

**“And I dance”: An Exposure to a Diverse Racism in “Dancing”, a
Short Story by Neil Bissoondath**

Patel Dipti Rameshbhai

Assistant Professor of English

R. V. Patel & V. L. Shah College of Commerce, Amroli

V. N. S. G. University, Surat, Gujarat

India

Abstract:

The research paper endeavours to expose an element of diverse racism in “Dancing”, one of the short stories of *Digging Up the Mountains*, by Neil Bissoondath. This research paper interrogates the notion of racism in the context of diaspora with the help of the views of Bill Ashcroft and his other co-authors, B. Davidson, Paul Gilroy, etc. Neil Bissoondath’s writing normally focuses on the lives of immigrants and refugees deracinated by political hostility. Moreover, Bissoondath also investigates the lives of those marginalized communities, alienated by their own culture within their own societies. However, in his story “Dancing”, Bissoondath elaborated the same point to some extent from a diverse perspective. In “Dancing”, Racism is recorded in a slightly strategic manner of the immigrant community, who deliberately manipulates the dominant social community. “Dancing” depicts how racism can be employed to exploit a social system in which tolerance towards other communities is systematized and in which any limit can be crossed and any cost can be paid, even at the cost of humanity, to violate this system. In this story, Bissoondath also narrates against the restrictions of a group or community which prevents the individual from exercising his or her own free will and as per the views of Bissoondath, an essential part of one’s free will is the right to change, leaving aside a culture that subjectively not considered to be worthy of clinging to.

Key Words: Racism, diaspora, immigrant community, dominant community

One of the most important legacies of the transatlantic slave trade and also of colonial rule has been the creation of the Racism. Although slavery subsisted in many era and in many societies such as African, Caribbean, and to name a few, they were not commercial slaves in this modern sense. As Bill Ashcroft and his other co-authors believes, “Slavery was often associated with exogamous groups, captives or members of other groups outside the community, but the post-Renaissance development of an intense ideology of racism produced the peculiarly destructive modern form of commercial, chattel slavery in which all rights and all human values were set aside and from which only a few could ever hope to achieve full manumission (legal freedom). Many of the pseudo-objective, ‘scientific’ discourses by which colonialism justified its practices flowed from the need to rationalize such an indefensible commercial exploitation and oppression, on a mass scale, of millions of human beings” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 213-14). As Davidson expresses in his book, *The Search for Africa, History, Culture, Politics*, “...slavery gave birth to racism, at least in its modern form, just as racism became the excuse for slavery’s excesses.” It seems almost impracticable to separate Racism from slavery, as it has been closely entangled with the colonial form of the institution of slavery.

According to Gilroy racism originates in and is reproduced in certain forms of “the struggle between capital and labour- specifically in the modern period, the employment of migrant labour” (23). Gilroy further argues racism to be a process which is not in his view a single even which bases on “psychological aberration” or “some historical antipathy to black which is the cultural legacy of empire” (23). This legacy still haunts the consciousness of all white British “regardless of age, gender, income or circumstances” (23). Gilroy points out how “[t]he right to be prejudiced is claimed as the heritage of the freedom Briton” (229-30). British colonial past is the key factor in the production of racism.

However, the racism in “Dancing”, one of the short stories of *Digging Up the Mountains*, by Neil Bissoondath, can be read as a diverse exposure. Neil Bissoondath’s writing normally focuses on the lives of immigrants and refugees deracinated by political hostility. Moreover, Bissoondath also investigates the lives of those marginalized communities, alienated by their own culture within their own societies. As Jim Shepard writes, “That spectrum of human response, from the selfless to the despairing, is what Neil Bissoondath writes about. In doing so, he speaks for the silenced voices that continue to fill the margins of our societies, the voices of those so overworked and under rewarded that the term 'disadvantaged' is inadequate to describe them.”

Racism is one of the remarkable characteristics of the works of Neil Bissoondath, but in his story “Dancing”, he elaborated the same point to some extent from a diverse perspective. “Dancing” depicts the story of a black Caribbean servant woman migrating from Trinidad to Toronto for a better life, where she experiences racism as the underside of “ethnic separatism” (Toorn 84). However, the surprising part of the story is, it is not the Caribbean immigrants, who are victims of racism, but the dominant Canadian ethnicity undergoes the racialism by the Caribbean immigrants. “Dancing” deconstructs racism by presenting that racism is not solely relied upon by the dominant ethnicity. As Bissoondath has it, “this is a story that says: not only whites are racist. The fact is that non-whites can also be racist” (Srivastava 319).

In “Dancing”, Racism is recorded in a slightly strategic manner of the immigrant community i.e. the Caribbean immigrants, who deliberately manipulates the dominant social community, i.e. Canadian ethnicity. In other words, “Dancing” depicts how racism can be employed to exploit a social system in which tolerance towards other communities is systematized and in which any limit can be crossed and any cost can be paid, even at the cost of humanity, to violate this system. While racism on the part of the Canadian ethnicity, which is the ethnic majority, is non-existent in this story, the supposedly marginalized community, here the Caribbean immigrants in the Western downtown, i.e. Toronto detect the financial prospective out of the “constant assertion of cultural difference” (Toorn 84). More precisely, the marginalized community has learned to take benefit of this worn-out system of racism, which hardly subsists among the dominant community.

In 1986, Bissoondath won both the McClelland and Stewart Award for fiction and the National Magazine Award for the short-story “Dancing”. In “Dancing”, Sheila, a young black uneducated Caribbean woman, just an ordinary fifty-dollar-a-month maid, who worked for seven to eight years at an Indian family in Trinidad, suffering from emptiness, recently joins her sister, Annie in Canada for better life. When Sheila was in Trinidad, she receives a letter from her sister Annie, who resides in Toronto, inviting Sheila to join her. While reading the letter, Sheila reacts on racism:

“She writes how Canadians racialist as hell. She say they hate black people for so and she tell me bout a ad on tv showing a black girl eating a banana pudding. Why they give banana to the black? Annie say is because they think she look like a monkey. I couldn’t bring myself to understand how people so

bad. Annie say they jump out of the stomach like that. I telling you, man, is a terrible thing how people born racist” (Bissoondath 189-90).

When Sheila reaches to Toronto, she gets a terrifying, dizzy sense of the unfamiliar surroundings - automatic doors, high-rise apartment blocks, subways and a coldness of climate and human spirit that she has never experienced. She is warmly welcomed by her sister, Annie and brother, Syl at Toronto, but she isn't sure yet if her decision of leaving Trinidad is right. Annie forewarns her the very first day of her arrival that the Canadians are racist as hell and also advises her to stick together with her own community i.e. West Indians. This piece of advice is not completely appreciated by Sheila:

“Us West Indians have to stick together, Sheila. Is the onliest way... You must stick with your own, don't think that any honky ever going to accept you as one of them [i.e. the Canadians]. If you want friends, they going to have to be West Indian. Syl tell me so when I first come up to Toronto and is true. I doesn't even try to talk to white people now. I ain't have the time or use for racials” (Bissoondath 197-98).

“Dancing” exposes the bitter fact that those Trinidadians who declare to be discriminated by the dominant community, may also exhibit their very racist thinking through their own action, they blame the ethnic mainstream of. It is not astonishing that Bissoondath disapproves of such fictionalizations of difference as cynical.

The next day of her arrival, Annie and Syl takes Sheila round the city, leading her to Sylvester's one bedroom apartment, where they have party with other West Indian friends of Sylvester. A glimpse of racism and discrimination is witnessed when Sheila gets a shock by having a look at white men bending their back over fork and pickaxe, digging a hole in the street. They were sweating, dirty and tired. It is a matter of great shock for Sheila as she has never seen white people doing such kind of sordid work in Trinidad.

At Sylvester's one bedroom apartment, soon Sheila feels suffocated in the congested room of Sylvester and finds herself terribly nostalgic about her free life in Trinidad, her own small room wherein privacy she enjoyed and repents on her decision of migrating to Canada. In most of his writings, Bissoondath narrates against the restrictions of a group or community which prevents the individual from exercising his or her own free will and as per the views of

Bissoondath, an essential part of one's free will is the right to change, leaving aside a culture that subjectively not considered to be worthy of clinging to. This very issue is depicted through the protagonist of this story, Sheila, in context of the cultural expressions of the Caribbean immigrant community. Sheila regards the songs played during the partying by the Caribbean community as old and stale, as for her limbo, calypso and reggae do not have an innate value and she also believes that carrying the old culture over into the new country merely misrepresents the essence of that culture. Thus "the central paradox of 'Dancing' is that the Trinidadians' efforts to make Canada 'just like Trinidad' [. . .] falsify the culture they seek to preserve." (Toorn 85) For instance, the way of dancing by the West Indians at Syl's apartment in the story "Dancing" is not observed as a declaration of Caribbean cultural particularity, as without the context of its Caribbean environment it becomes ridiculous.

After a while during the party at Sylvester's apartment, a white neighbour comes complaining about the loud music, but an ugly confrontation occurs between him and partying drunken West Indians and they humiliate the white neighbour badly. Sheila is too upset by the incident that she wants to go back to Trinidad, but her brother rebukes her and tells her that they have all the right to be in Canada, which reflects a view of Canadian multiculturalism as a policy that in its liberalism and tolerance fosters rather than impedes racism. As Syl reveals in a conversation with the Sheila: "We have every right to be here [i.e. in Canada]. They [i.e. the Canadians] owe us. And we [i.e. the Caribbean immigrant community] going to collect, you hear me? (Bissoondath 208).

Forced to dance Sheila by the other emigrant Trinidadians at Sylvester's apartment, is an attempt of claiming her for a uncertain community identity and Sheila's dancing in "Dancing" is not distinguished by the liberation and euphoria that the Caribbean culture is said to provide for the other immigrants. In other words, Sheila's dance indicates the unsteadiness of a ghetto state of mind both merciless and repressive in its denial of individuality, as she does not feel like dancing once her fellow Caribbean immigrants have exhibited exactly the kind of cultural chauvinism that she at first wanted to run away from by bidding goodbye to the Caribbean but she soon realizes that she has no choice now. As Sheila feels:

"Then Syl grab me and shout, "Somebody put on the music. Turn it up loud-loud. For everybody to hear! This whole damn building! Come, girl, dance.

Dance like you never dance before.” And I dance. I dance an dance an dance. I dance like I never dance before” (209).

It is really tragic that in Canada Sheila unintentionally becomes the part of a violent instigation into a community, she feels no longer of her own, but she is made West Indian. The medium employed by the other West Indians in Canada to sustain its culture, are as Sheila feels, not relevant for the present time and place and therefore has lost all of its worth as a meaningful cultural practice. For Sheila, Caribbean culture as practiced by the community in Toronto does not conserve their tradition but stagnate it. On one hand Bissoondath translates Canadian as the chance of reformulating oneself, on the other hand, Sheila, like so many other protagonists of Bissoondath’s writings, is compelled to surrender to the restrictions of the old community and its culture. Caribbean dance by Sheila in Canada can be depicted as a measure against her search for a new identity, a dance of the extinction of her individuality.

After interrogating the story “Dancing” from racialist perspective, it can be concluded that the contemporary diasporic identities provide a strong basis from which to oppose contemporary expressions of racism. As Michel Wieviorka writes in his paper “Racism and Diaspora”: “Immigrant and mobile population have been able to construct images of identity that are based neither on an assimilationist model, nor defensive strategies against assimilationism rather, the older internal relation between racism and diasporization has been broken by the ability of groups to claim a diasporic status on the basis of a public and not private articulation of self identity.”

Works Cited:

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Bissoondath, Neil. *Digging Up the Mountains*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1986. Print.
- Davidson, B. *The Search for Africa, History, Culture, Politics*. New York: Random House, 1994. Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. London: Hutchinson, 1987. Print.
- Shepard, Jim. "Keeping It Short: A Season of Stories, Trading One World for Another." *The New York Times*. 26 May 1991. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/05/26/books/keeping-it-short-a-season-of-stories-trading-one-world-for-another.html?pagewanted=all>>
- Srivastava, Aruna. "Interview with Neil Bissoondath." *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*. Ed. Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond. Toronto: OUP, 1990. 312-20. Print.
- Toorn, Penny van. "Positioning Neil Bissoondath: Post-Colonial, Multicultural and National Formations." *New Literatures Review* 27 (1994): 78-90. Web. 22 Oct. 2015.
<<https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/binary/JYT5NZWKC7KS3H7SQL2MDUD6V QFOMF5/full/1.pdf>>
- Wieviorka, Michel. "Racism and Diaspora" *Thesis Eleven* 52.1 (1998): 69-81. Web. 22 Oct. 2015. <<http://the.sagepub.com/content/52/1/69.full.pdf>>