Arcane Disruption of Nature and Its Imaginary

The Land-Spirits of Cyril Dabydeen’s Dark Swirl

The epigraph to Part III illustrates the core of Cyril Dabydeen’s writing. In the second stanza of his poem “Multiculturalism,” the poetic voice questions official policies towards Canada’s ethnic minorities. He does so by confronting the historical connotations of ‘minority’ status, which has determined the direction of Canadian policy on inclusive multiculturalism. The poem explores the contradictions and conflicts of such a labelling, which is built upon intangible power-relations that condition marginal life, evoking the burden of “blood coursing through my veins: / The heart’s call for employment equity / The rhapsody of police shootings in Toronto.” The poetic voice situates itself within the experience of marginalized communities in order to trace the reasons for their alienation and to hint at a unique insight into the multifaceted dimension of Canadian in-between identity:

One country really…
Or galaxies of province after province,
A distinct society too –
Quebec or Newfoundland; the Territories…
How far we make a map out of our solitudes,
As we are still Europe, Asia,
Africa; and the Aborigine in me

For Arun Mukherjee, Dabydeen’s poetry illustrates preeminent that “what seems natural and self-evident to the well-adjusted member of a society,

becomes highly problematic when seen from the eyes of an outsider.”

This description corresponds perfectly to the definition of marvellous realism. If applied to diasporic authors who produce their creative works from a host country, as is the case with Dabydeen, this narrative effect aims at reconciling a non-Western cultural background with Western interference factors, inevitably shaping transcultural identities. This is why Dabydeen has been chosen for examination here. For Mukerjee, his writing is characterized as follows:

The outsider borrows under the suppressions of the dominant version of history and myth and brings out their ambivalences and disjunctions. The other, thus, serves as a measuring rod against which a culture can take stock of itself. He serves as a mirror where a culture may see itself outlined as others see it. For cultural traits are inconspicuous to the members of a culture who remain oblivious to the dangers of ethnocentrism. If nothing else, the outsider can make a culture self-conscious and that in itself is a great achievement.

Mukherjee’s assertion confirms my interest in Dabydeen’s writing, which has been partly overshadowed by the popularity of his acclaimed relative David Dabydeen. Both cousins were born in Guyana, have Indian ancestry, and have experienced migration; while David emigrated to England, Cyril went to Canada, and this has clearly shaped their poetry and fiction. Notwithstanding the more than evident parallels between the two, Cyril Dabydeen’s works are interesting in terms of the strategies he uses to subvert preconceptions of both Guyana and Canada, his home and host countries. As a poet, he has been awarded several prizes and has also served as poet laureate of the city of Ottawa. His poetic production, which illustrates the conundrums that emerge from his diasporic condition, has received more attention than his prose. However, diaspora and migration are also present in Cyril Dabydeen’s short fiction: stories that express feelings of isolation, alienation, marginalization, and disaffection; stories inhabited by characters who find themselves in-between nations, metropolitan and remote spaces, or complex personal and social situations. Much of his writing has explicit reference to his own biography: i.e. a transcultural experience is invoked through his Indo-Guyanese-Canadian identity. In his novella *Dark Swirl*, Dabydeen goes one step further in representing the problems of situating individual experiences within a

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