi-racial society over the last fifty years

is amazing. It appears almost miraculous that a country that for so long was determined to reject the mass migration of alien races has peacefully incorporated millions of new arrivals from an array of racial backgrounds. (qtd. in Windschuttle 29)

Today, as the certitudes of the nation state are eroded under the pressures of globalisation, social prejudice and racism are prevalent in both multicultural and monocultural societies throughout the world.¹ This might be seen as “a communal reaction to fear, a backlash against globalization that is perceived to be a threat to national identity” (Khan 2001).

In the aftermath of the highly-publicised racist attacks or opportunistic violence on Indian students in Melbourne in 2008-2009,² many have struggled with the question: Is Australia a racist country? S. Zelinka defines racism as:

A belief in the superiority of one particular racial or ethnic group and, flowing from this, the exclusion of other groups from some or many aspects of society. This exclusion (and often exploitation) is seen as legitimate simply because of the difference or supposed inferiority of the other group’s race, ethnicity or nationality. (1)

B. Troyna explains the complexity and contradictions of racism as an ideology:

What is evident, then is that racism is an ideology that is continually changing, being challenged, interrupted and reconstructed, and which often appears in contradictory forms. ... specific forms of racism can be expected to change, and inherited racist discourse are likely to be reconstituted. New circumstances are likely to lead to new formulations of racism. (15)

Further according to noted Australian historian Marilyn Lake, these formulations of new racisms may be a result of the “yearning for a White Australia” that has never died (qtd. in Windschuttle 28). Gweda Tavan has also observed that “racism remains the skeleton in closet” and “Its ghost arises with each new decade to haunt political debate, whether the issue is multiculturalism, asylum-seekers, Asian immigration or Indigenous affairs” (qtd. in Windschuttle 28). Chris Gilligan has noted that everyone agrees that racism is “a scourge, a malignant cancer which eats away at the body of a healthy society” but still new racism or social prejudices are a lived reality for many people in this part of the world and it remains largely a silent or invisible issue. The question that begs to be asked here is: Is it necessary

that racism be “institutionalised”?³ In this relation, Panikos Panayi has observed: “All minorities in all societies in all historical periods have endured hostility from the government and the majority populations in the countries in which they live” (102). Further, according to Gopalkrishnan and Babacan, racism “diminishes the social fabric of society, creates social tension, and perpetuates social inequality and impacts on the life chances of the people involved. Racism affects many sub-sections of society: those who perpetuate it, those who are at the “receiving end,” and those who are not directly involved in the problem” (1). The perpetuation of racism, as Ghassan Hage has pointed out, is a collective social act as: “Violent racists are always a tiny minority. However, their breathing space is determined by the degree of ‘ordinary’ non-violent racism a government and culture allow to flourish within it” (247). Going back once again to the academic/scholarly definitions of racism, sociologists define racism as a system of “group privilege”—prejudice plus power.⁴ Similarly, in *Portraits of White Racism*, David Wellman has defined racism as “culturally sanctioned beliefs, which, regardless of intentions involved, defend the advantages whites have because of the subordinated position of racial minorities” (x).

There is of course much more that could be written about the logic of racial indifference. This article attempts to critique racism, prejudices and indifference as represented in the short stories of South Asian diaspora in Australia as multicultural literature is an important forum for negotiating these issues. It concludes with the assertion that for Australians and its various migrant groups an understanding of their diversity and tolerance of difference is required to resolve racial tensions and build a stable and secure future.

II

Sunil Badami, an Indian-Australian short story writer, recalls his growing up years in Australia being one of only three Indian kids at school, who were often called by diverse names such as “Curry-muncher, towel-head, abo, coon, boong, darkie, nig-nog, golli-wog.” This race-based prejudice, violence and dislike towards a particular minority group denote “racism.”⁵ However, on the other hand, there also exists significant protest against such incidents and support for the minority communities.⁶ The ambiguity of such a situation is clearly reflected in the words of Sangeeta, one of the interviewed second-generation Indian women in Vijaya

Joshi's book *Indian Daughters Abroad*: "I think to be accepting of other people is a typically Australian trait. ... Australians are willing to accept all the different cultures. I know people will disagree with me on that point" (139-140). But she quickly adds:

May be now they're not so accepting because economic times are bad; competition is greater. Now maybe they're starting to begrudge the fact that people from other nations are coming in, doing better. That is leading to some negative things about migrants. (140)

Although an accepting nation, times of economic recession has made Australians suspicious of people from other nations that are coming in (see Hassan 2005). This sudden realization, takes us directly into the psychological definition of racism that is also related to the growing visibility of South Asians today in almost every city of Australia that as a phenomenon was absent even two decades ago.

An interesting perspective of migrant's engagement and understanding of Australia and the Australian way of life is provided in Chris Raja's "White Boots," where he uses the Aussie Rules football as a metaphor for assimilation. Chris, the narrator, immigrated to Australia from Calcutta with his parents, when he was just eleven years old. To him everything is strange, new and alien. Also, his idea of Melbourne, the one he always imagined, taking references from the model of American cities presented in Hollywood films, is shattered—"Melbourne was clean and green ... with not a person in sight on the road except for those who drive" (98). He further notes: "I found this place particularly quiet. But here, on television, at the football people seemed to come alive and their personalities shone through" (98). It is only in football that his young mind can grasp the idea of multitude and an Australian national spirit.

My eleven-year-old brain tried to grasp the reality of being in Australia, of living in Australia for the rest of my life. I hadn't even been to an Australian school yet but still I managed to understand that this strange game, the roughness, the secret hidden rules, would be useful currency. It would help me integrate and come to terms with being a stranger in a new country that was now going to be my home. (97)

The narrator as a thirteen year old boy, grappling with his new identity, idolizes Warwick Capper, the "idiosyncratic footballer, in a strange and alien land," who in

a way teaches the young migrant the “importance of being an individual” (98). The narrator notes that Capper with his tall height, blond hair, tight shorts and white boots stood out from the rest of the players. To his surprise, as he observes that “not everyone in Australia was blond and blue-eyed as I was led to believe growing up in India in the seventies. Naively, the young me had expected to become blond and blue-eyed when I became an Australian” (98). It is the notion of individuality and being different than the rest that the narrator learns from Capper. Nevertheless, the white students at school made fun of him, his accent and his difference—“Have you ever got on with someone?” “You speak funny” (98). It is his friendship with a white Australian boy Darren Carter and football that has helped him adapt to living in Australia. He notes “I was lonely and the football on television occupied me” and “It was only after Darren Carter became my friend that I slowly began to feel accepted” (98). Chris saved Darren from getting mugged by other white boys at school and therefore in their friendship, one can read the Australian ideal of mateship.

According to Wray Vamplew “Sport has played a role in community formation and perpetuation; it has been part of the life of immigrants, providing a cultural link with what they have left behind” (370). Further, in using Aussie Rules as a multicultural suburban event, initiating the new migrants into the Australian way of life, Michael Atkinson, the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Government of South Australia, says

People coming to Australia already have a passion for sport, whether it is soccer, cricket or rugby. Football is so much a part of Australian culture it is important for our community that migrants who are interested in sport are introduced to our national game, to share with us the highs and the lows of following their local team. (qtd. in Simon Forrest 2009)

The Australian government and its various agencies recognize sports culture as one of the major entering points for migrants into the country’s national culture. According to Lieutenant Governor Hieu Van Le, Chairman, South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission:

Giving that extra support to migrants when they arrive in Australia will reap rewards in the future. It is important that new migrants are given every support to take part in activities that form the basis of our culture, so that they adapt more

quickly to life in their new country. (qtd. in Simon Forrest 2009)

However, John Kinsella sees Australian Rules Football or footy as a sports culture which inculcates a lot of ugly and aggressive masculinity, sexism, racism and animal cruelty. He observes that footy was used as a sign of “cultural assimilation,” of recognising the power of Australianness, but somewhere it has also become the sign of “blind nationalism” that has led to the propagation of the game through many strata of Australian society and migrants (see 2002: 21-24).

Despite the development of many policy initiatives, racism remains a major concern. Historically and in more contemporary times, discrimination or indifference has emerged as a problem for the Australian government and the intelligentsia—creative writers and academics. There are many forms of racism or discrimination. Culture and race sometimes become intertwined and dependent upon each other, even to the extent of including nationality or language among the categories that “race” covers to the set of definitions of racism. Some scholars believe that in Australian culture racialisation has been so normalized by stereotyping the “Other” that it is deeply disturbing. Richard Delgado points out that: “A culture constructs social reality in ways that promote its own self-interest Our social world, with its rules, practices, and assignments of prestige and power, is not fixed; rather, we construct it with words, stories and silences” (xiv). A case in point is Yasmine Gooneratne’s story, “Navaranjini Takes Note of Signs and Visions.” Gooneratne describes Navaranjini’s first cab ride from the airport to a suburb in Sydney or in other words her first brush with Australian society. The ride is imbued with Navaranjani’s vision:

I had decided, quite early on, that though I didn’t know much about Australia to start with, I was going to learn. Part of the baggage I packed for our visit to Australia, I now realize, was a very strong determination to make a great success of the next five years, for my husband’s sake. And so I decided to equip myself early for whatever Australia would put before us. (36)

Navaranjani is confident about her preparation but is alarmed by the pace of the city, grim faces, stickers on cars and racist graffiti on the walls—“ASIANS OUT” and “BASH A PAK A DAY” (40). Her first impressions of Australia turn into fear as she realizes “anything can happen in Australia” (38). But she wonders about an Australian immigration poster—“a smiling child with her woolly lamb”

(40)—that she once saw as a schoolgirl in Sri Lanka.

I knew, then, that the welcoming smile on the face of that little girl in the poster school had been meant for someone else. Whoever it was that she had held her flowers out to so invitingly, it could not have been for me. (41)

Her initial confidence and self-determination of making this journey of relocation from Sri Lanka to Australia a success, seeing the strange gaze and racist remarks around her becomes weak.

Similarly, Ruth Van Gramberg in her short autobiographical narrative “Immigration Dreams, Foundations and Formations” points out that once the immigrants have undertaken their journey and reached Australia they are often subjected to racism in this adopted homeland:

On the way you’ll be misused, mistaken, confused, churned up, spat upon and sworn at. Your emotions will be ripped apart and laid bare, as you strive to survive and there will be occasions when you feel so lost and inadequate, you wish to run back to where you came from, to admit defeat. ... you lose your equilibrium, as the earth has not even begun to stabilize beneath your feet and you don’t know who or what you are... . (209)

The results of such racism and dehumanization can be very dangerous for a new migrant and emotionally he or she will feel drained out and the simple everyday happenings that one takes for granted, “can develop into the most frightening, desolate and desperate situations” (210). As

The beginning of a new life in a new country can be very traumatic for any migrant. There are so many barriers to be overcome, largely the complete geographical, physical and cultural differences are intimidating. More so, if language is a problem. (210)

Van Gramberg, feels an advantage over other migrant groups and other people from the Indian subcontinent as her family is proficient in English. She was lucky that she did not face any problems in Australia because of her language. But for others from South Asia, she further notes, “survival for the moment, for each precious day, constitutes a challenge” (210). She observes that travelling is always a problem at the beginning for a migrant—be it the journey from homeland to hostland or to a destination within the hostland.

Travelling was another nightmare without a map, as one only knew the name of the destination written on a piece of paper. How many stops between or beyond was part of the unknown, however once there, you felt it was another parcel of alien territory you had made friends with. (210)

But once the migrant becomes self-confident and starts adjusting and familiarising with his/her new environment, space, and people around him/her, gradually, “a feeling of stability emerges” and each accomplishment is like “a milestone, stored away for future reference” and looks “forward to the future with enthusiasm and love” (210).

Particularly following the 9/11 attacks in the USA, Muslim Australians have experienced a significant rise in Islamophobia and racism.⁷ Such prejudice has manifested in the spectrum of violent attacks, mosque and other property damage, slurs, and in stereotyping in the mainstream Australian media.⁸ Dr William Jonas, Race Discrimination Commissioner, after listening to Muslim community’s members’ experiences of discrimination and vilification post 9/11, summarized it in his report titled, *Isma – Listen: National Consultations on Eliminating Prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians*:

What we heard was often disturbing. Participants identifiable as Arab or Muslim by their dress, language, name or appearance told of having been abused, threatened, spat on, assailed with eggs, bottles, cans and rocks, punched and even bitten. Drivers have been run off the road and pedestrians run down on footpaths and in car parks. People reported being fired from jobs or refused employment or promotion because of their race or religion. Children have been bullied in school yards. Women have been stalked, abused and assaulted in shopping centres. Private homes, places of worship and schools were vandalized and burned.(iii)

The above paragraph best summarizes the reported incidents of discrimination experienced and a general rise in intolerance towards by Muslim Australians following 9/11. They were attacked not because of their “individual actions, but on the basis of a cultural stereotype portrayed as barbaric” (Griffiths161). These acts of racism and anti-Muslim prejudice in Australia can be linked to the Australian media’s exaggerating information regarding Muslims in general which is closely linked with the American media reports. This made the Muslim community in

Australia more vulnerable and isolated. The question that arises here is: Was Muslim community in Australia always seen with distrust and fear?⁹ Hanifa Deen in her autobiographical narrative “Curry, Crusades and Scripture” compares the 1990s with the 1940s and the 1950s, the time she grew up as a second generation Pakistani and observes,

When looking back at the Australia in which I grew up—the Australia of the 1940s and 1950s—a feeling of nostalgia for a bygone era is singularly lacking. The dominant feeling is rather one of relief that fifty years down the track, society has changed for the better, that our regional insularity has broken down and that cultural diversity is not the aberration it once was. (139)

Hanifa notes that the place, an inner city suburb, where she grew up in 1940s and 50s in Western Australia, “was jokingly and sometimes affectionately called ‘little Italy,’ but it was also a ‘little Greece,’ a ‘little China,’ a ‘little India’ and so on. The same area contained a Muslim mosque, a Jewish synagogue, the various Orthodox churches and the more ‘normal’ houses of worship” (139). As the daughter of a Pakistani-Australian herbalist, she was often teased by high school boys about the “strange-looking herbs” at her father’s shop. She further notes, that although at school the “classroom was ethnically diverse, the school curriculum, especially social studies, was ‘true blue’ Britannica” (140). And as the only Muslim student in the school, she further notes, “I writhed with vague feelings of injustice and persecution” (140). School teachers, instead of enlightening her on historical and religious differences, added on to the confusion. But in the 1990s the scene has totally changed for Muslim children in Australia. Although “still a minority,” they belong to “communities which collectively have a much stronger presence in society” (141). Her mother explained the earlier injustice and absurdity of White Australia Policy to the children in her colloquial way: “If Jesus Christ wanted to come to Australia ... he wouldn’t be allowed in” (141). Similarly, impressions of rural life in Australia particularly of the Muslim family and children, is provided in Mena Abdullah’s stories from a Muslim and at times also from a Hindu viewpoint. These works from religious perspectives are, according to Annette Robyn Corkhill, “a challenge to dominance” of Anglo-Australians and are “made all the more remarkable and potent by the stories’ gentleness, humour, subtlety and apparent guilelessness” (72).

Anura and his wife, in Sunil Govinnage's "The Vanished Trails," migrated from Canada to Australia in the hope that they will get good jobs and secure future for their daughter. But "despite the Canadian experience, Anura could not secure a good job after he arrived in Australia" (75). While his wife is able to get a job as administrative assistant, Anura blames Australians for his plight—"some employers are racists in Australia" (75). Siri, his friend from school days, on hearing this wonders: "*Is Australia a racist country? Why are migrants not always treated properly?*" (75). Anura's frustration and disappointment with himself has resulted in targeting others for his missed opportunities. In his daughter's view, her parents have changed a lot, but "they're still more Canadians than Aussies!" (78), as Canadians are more "demanding," while the Aussies are "more laidback and not aggressive" (79). On the other hand, Anura's friend Siri, who is also struggling as a writer in Australia, cannot get his poems published in magazines, even after doing a university course. He notes: "There is no place for migrants' writings in Australia. Everything has to be white and linked to their bloody convict past!" (76). Siri, after all the rejections, loses all inspiration to write. He feels that since his writings deal with Aboriginal issues and deaths in custody, his themes are not good enough for white Australian magazines (76). Anura too has a very strong feeling that behind the rejection of Siri's works, there is an element of racism involved. The daughter, on the other hand, has accepted the fact that she is an Australian, and "Just like the white settlers, we have settled down in Australia. We need to accept things as they are. We can't change the past and history" (79). Siri knows that he and his friend cannot "become a part of the history" but can sure "try to change things" for their small community and a better tomorrow (79).

Sunil Govinnage's another short story "Black Moon" is set at the time when the One Nation Party, a Right-wing political party that advocates zero immigration to Australia, sweeps Queensland elections and is expected to get 25% votes in the coming Western Australia elections too. Jayadeva's son, Asela, asks his father:

"Dad, what will happen to Asians if they [One Nation Party] come to power in Perth? Will we have to leave Australia? Are we Australians or Sri Lankans, Dad? Me, Sunitha and *amma* have Aussie passports, but you don't! Will they ask you to leave?" (9-94)

These questions are not troubling only young Asela, but every migrant's mind

consequent to the rise of One Nation Party and Pauline Hanson. Jayadeva answers: "Where can we go? This is our country. You're all Australians. Maybe this is the time for me to get an Australian passport as well" (94). But why in the first place did Jayadeva not become an Australian citizen like his wife? The answer to this lies in his emotional attachment or the uncut umbilical knot that attaches him to his homeland Sri Lanka. He wonders: "*How can I give up my Sri Lankan citizenship? I was born there, grew up there, studied there, perhaps one day I may go there to die...*" (94). He left Sri Lanka because of terrorism and limited opportunities. Australia has been good to them but will Asians be able to "continue to stay here with racism" (95). The father-son discussion and their interaction on the issue of the One Nation Party, and prejudice towards the Chinese migrants in the restaurant, provide a humorous peek into "the inescapable ramifications of multiculturalism in Australia" (xviii).

Yasmine Gooneratne in her story "Bharat Changes His Image" provides the first impressions of the couple, Navaranjini and Bharat, who are impressed by the "many fascinating things about Australia, its landscape, its wildlife and its people" (45). The narrator, as if learning from a tourist brochure, learns two things about Australia that are also told to every new immigrant coming here:

... Australia is very rich in unusual species of bird, beast and fish, there are some varieties of Australian wildlife which should be carefully avoided. "Australia is the most dangerous country in the world," said the brochure the Rentokil man left in our letter box when he came round to spray the foundations of our house against funnel-web spiders and redbacks. Those are the creatures every newcomer to Australia is warned about. ... and told me to beware of jellyfish off Australian beaches in January, and sharks and stonefish all the year around.

"Better watch out for stonefish, they're poisonous, and very very dangerous," Christina said. "One encounter with a stonefish can be fatal." (45)

This information is mainly related to the natural dangers that lurk on the earth and sea of Australia. One thing that Navaranjani sarcastically observes about the people of Australia is

... like the Australian stonefish, which lies on the bottom of the ocean floor like a harmless piece of rock until you step on it, Australian people can be endlessly surprising. One surprising thing about them is, that deep, very deep, a long way

down, Australians are true Orientalists at heart. Of course like, like many Asians visitors to this country, I didn't find that out at first, because Australians hide their sensitive souls under a rough exterior. I was fooled, just like everyone else. Just like my husband. (45)

Further, according to Susan Koshy, some scholars "treat South Asian color consciousness as equivalent to white racism and criticises the immigrant community for denying its own blackness" (285). A point ironically expressed by Gooneratne's narrator, Navaranjini, in "Bharat Changes His Image," where she observes this in relation to how we perceive "Others":

You see, at home in Sri Lanka, and I suppose in India too, which is the centre, after all, of the *real* Asian world, we always called far Eastern people "Ching-Chongs." My husband says it's racist way of speaking, that we learned racism from the British in our colonial days, and must discard it totally now that we are free. But coming from such a Westernised family as his, he just doesn't understand. There's nothing racist about saying ... that word; racism's unknown in India and Sri Lanka. Race and caste and colour just have their appointed places there in the divine scheme of things, in which everything moves in a beautifully regulated order. Everyone knows *that*. (46)

The narrator, in her innocence, speaks from a position of a loyal subject and feels that if you are not malignant towards others and follow the "divine scheme" of colour, caste and race then you are not a racist. She forgets that following such an order of things without thinking about the consequences of its result in the larger plan of things is quite dangerous, as racial prejudices are certainly present even among the South Asians (see Schmidt-Haberkamp 2004).

Gooneratne, in an interview, has pointed out that when writing this short story she felt that, if "her racist Asian characters were to come up against fictional Australians, racist themselves, largely due to their colonial hang-ups, maybe they'd cancel each other out" (Rama 4). Australian racism and prejudices are interestingly presented through Prof. Blackstone, a sociology Professor from the same University where Bharat teaches. Blackstone reminds us of Professor Blainey and the debate that erupted in Australia in 1984, when Blainey expressed fears on the size of Australia's migrant intake. Blackstone, like Blainey, questions the concept of multicultural Australia, which in turn has become more Asianised. His provocative

statements make headlines and stir national debate. He in his speech on the radio lashes out at Asians:

“Asians,” he’d said on radio, “pollute the air with the fumes of roasting meat. And we Australians,” he’d added, “must be alert to the dangers involved for our society if we allow Asians in who cannot assimilate and accept our customs.” (48)

Navaranjani, initially is not bothered about Blackstone’s remarks and says the same to Bharat, who is undergoing a post-migration identity crisis. She feels that Blackstone is talking about “Asians” (Chinese) and not “South Asians”: “Why should you care what Blackstone says?” I asked. “Your eyes aren’t slits and your head doesn’t look slope. It’s obvious he doesn’t mean *you*” (48). Bharat’s conception of his identity is shattered and it is up to Navaranjani to save him. She engages in a verbal fight with Prof. Ron Blackstone and blames him for Bharat’s identity crisis. She also tells him openly in the university party:

You, a so-called sociologist who should know that *real* Asians would die before they touched charred pig meat, *you*, polluting the air with meat fumes from your filthy, smelly Barbie in your weed-ridden backyard.

... you ignorant, non-vegetarian racist? I am a Tamil, Professor Blackstone, and a Hindu. Pure veg, and proud of it. What do you take me for? A pork-eating Ching-Chong? (53)

In the end with change of name, lifestyle and language (Australian English) Bharat feels more comfortable in Australia and among Australians. As Navaranjani notes: “He seemed much happier as a result of all these changes, and instead of standing about at parties with a glass of orange juice in his hand, sulking and reading insults into everyone’s innocent remarks, he’d have a real beaut time” (50-51). Navaranjani is happy too as she has reformed a racist (Professor Blackstone) and forgives him graciously to send home a message—“how well *real* Asians of culture and goodwill assimilate to the Australian way of life” (53).

Are these stories pointing towards racism in Australia? If what is going on in these stories is not “racism,” but just “indifference” or “prejudice” towards a particular group, as some of the writers analysed here have suggested in their narratives, then we are constantly reminded by the great philosopher-thinker Martin

Buber that the greatest evil in the world comes not from bad deeds but from “indifference.” Sometimes, deeply racialised aspects of Australian society and prejudices of South Asians towards others are played out in these texts. According to Stratton and Perera this is the “everyday racism,” the kind of “unthinking racism” that is accepted as a general rule in our daily lives and that we do not consider it racism anymore that “prevents us from seeing the racialised discriminations that happen all the time in Australia” (see 2009). In this literature, sexually and racially abusive graffiti at public places and media also play a crucial role.

Many people believe that racism only exists when it is accompanied by violence. They do not comprehend how emotionally and psychologically painful discrimination and prejudice can be to its victims in a society. David Carter has noted that “literature is not just a set of individual texts or authors but rather a set of institutions and institutional practices which regulate the making and transmission of (literary) meanings in a given society” (18). Given the cultural dimension of racism in Australia, as seen in the above analysis, the institutional challenge—both political and literary—is to translate the acceptance of cultural diversity, implied in the public’s support for multiculturalism, into a belief that this diversity can coexist with a commitment to shared political institutions and values (see Inglis 2006).

III

Even if we assume that people of South Asian origin, particularly the second and third generations have integrated publicly into the mainstream, while keeping certain aspects of their cultural life alive at home, what about the post-assimilation mainstream Australians attitude towards them? According to Fazal Rizvi,

Australians have been asked to make a decisive ideological shift in their thinking, away from the colonialist frame that has traditionally informed their perceptions of Asia to a post-colonial outlook which challenges the racist assumptions of cultural dominance and superiority. Yet most of their attempts to revise their thinking have at best been clumsy, with the new practices of representation failing to make a decisive break from the residual racist expressions that had rendered Asians as a homogenised mass, socially inept and culturally inferior. (173)

So, the closest designation that we currently have for this attitude of prejudice,

neglect and indifference towards a particular community is “racism”—“a reduction of someone from a particular group to the stereotypes, negative or positive, we have of that group” (Chow 27).

However, the present situation of “racism” or “opportunistic violence” against Indian students is a passing moment and keeping “Australia fair” and “multicultural,” instead of being “disguised under” some “euphemistic terminologies” is a challenge for the Australian government (Kinsella 2003). In this respect Hanifa Deen notes that the earlier government agenda for multicultural issues was “more rhetorical than real” (see 2001). However, Dr Geoff Gallop, Premier and Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Interests, Western Australia observed that in “a democracy such as ours, while difference need not always be reconcilable, through *dialogue* it can be negotiated and mutually respected” (ii; my italics). For these dialogues and multiculturalism to succeed, Australia needs genuine partnerships between all participants.¹⁰ Through a dialogue between various communities, multiculturalism offers the opportunity to both embrace difference and to reproduce the nation. Multiculturalism in Australia has been seen to be more and more advantageous, especially if it is understood as diversity.¹¹ This is the focus of what Stuart Hall has called “the multicultural question” (2001). It sets “unity in diversity” as the dialectical relationship between universals and particulars.

Today, the Australian government with its various anti-racism regulations,¹² multicultural projects, publication grants and encouragement to writers from various ethnic backgrounds is dedicated to making the migrant’s voice heard and their cultural aspects seen in a positive light.¹³ Within the Australian history, the narratives of/by South Asian diaspora writers about their lives in Australia have a special value.¹⁴ First, they are “a shining example to those groups of Australians who suffer from any form of discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, race, religion, region, gender, sexuality, age, class, family and the like” (D’Cruz and Steele 13). Second, they are able to help continue the dialogue between the two countries through their literature and narratives as they are able to perceive more sharply—being “adopted Australians,” according to A. Phillips, they are knowledgeable about Australian past without having lost the special advantage of their South Asian viewing-point (1). It is this dialogue and promotion of success stories by the Australian government and academia that has further helped in building an interest in the study of contemporary migration and settlement of people from the Indian subcontinent, their problems and

future expectations.¹⁵ Similar views are expressed in the introduction to *Seeing it Their Way*, a handbook designed to be used at any level of the school curriculum. David Dufty et al. note that the materials collected in the volume aim to bring a clear awareness that we are all conditioned by our culture, that we tend to judge other cultures by our own standards and that to be culturally mature we need to be able to understand and appreciate at least one other culture in some depth and to be able to imagine with some accuracy how others view their world: in other words, to develop an intercultural perspective—to try seeing it their way as well as our own way. (2)

For Australians and its various migrant groups an understanding of their diversity and tolerance of difference is required to build a stable and secure future. As Kessler has noted “it is only by engaging with difference, not simply intellectually within our own minds but in the pluralistic public or political world where difference has its origins and is upheld, that we can really understand ourselves” (63).

In conclusion, the South Asian diaspora in Australia has seen good days and from their historical journey, it can be prophesied that they will cope with this passing crisis of racism and indifference displayed by a certain section of Australian public.¹⁶ In light of the recent debates and issues related to racism, multiculturalism, immigration, diaspora, and transnationality, it is imperative to suggest that to co-exist peacefully there is a need for the edification of the dominant society about various minority groups. However, we still need a strong plan for South Asian-Australian diasporic area studies (nice point) both in South Asia and Australia that is based not just on language, history and material life but also on a critical bilateral dialogue between the two regions, as diaspora literature “commands respect, not sentimentalization, exploitation, or neglect” (Newman xiii). Gantner reminds us the challenge is to ensure that the next generation [of Australians] has the knowledge and understanding to get on with their neighbours, to solve global problems, and to build a shared and prosperous future. It must start in our own front yard—Asia. We don’t need to “Asianise” our curriculum. We need to “Australianise” it. (qtd. in Henderson 6)

In this South Asian diaspora literature has helped in the past and can help in the future too by opening up the space of the post-colonial world and “the

possibilities of alter/native ficto-historical texts that can create a world in process while continually freeing themselves from their own biases” (Ashcroft et al. 85; Chambers 12). In Australia, there will always be celebrations of diversity and South Asians will be remembered for what they have achieved. The proclamation of Leila, one of the protagonists in Yasmine Gooneratne’s stories,¹⁷ can as well be borrowed and reversed for Australia and Australians—South Asians become an Australian Learning Experience. About South Asia. About Australia. About the world.

Notes

1. Mellor notes the complexity of racism and demonstrates how everyday racism occurs through a range of means by a range of players (474-486).
2. According to reports, in Victoria alone in the past one year “an astonishing 1447 people of Indian origin were punched, kicked, raped or robbed” (see Bolt, 2009). As an aftermath of “race attacks” in 2010, Dr Helen Forbes-Mewett, a Monash University based sociologist, was awarded a four-year Australian Research Council (ARC) grant to investigate the nature of these attacks, which have caused great distress in the South Asian student community and damaged Australian relations with India (see Healy 2010).
3. A study on racist attitudes conducted by a team led by Dr Kevin M. Dunn of the University of New South Wales in 2003 found one in eight Australians interviewed admitted they were prejudiced, particularly towards Muslim Australians. The study also found some Australians were living in denial of such prejudice though 80 per cent of those surveyed recognised racism was a problem. Unfortunately, the problem has been promoted since, and continues to contribute to decrease in the process of integration (see Dunn 2003; Hassan 2005).
4. According to Phil Griffiths ‘[R]acism towards Asian people was grounded in *strategic feras*’ that were highlighted strategically by the ruling class for serving their own interests and hold on working classes in Australia (163).
5. In Melbourne and Sydney, Indian students protested against what they claimed were racist attacks. Former Australian High Commissioner to India John McCarthy agreed that there may have been an element of racism involved in some of the attacks on Indians, but that they were mainly criminal in nature.

See also “Nepalese Student Bashed in Sydney,” 2 February 2010, 4 May 2010 <<http://aussienepali.com/2010/02/02/nepali-student-bashed-in-sydney/>>.

6. See Mia Northrop, “Vindaloo against Violence 24 February 2010,” 25 February 2010, 15 March 2010 <<http://vindalooagainstviolence.wordpress.com/>>. Also see Facebook group “I Am Australian and I Would Rather Immigrants Living Here than Racists,” 2010, 17 July 2010 <<http://www.facebook.com/#!/group.php?gid=121223051227626>> and also various stand-up spots related to Australian racism done at the “2010 Melbourne Comedy Festival Gala,” <www.youtube.com>.
7. In July 2007, Dr Haneef, an Indian doctor working at the Gold Coast Hospital in Australia, was held for 25 days, including 11 days in immigration detention. He was being “framed” by the Australian police for the London and Glasgow bomb attacks and involvement in other terrorist activities. Widespread public concern in India about Dr Haneef’s treatment by the Australian government and police forced Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh to intervene, making a statement expressing the hope that Australia would extend “all the facilities” to Dr Haneef “fairly and justly under Australian law.” Mike Head notes that letters to newspapers and blogs indicate that broad layers of people (both white Australians and migrants) were disgusted with the Howard government’s approach and Kevin Rudd’s support for the government’s conduct and actions taken against Dr Haneef (see Head 2007).
8. For a detailed discussion on racism towards immigrants in Australia, see Griffiths 2005; Rasool 2002.
9. For a detailed discussion on various facets of Islam and Islamic terrorism, see Kundani 2008.
10. Recently, Australia has also agreed to a proposal for sending a group of Australian Youth Ambassadors to India in the near future to promote bilateral links between the two countries (see Bhandari 2008).
11. According to the Australian government’s Immigration department, “the planned 2002-03 Migration Program, if continued over the next 10 years, is estimated according to preliminary modelling by Access Economics to provide net benefits to the Commonwealth Budget of around \$30 billion (in constant

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- 2002-03 prices and without savings in Public Debt Interest (PDI)” (DIMIA 2004).
12. The *Racial Discrimination Act* of 1975 protects individuals from discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin. In 1995 the Act was extended to make racial vilification against the law in Australia.
 13. One such programme is the DIMIA’s “Living in Harmony” programme. It is designed to bring into Australian sporting activity the excluded groups by “aiding and encouraging a host of sporting bodies to promote racial and ethnic tolerance in Australia” (Vamplew 371).
 14. Australia has commended the growing Indian diaspora in the country for its contribution in enhancing bilateral links. In a statement Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said that the ‘Indian diaspora in Australia is making a tangible contribution to enhancing bilateral links’ (qtd. in Bhandari 2008).
 15. A good number of Australian scholars are working on Australia-India relations and cultural diplomacy at the moment: Prof. David Walker, Prof. David Lowe, Prof. Bruce Bennett, Prof. Paul Sharrad, Prof. Auriol Weigold, Dr Rick Hosking and Dr Kama Maclean. Dr Maclean, a University of New South Wales based historian and India expert, is looking into the Indian impact on internationalism in Australia in the early 20th century. Also, a new TV series, titled *My Australia*, is being produced by the ABC that will be broadcast by Australia Network to 44 countries in the Asia Pacific region. It looks at Australia through the eyes of people from South Asia and the Asia-Pacific region who are studying or living there.
 16. In December 2010 Dr Haneef returned to Australia with his wife and child and noted: “Coming back to Australia represents a very important step for me and for my family. I’m grateful to the Australian government and the Australian people for their ongoing support and I’m hopeful that the upcoming mediation will be an opportunity to resolve this matter and give my family and me a chance to move forward.” He further observed: Australia is “a very fair place to live” (Trenwith 2010).
 17. Yasmine Gooneratne, “In the East My Pleasure: a Postcolonial Love Story,” *Span* 34-35 (November-May 1992-1993): 269-279.

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