"As if it were my natural element"

Negotiating Cultural Hegemony in Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*

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> Canadians take pride in their identity and have made sacrifices to defend their way of life. By coming to Canada and taking this important step toward Canadian citizenship, you are helping to write the continuing story of Canada.
>
> > Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*, 3

> There is a necessary link between the conditions—political, economic, social—in which writers find themselves and the stories they choose to tell.
>
> > Chelva Kanaganayakam, "Spattering Dung on Canadian Lawns: Immigrant Writing and Literary History," 162

Most literature is, according to Raymond Williams, a form of contribution to the dominant effective culture. Produced and existing across all areas of culture, from the "residual" and the "emergent," to the "dominant," literatures "in any period, including our own, contribute to the effective dominant culture and are a central articulation of it" (Williams 1434). Conceiving of literature as the central articulation of a single dominant culture, Williams's formulation would seem to afford little room for the critical dialogue that engages much of the recent immigrant writing in Canada. Indeed, the precarious position that immigrant writing has occupied within Canadian literature results, at least partially, from its tendency to elude classification as distinctly "Canadian." In his article "Spattering Dung over Canadian Lawns: Immigrant Writing and Literary History," Chelva Kanaganayakam asserts that "a multicultural Canada has nurtured a large number of immigrant writers who write about the lands they left rather than the ones that they have become a part of" (162). Accordingly, the relative dearth of "Canadian" content in immigrant writing in Canada has led some critics, including Kanaganayakam, to question the usefulness of labeling such writers "Canadian" at all. More recently, Lily Cho has drawn attention to the contradictions that result

from attempts to situate "minority literatures" in relation to "majority literatures" within Canada (108). The contradictions Cho identifies prompt her to interrogate the notions of citizenship on which such critical endeavours are predicated. Conceptions of modern citizenship that are inextricably coupled with conceptions of the nation can hardly be said to offer a productive means of theorizing the "Canadianness" of a large body of immigrant writing that is predominantly about the country from which the author has emigrated and only minimally discusses Canada. A literary analysis that treats literature as the expression of a single and homogenous national culture and ignores these and numerous other theoretical developments in Canadian literary studies is, she argues, potentially regressive.

Nevertheless, it would be rash to suppose that the exigencies of approaching immigrant writing in Canada have rendered obsolete cultural theory of the New Left, which explores the reciprocal relationship between literature and the specific social, political, and historical contexts in which it is produced. Indeed, the very effort to identify a "latent Canadianness" in recent immigrant literature threatens to engage in a hegemonic process of cultural appropriation, paralleling the phenomenon Raymond Williams describes in his 1973 essay "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory." Williams's revision of the classical Marxist paradigm of base and superstructure offers a framework for examining the extent to which literary texts written by Canadian immigrant writers are appropriated by the dominant effective culture in an attempt to validate a narrative of Canadian multiculturalism and humanitarianism. This is a narrative that is ostensibly inclusive but which in reality often elides the social, cultural, and economic disenfranchisement experienced by many immigrants to Canada. The question to be asked is not so much which "effective dominant culture" immigrant literatures can be said to articulate, but how these literatures unsettle the selective traditions and dominant narratives of the multiple hegemonies to which they respond.

Saturated with the distinct and vertiginous histories of both Sri Lanka and Canada, Shyam Selvadurai's most recent novel, *The Hungry Ghosts*, offers a complex representation of the distinct dominant effective cultures of two countries. Selvadurai begins the novel with the striking contrast between luxuriant wealth and abysmal poverty that characterizes Sri Lanka. After passing through the "elegantly treed streets" of "the wealthy neighbourhood of Colombo 7," Shivan Rassiah, the novel's protagonist, and Daya, Shivan's grandmother, come to "a large two storey house... set in a vast garden" (4). Daya informs Shivan that, when she dies, he will inherit this house and all her other properties. Getting back in the car, they leave Colombo 7 and drive towards the older part of the city, ar-

riving at a "dilapidated row house" with walls "smudged with black and green fungus" (4-5). Siriyawathy, the tenant who reluctantly greets them at the door, is a bewildered woman with uncombed hair and a faded flowered dress. By her feet is her son, dressed only in shorts, with his "belly distended from malnutrition" (5). The reader soon learns that Daya has come to this small row house to inspect her property, and these tenants, three months in arrears, are to be forcefully and illegally evicted. This opening passage, replete with the subjugation and exploitation of the proletariat Siriyawathy at the hands of the bourgeois Daya, appears to readily invite a traditional Marxist reading grounded in an examination of Sri Lanka's economic modes of production. However, the portrait Selvadurai paints of the immense disparity between the rich and the poor in Sri Lanka becomes increasingly complicated over the course of the novel.

As the narrative shifts back and forth between Sri Lanka and Canada, the dominant systems of meanings and values confronted by Shivan shift and oscillate. A level of complexity is added to the text, which complicates attempts to reduce the whole of society to two social classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletaria—"the property owners" and "the propertyless workers" (Marx 652). Orthodox Marxism, with its narrow focus on the economic relations of production, is inadequate to the task of informing the novel's concern with complex social identities. Rather, the novel demands a framework that recognizes socio-cultural inequality as the result of a hegemony in which systems of ideas and beliefs are dialectically intertwined with one another and with constructions of gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. By offering a complex representation of hegemony, Selvadurai provides a narrative in which the protagonist, Shivan, attempts to negotiate his identity within the two distinct effective dominant cultures of Canada and Sri Lanka. Unable to reconcile his identity with the dominant social and cultural practices of either culture, Shivan is alienated from both. Ultimately, *The Hungry Ghosts* indicts the dominant narratives that perpetuate the hegemonies of both Sri Lanka and Canada and offers an intricate representation of social inequality as the result of the multifaceted intersection of gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality.

In "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," Williams takes issue with what he considers to be the misuse of a fundamental tenet of Marxist theory: the organization of human society into two parts: base and superstructure. Specifically, Williams challenges the tendency in "vulgar Marxism" to oversimplify the concept of a determining base and a determined superstructure, a concept denoted by the proposition that "the base determines the superstructure" (1423). Put

simply, this proposition expresses the view that basic relations of production, for instance, the division of labour, the ownership of property, and industrialization, determine the whole range of social and cultural practices in a given society, be it law, education, religion, art, or literature. According to Williams, this model of society has "been commonly held as the key to Marxist cultural theory" (1424); yet the centrality of the determining base / determined superstructure model becomes problematic in light of what Williams identifies as "deep contradictions in the relationships of production and in the consequent social relationships" (1424).

Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* is set in a volatile social context during a unique and difficult historical period: the Sri Lankan civil war. Combined with the sheer geographical breadth of the narrative's setting, this transformative period of political and social instability complicates analyses of the already dynamic socio-cultural processes that constitute the Sri Lankan and Canadian societies represented in the novel. Consequently, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of the dominant class intentions that "define" these societies. Yet it is precisely this sort of summary investigation into the abstract structures of production and resultant social practices against which Williams positions his own analysis of base and superstructure: "For if ideology were merely some abstract, imposed set of notions, …then the society would be very much easier to move and to change than in practice it has ever been or is" (1428). In order to supplement and update Marxist cultural theory, Williams adopts Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, providing a clearer basis for his argument.

Williams defines hegemony as "a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and of his world. It is a set of meanings and values which are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming" (1429). Thus, to say that a society's dominant class, the wealthy elite, is hegemonic, is to suggest that it sets the conditions for an entire way of living, interacting, and perceiving. This hegemony reveals itself through the "central system of practices, meanings and values, which, we can properly call dominant and effective" (Williams, 1429). Understood within this more sophisticated theoretical framework, the "base" is not simply an abstract concept comprising the broad productive forces of a society, but a term which denotes what Williams describes as "the specific activities of men in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process" (1426). Thus, Williams moves beyond the base-superstructure model of determi-

nation and shifts the focus towards the proposition that "social being de-termines consciousness" (1423). Williams's broader understanding of the base-superstructure paradigm allows for a more nuanced and inclusive reading of texts like *The Hungry Ghosts*, in which economics is but one of many socio-cultural processes that exert influence over the broader super-structure and consequent social inequality.

Born of a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father into a state in which these two ethnic groups are soon to be engaged in civil war, Shivan occupies a precarious position within the economically and ethnically stratified hierarchy of Sri Lanka. His situation is made all the more diffi-cult by his sexual orientation, an aspect of Shivan's identity which is fun-damentally at odds with the social practices of the heterosexist dominant effective culture of Sri Lanka. For Williams, the family is an institution within which the process of a wide social training occurs. Such processes, writes Williams, "are involved in a continual making and remaking of an effective dominant culture, and on them, as experiences, as built into our living, its reality depends" (1429). In *The Hungry Ghosts*, the terms and practices, which constitute hegemony in Sri Lanka, find clearest expression through the interactions that define the relationships within Shivan's fam-ily.

Predicated upon economic terms, familial interactions, between Shivan, his grandmother Daya, his mother Hema, and his sister Renu, figure as pecuniary exchanges, establishing a hierarchy in which Daya, who represents the economic elite, attempts to purchase the affection of Shivan, while providing only the means for subsistence to Hema and Renu. This hierarchy is established upon the family's arrival at Daya's house. Screaming at her daughter, Daya tells Hema, "Look at them! Tamil, poor, and undereducated! You're a disgraceful mother. A failure!" (31). At the same time, she ironically sums up her opinion of Renu by telling her, "Yes, I see where you'll end up. Like mother, like daughter" (36). Shivan's own attitude towards this hierarchical arrangement is conflicted. When Hema discovers the books that Daya has been buying for Shivan, Shivan observes that, "From then on, all my grandmother's gifts felt to me like a betrayal of my mother, an affront to her poverty" (37). Shivan's guilt, however, extends only so far. When Hema reprimands Shivan for having hit Renu, telling him that she is "ashamed" of him, Shivan retorts, "shame is for the unwashed proletariat" (42). This sense of entitlement and class division within the family is reinforced and reflected by Shivan's participation in Daya's business affairs, where Shivan is "beginning to learn the trade of [his] patrimony," becoming "familiar with legal terms"

and accompanying his grandmother on "errands having to do with her property" (39).

The economic language Selvadurai uses to establish the social stratification within Shivan's family is indicative of a broader shift toward neo-liberal economics within Sri Lanka during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Described by Williams as an "emergent cultural practice," this shift has led scholars to address the origins of the 1983 riots. In his 1984 essay "The Open Economy and its Impact on Ethnic Relations in Sri Lanka," Newton Gunasinghe establishes a correlation between the dismantling of Sri Lanka's state-regulated economic system, the movement toward an open economy, and the intensification of ethnic conflict between 1977 and 1983 (100). According to Gunasinghe, rather than constituting a socialist phase in the history of Sri Lankan political economy, the state regulated system prior to 1977 saw the state provide political patronage to Sinhala entrepreneurs, protect "predominantly Sinhala" middle-level entrepreneurs, and create extensive job opportunities "mainly for the Sinhala people through the expansion of the public sector" (103). The state-regulated privilege of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority established a structural basis for Sri Lanka's ethnicity-based social stratification. However, the subsequent removal of import controls brought an end to the protective market that had previously benefitted the Sinhala majority: "the dissatisfied sections of the urban poor constituted a volatile social base, capable of being mobilized for their own narrow ends by the ideologists of Sinhala dominance as well as by frustrated sections of Sinhala entrepreneurs" (Gunasinghe 113). The volatile situation that resulted from drastic shifts in Sri Lankan economic policy and the destabilization of government-regulated inequality is linked causally to the eruption of violence in 1983, which began with the Sri Lankan Civil War. Not all Sinhala Sri Lankans, however, were disadvantaged by this overhaul of the Sri Lankan economy.

Attempting to identify a "non-metaphysical and nonsubjective" explanation for "emergent cultural practice," Williams finds "the central source for new practice in the emergence of a new class" (1432). In *The Hungry Ghosts*, the rise of a new class of landowners who take advantage of the inchoate regulations in the wake of Sri Lanka's economic liberalization finds clearest expression through the character of Chandralal. An up and coming "mudalali" and a cherished business partner of Daya, Chandralal is a manipulative entrepreneur whose upward mobility is achieved through his use of violence to forcefully evict indigent tenants for the bourgeois landowners of Colombo. When ethnic massacres and pogroms in Colombo force many Tamil residents to flee their homes, Chandralal and

Daya exploit their urgency and vulnerability by purchasing their properties at reduced prices. Chandralal's new found wealth is facilitated by the neo-liberal economic policies implemented by the United National Party:

> Chandralal kept up a steady patter about how Sri Lanka was going to be the next Singapore; how the government was opening up even more garment factories and free trade zones, building even more new roads; how the famous village reawakening scheme was going to bring prosperity to the outlying districts of Sri Lanka. I nodded and feigned interest, but all the time I felt giddy. (192)

The wide-ranging impacts of economic globalization are thus welcomed by those like Chandralal who benefit from the resultant uneven distribution of resources and capital. For Chandralal and Daya, Sri Lanka's ethnic violence is advantageous. Nonetheless, while the immediate cause of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka might be identified as the emergence of laissez-faire capitalism and the opening up of free markets, political economy is insufficient to explain the ethnic and sexual discrimination which ultimately cause Shivan, Hema, and Renu to immigrate to Canada.

In fact, as Gunashinghe indicates, the ethnically motivated restrictions that existed prior to Sri Lanka's economic liberalization in the late 1970s were the result of a pre-existing racialization of the Sri Lankan political system that can be traced back to the period of British Colonialism. In a 1979 essay titled "Aspects of Social Stratification," Tissa Fernando examines the origins of pre-Civil War social stratification in Sri Lanka. Entirely apart from the introduction of a cash-based plantation economy brought by British colonizers, the erosion of Sri Lanka's traditional religious and caste-based hierarchy was accomplished through the institution of an English education system in 1832. This system established a new stratification based on social class and ethnicity that was superimposed over traditional stratification based on religious caste. As D.D. Saram observed, the Central School Commissioners "always kept in mind what they considered to be the requirements of the different classes in society" so that "schools came to be divided into a number of categories each serving a particular social class" (3-4). Consequently, the Western-educated and predominantly Sinhala elite formed the ruling class while those educated in the ostensibly inferior Sinhala and Tamil system formed the lower strata of Sri Lankan society. Thus, in spite of drastic changes to Sri Lanka's political economy subsequent to the country's independence

from Britain in 1948, the system of social stratification established under the British endured through residual socio-cultural institutions.

The legislation of the ethnically prejudicial "Sinhala Only Act" in 1956 and the draconian "Prevention of Terrorism Act" in 1979 can be seen as part of a broad process of incorporation whereby the trenchant class and ethnic divisions inaugurated under British colonialism were structurally incorporated into the dominant effective culture by the country's ruling elite. Selvadurai implicitly indicts this legacy of British colonialism. Speaking of the proficiency with which the Sri Lankan regime whitewashes governmental human rights violations and political violence, Sriyani, the head of Kantha, a Sri Lankan human-rights organization, tells Shivan, "our state machinery is a well oiled one when it comes to these obfuscations. We received it well oiled already from the British" (161). Selvadurai further alludes to the enduring predominance of British cultural hegemony through Shivan's consumption of the literature of the Western canon:

> I had become an even more voracious reader... I devoured practically anything. Georgette Heyer, Victoria Holt, Dickens, Thackeray, Austen, Agatha Christie, P.G. Wodehouse, Leon Uris, Tolstoy were all swallowed in great gulps. (64)

Educated in English and Sinhala at a school in which the wealthier Sinhala students bully the "destitute Tamil boys," Shivan is baffled when he is given R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* by one of his grandmother's well educated middle class tenants: "it had never crossed my mind that anyone but British and American people wrote novels" (49). Shivan's inculcation in the English education system is also evident in the way in which he consumes literature, "devouring" the Western canon and "swallowing" books in "great gulps" to feed a "voracious" appetite. This approach to literature corresponds to what Williams calls "theories of consumption," theories that "are concerned with understanding an object in such a way that it can profitably or correctly be consumed" (1434). This reduction of the text to an isolated and consumable object not only reinforces the capitalist ethic of commodification, but also ignores the social, cultural, and historical context in which the text is produced and distributed. Selvadurai's use of diction also gestures toward the metafictional quality of this passage; confronted with images of the naive consumption of literary objects, the reader is forced to become acutely aware of the way in which he or she approaches *The Hungry Ghosts*. Shivan's participation in this

mode of cultural consumption is a testament to the hegemony of Western literary culture in Sri Lanka.

While Shivan is clearly affected by the socio-cultural institutions in which he is educated, the impact of this cultural hegemony on individual subjects is not as uniform as the broad socio-economic analyses provided by Gunasinghe and Fernando might suggest. The participants and victims of oppression do not enter into the hegemony as ready-made subjects. The vast array of socially constructed and historically constituted identities that comprise any society are not easily situated within abstract binary structures such as rich and poor, assailant and victim. Accordingly, Selvadurai's representations of both Canada and Sri Lanka are complicated by layers of social differentiation. Daya, for instance, is not only an exploitative landowner, but also the victim of an oppressive patriarchy. As a young woman, Daya is caught in an "uncompromising" situation with Charles, a young Sri-Lankan-Englishman who has returned to Sri Lanka because of the racism he encountered in Britain. Daya learns that in Britain, Charles "had been in love with an English woman who had led him on to amuse her friends, all of them entertained by the temerity of this dark colonial. Finally, there had been a public humiliation at a dance" (258). When Charles assaults Daya, she experiences a similar public humiliation, but because of the especially severe nature of the patriarchal society in which she lives, she is subjected to far more dire consequences than Charles had faced in England as an ethnically Othered male.

Ostracized by her community and family, Daya is left without a voice: "No one would let me tell my story" (363). Having jeopardized not only her own marriage prospects, but also those of her "unmarried cous-ins," Daya is forced to marry an old widower, Mr. Ariyasinghe. Though Ariyasinghe is a "good, kind husband," Daya's inability to give voice to her story and defend herself against her community's accusations "corrode[s] her" so that she is "never happy," becoming a "spectral thing who stay[s] in her room or in the back garden of her parent's house" (265). The silencing of Daya reveals the inherently gendered operation of Sri Lankan hegemo-ny, one that is tied to, but not resultant from, socio-economic class. While the death of Mr. Ariayasinghe presents Daya with an opportunity for em-powerment through economic independence and capital gain, the persis-tence of her unfounded reputation as a "shameless" and "disgraceful" woman is demonstrated by the remarks of Mr. Ariayasinghe's mother: "She is the one who made a vesi of herself with that man... And who had to face the consequence of her lasciviousness? We did" (54). Daya's subju-gation under the dominant effective culture is demonstrative of multidi-

mensional formation of socio-cultural inequality and of the hegemony's capacity to contain internal conflict. Daya's clash with her traditional relatives figures as a contradiction between the emerging culture of economic enterprise and the residual and more severely patriarchal system characterized by gender discrimination.

Though Selvadurai responds to the transformative economic phase that contributed to inequality and discrimination through his representations of Chandralal and Daya, Shivan's disaffection, like Daya's earlier subjugation, is not the result of economic disenfranchisement. Nor is it the result of his subjugation within the broader socio-cultural hierarchy Sri Lanka inherited from the British. On the contrary, his education at a "prestigious Colombo school" and the forthcoming inheritance of Daya's business guarantees Shivan's membership in Sri Lanka's class of landowning bourgeoisie. Rather, as Shivan becomes increasingly involved in his grandmother's business affairs, it is his inability to conform to the heteronormative patriarchy that excludes him from full participation in Sri Lankan society. Shivan's homosexuality, a fact he hides from his grandmother, precludes his ability to acquire membership in the dominant class without surrendering the possibility for achieving a genuine romantic relationship and sexual fulfillment. "It is a fact about the modes of domination," writes Williams, "that they select from and consequently exclude the full range of actual and possible human practice" (1432). In *The Hungry Ghosts*, the explicitly homophobic hegemony of Sri Lanka situates alternative sexualities in opposition to economic sufficiency, maligning homosexuality as a threat to the dominant capitalist culture. Heteronormativity thus becomes a precondition for affluence and success. Accordingly, Shivan's father's ineptitude, which leads to his constant demotion, draws explicitly sexualized criticism from Hema: "she would yell at my father, calling him a ponnaya, a faggot, railing at his weakness and incompetence" (19). The institutionalization of homophobia by the effective dominant culture is made explicit later on by Sriyani when she informs Shivan that "there is still a law here… Ten years in jail, not just for being caught in the act, but for actually being so inclined" (215). Unable to conform to the social practices tolerated by the dominant effective culture, Shivan becomes disaffected and determines to escape Sri Lanka for the relative freedom he believes he will find in Canada.

The continued existence of an effective and dominant culture depends on its ability to incorporate an array of often divergent and at times contradictory meanings and practices, or "elements," Williams writes, "of real and constant change" (1428). Nevertheless, the incorporation of these elements is not arbitrary and in any society there always occurs a process of

selection. Williams refers to this process as the "*selective tradition*, that which, within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as '*the* tradition', '*the* significant past'… the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded" (1429). In *The Hungry Ghosts*, such discursive selectivity is constantly brought to the reader's attention. The exclusion and omission of non-heteronormative sexuality in Sri Lanka is one example, but the text contains a multiplicity of others.

The selective tradition is evidenced by the books Shivan reads, British books that attest to the enduring predominance of the Western literary canon in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Daya's selection and interpretation of Buddhist tales, which she appropriates and reinterprets in order to justify her exploitation of impoverished tenants, also engages in a process of reinterpretation that contributes to this same selective tradition. More broadly, selectivity can be seen in the gross misrepresentation and concealment of human rights violations in Sri Lanka, as in the case of the newspaper and media cover-up of the death of Ranjini, a young woman working for Kantha. It is the fact that the selectively constructed dominant culture excludes non-heteronormative sexualities and persecutes ethnic minorities, which causes Shivan to flee for Canada.

Officially designating itself "The Land of Immigrants," Canada's "selective tradition" is manifest in the mythos that underwrites Canada's reputation as a progressively "multicultural" and "humanitarian" nation (*Discover Canada*, 12). Canada's reputation for liberal immigration policies is not ungrounded. With regard to Sri Lankan immigrants, for instance, Canada has the largest population of Sri Lankan Tamils outside Sri Lanka, and Canada's Tamil population constitutes the largest Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in the world. However, the narrative of Canada's progressiveness conceals a long history of immigration policies marked by racism, sexism, and classism. In Canada—and Sri Lanka—the dominant effective culture's endorsement of Anglo-conformity evidences the legacy of British colonialism. According to Howard Palmer, when immigration began to increase in the early twentieth-century, the Anglo-Canadian hegemony ensured that "a group's desirability as potential immigrants varied almost directly with its members' physical and cultural distance from London" (176). The emergence of "cultural pluralism" in the 1960s meant that ethnic, gender, and class discrimination became less overt, but the creation of new policies also served to obscure Canada's history of discrimination, intolerance, and racism. This history has been selectively and systemically supplanted by a narrative of multiculturalism, humanitarianism, and harmonious diversity.

The "cultural mosaic" metaphor, with its implied endorsement of heterogeneity and its suggestion of a horizontal equality, has been superimposed over the highly stratified vertical mosaic of Canadian society. In 1986, Canada was awarded the Nansen medal by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in "recognition of their major and sustained contribution to the cause of refugees" (Beiser 39). Canada's receipt of this award appears to have accurately reflected Canada's response to the South East Asian refugee crisis that occurred in the wake of the Vietnam War; between 1975 and 1985 Canada admitted 110, 000 refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.[1] Nevertheless, Canada's liberal immigration policies only began with the abandonment of its highly racialized and overtly discriminatory immigration restrictions in 1967. As Morton Beiser observes, with the receipt of the Nansen award in 1986, "Canada's reputation for humanitarianism reached its peak" (40; Elabor-Idemudia 64). The official discourse surrounding Canada's immigration policies belies a fundamental discord between the acceptance of immigrants into the country and Canada's success at integrating those immigrants into Canadian society.

Selvadurai's detailed description of landscape and geographical setting reveals yet another important example of the process of selective tradition as employed by Western countries. The ways in which countries like the United States and Canada commodify and market their appeal to immigrants is a testament to the selective tradition in the West. The images Shivan admires in the American Center Library, glossy pictures of "students lying in the grass, sun glinting in their hair," allow him to construct an imaginary future for himself in Canada marked by freedom, affluence, and happiness: "[T]he glistening blond wood of the library floor, the faintly chlorinated smell of air conditioning – always the smell of privilege in the tropics – confirmed this promise" (57). Similarly, the "posters of snow-capped mountains and sparkling rivers running through mint-green valleys" that Shivan studies in the Canadian embassy help to generate erroneous perceptions of Canada as an uncontaminated and pristine wilderness (70). Once Shivan arrives in Toronto, the billboards he passes on his way from the airport to the Submaramian's seem to Shivan "a promise of affluence and happiness," and when he arrives in the suburb of Unionville, Shivan recalls "I had arrived in the middle of my dreams" (83, 84). Thus, for Shivan, the images and representations, which form his

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[1] For a detailed examination of Canada's response to the South Asian refugee crisis during the decade after the Vietnam War see Beiser, Morton. *Strangers at the Gate: The "Boat People's" First Ten Years in Canada.* Toronto: U of Toronto, 1999. Print.

conception of Canada, mirror the hegemonic systems of meaning and value that constitute a reality for those under its sway. Hegemony, contends Williams, "constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute... experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move..." (1429). It is only later when the Submaramians passively demand an extortionate rent for their basement apartment that this constructed "reality" begins to reveal itself as an illusion.

A number of events that occurred in the years following the outbreak of the Sri Lankan Civil War reveal the contradictions between Canada's official discourse of humanitarianism and multiculturalism, and the actual cultural practices of the Canadian hegemony, practices which have served as social barriers to the integration and inclusion of immigrants in Canada. On August 11, 1986, three years after the outbreak of the Sri Lankan Civil War, and two years after the fictional arrival of Shivan in Canada, one-hundred and fifty-two Sri Lankan Tamils were found crammed into two life boats off the coast of Newfoundland. The adoption of the terms "suspicious," "illegality," and "deception" to describe these refugees demonstrates the extent to which the narrative promulgated by the Canadian media securitized, racialized, and othered the group. In an article titled "East Coast Vulnerable to Landings" in the Globe and Mail on August 16th, 1986, the regional director of the coast guard expresses a paranoia that undermines the official discourse of hospitable humanitarianism communicated by the Canadian government:

> Even as I talk to you now someone may be landing... Even if you knew which area a ship was coming to you couldn't be sure of stopping it... boats can slip away into another area or wait until weather conditions are right, like on Monday, when the seas were calm and the fog so thick you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. (Martin A4)

The subsequent discovery of the group's departure from Germany only served to further draw attention away from the persecution and violence from which they had fled and toward the precise location of their departure for Canada. Depicted as a threat to Canadian security and situated within a discourse of risk, the Tamil Refugees were nevertheless admitted to Canada on a one-year ministerial permit.

However, the passing of Bill C-84 in 1989 saw the implementation of structural barriers that paralleled some of the more hostile public

discourse surrounding the events of 1986. Styled the "Detention and Deterrents Bill," the legislation was contrived under the pretence of identifying false refugee claimants in order to preserve access to Canada for genuine refugees (Angus and Mathaway 8). However, the numerous provisions made for the "determination" of refugee status, including arbitrary detention and the rejection of ships suspected of carrying unauthorized entrants, ensured a reduction in the total number of legitimate refugees ultimately permitted entry into Canada. While the terms of the discourse changed, the principle of desirability according to which Canadian immigration policy was legislated prior to the 1960s appears to have been no less influential two decades later. Nevertheless, the discourse of inclusivity and opportunity prevailed.[2] In *The Hungry Ghosts*, it is Daya who most accurately expresses the positive perceptions of the immigrant experience propagated by Canada. Attempting to justify her recent purchase of a house from a Tamil family who fled to the West, Daya tells Shivan, "Now look at that family, they have a new life… Those three girls are probably all in university and will be prime candidates in the bridal market" (224). Shivan, who has witnessed the conditions in which Tamil refugees in Canada live, repudiates Daya's optimism: "Stop talking nonsense, Aacho. That family is probably very poor. You have no idea how those people exist in the West, the jobs they do to survive, the cramped apartments they live in, the daily contempt of white people" (224).

　　　Shivan, Hema, and Renu are not refugees and do not have difficulty gaining entry to Canada, but it is amid the unwelcoming Canadian climate of the 1980s that they arrive at the home of the Submaramians. Indeed, their experiences as immigrants within Canada contest the dominant narrative of multiculturalism propagated by the Anglo-Canadian hegemony. Shivan's dream of Canadian freedom and affluence begins to steadily erode when he and his family move into a "tiny row house" in the "poor ward" of L'Amoreaux. By having Shivan move into a house permeated with mould, Selvadurai draws an obvious parallel between this new house and the fungus-covered pettah property visited by Shivan and Daya at the beginning of the novel. The socio-economic privilege Shivan enjoyed

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[2] An article published in *The Toronto Star* in August 2011, titled "25 Years Later, Tamil Boat People Live the Dream," reveals the extent to which public discourse in Canada obscures its history of intolerance by constructing a narrative of opportunity and prosperity through selectivity. Having interviewed one of the one hundred and fifty-five Tamil refugees that arrived in 1986, the author writes of the group: "What is remarkable about their tale is not just their survival… but how they have prospered in a country where they arrived with nothing." (Aulakh).

in Sri Lanka offers no means for him to negotiate the ethnic stratification of Canadian society.

Similarly, the relative subordination of Hema and Renu in Sri Lanka is amplified by their particular vulnerability as ethnically-othered women in Canada. Selvadurai's acute awareness of the intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity reveals itself in the succession of events that bring about the Rassiah's departure from the home of the Submaramiams. Most notably, it is Bhavan Submaramiam's attempt to sexually assault Renu, an act of sexual violence that is conspicuously trivialized by Shivan, which precipitates their prompt departure. Renu's victimization results not only from Bhavan's attempt to assault her, but also from the way in which Shivan perceives the attack as a fortuitous opening for the family's escape from Unionville. Failing to recognize how this traumatic experience detrimentally affects Renu, the assault is relegated to a passing reference in Shivan's narrative. In fact, Shivan's consistent depreciation of the suffering of Renu and Hema is not only indicative of Shivan's self-absorption, but also of his failure to recognize their gendered subjugation in both Sri Lanka and Canada.

It is through contrasts more than parallels that Selvadurai emphasizes Shivan's own increasing disillusionment. Preceding many of the novel's chapters are brief and highly descriptive interludes written in the present first person narrative voice. These sections consistently return the narrative focus to a polluted culvert behind Hema's house. Significantly, these interludes, given prominence by their temporal, spatial, and textual separation from the central narrative, anticipate the disjuncture between Shivan's illusions of Canada and the reality he encounters there. Rather than a "sparkling river running through a mint green valley," Shivan works his way along the banks of this culvert with "black water like oil" lined with "clumps of filthy snow... which, as they melt, reveal nibbled Stryofoam cups, yellowed globules of Kleenex, condoms, straws, dog shit, cigarette packs, tattered mittens and scarves" (81, 90). This repository for the detritus of capitalist consumer culture is located in the heart of a multicultural community and surrounded by "looming towers filled with immigrants" (90). Tellingly, this imagery conveys the economic, social, and cultural marginalization of Canadian immigrants and reminds Shivan of his own arrival in Canada: "As I make my way... along the edge... I think again of that moment when we saluted our new future" (90). Combined with the unremitting depressiveness expressed by Shivan throughout the novel, these and numerous other images of Canada emphasize the economic disenfranchisement and utter disaffection that often characterize the Canadian immigrant experience.

Shivan's recurrent attempts to achieve happiness consistently fail in the face of the oppressive hegemonies from which he is alienated. The incorporated alternative cultures Shivan navigates in Canada are hardly more accepting than the effective dominant culture from which he is already estranged. As Williams observes, "[The] existence [of alternative cultures] within the incorporation is recognizable by the fact that... they do not in practice go beyond the limits of the central effective and dominant definitions" (1430). Accordingly, Shivan's attempt to find acceptance in the queer subculture of Toronto is obstructed by the incorporation of that alternative culture into the effective dominant culture of Canada; it offers no alternatives to the pervasive racism of the dominant culture: "We did not belong in the gay world because of our skin colour, yet spurned by our own people, we had no choice but to linger on the fringes" (107).

The racism Shivan encounters within Toronto's queer subculture is epitomized by the exoticizing sexual fantasies of the white men he meets: "My foreignness was often my appeal, and these white men ascribed both a submissiveness and feral sexuality to me, one man begging me to put on a loincloth and turban that he had in his closet" (113). It is only through the performance of white expectations that non-white immigrants are able to gain entrance to this ethnically exclusionary subculture:

> There was a black man from Trinidad in the group. I sensed, in that way we well-bred post-colonials from the old British Empire recognize each other's social markers, that his family back home was rich. But here he had moulded himself to fit white expectations, become more street black, more ghetto... [he] had slipped through the tight fence into the world of the charmed, the happy. (114)

According to Selvadurai, the racial and cultural homogeneity of the 1980s gay community in Toronto not only alienated visible minorities, but also rendered them silent: "...If you wanted to be gay, you took your place in the white world; this was pre-identity-politics. We had no language to articulate our thoughts, what it was like to be at the bottom of the hierarchy. You feel foreign and you can't speak about your world" ("Shyam Selvadurai"). The silencing of non-white immigrant voices is not, however, limited to Toronto's gay subculture. Instead, the incorporation of the subculture into the dominant effective culture of Canada obliges a certain degree of conformity to white Anglo-Canadian norms. In *The Hungry*

Ghosts, this conformity to the racism of the dominant effective culture entails the diminution of the gay community's inclusivity.

   In spite of Shivan's alienation from the dominant effective culture of Canada, his adoption of certain Canadian cultural practices precipitates his further dislocation from Sri Lanka. Shivan suppresses the awe and anxiety he experienced when he first arrived in Canada in an effort to naturalize his subsequent familiarity with the meanings and values of the hegemony: "I would pretend to the other young gay men I met at groups or bars that I had not been awed at all by Canada. I said I felt no culture shock, acting like I had slipped into this world as if it were my natural element" (93). Ironically, though Shivan's integration into Canadian culture is incomplete, the relative sexual freedom he encounters in Canada causes him to project onto Sri Lanka a form of freedom that does not exist there. Once again, landscape is imbued with a symbolic significance. Shivan's attempt to construct an idyllic life for himself and Mili is epitomized by the surreal backdrop provided by Sriyani's beach house where they vacation on a number of occasions:

> The house had verandahs all around, and airy rooms that were sparse but tastefully furnished... From the front verandah the garden sloped down to the sand and turquoise sea glittering with shards of light, a mist trembling where the waves crashed against the beach... The rustle of palm fronds, as they bowed and reared in the wind, was like the sound of a second sea. (180)

Selvadurai employs landscape imagery to convey the discord between the impossibility of Shivan and Mili's openly gay relationship in Sri Lanka and Shivan's visions of his future with Mili. Like Charles, Shivan returns to Sri Lanka in an attempt to escape the ethnic discrimination he experiences in the West. His misconceptions of Sri Lanka, however, are palpable in the freedom, which he imagines exists there. His return further parallels that of Charles in that his indiscreetness occasions the death of Mili, just as Charles' reckless and deluded love for Daya causes her to be ostracized from her family. After Mili's murder, the exotic setting for Mili and Shivan's relationship becomes a morbid signifier of Shivan's dislocation. The life Shivan envisioned with Mili, like the life he envisioned in Canada, is unattainable: "You misjudged [Sri Lanka]," Sriyani tells Shivan, "because you are now foreign to it" (240).

   Selvadurai depicts Shivan's final disaffection from Canada as a failure to fully articulate his life's narrative. Shivan's attempts to repress

the traumatic events of his past prevent him from committing to a relationship with Micheal in Vancouver. Though Shivan and Michael manage to establish a serious and relatively stable relationship toward the end of the novel, Shivan's reticence and restraint create a fissure between them. Finally, when attempting to make amends with Michael, Shivan provides only a partial narrative:

> [I was] hoping that the tide of my angry words would carry me to a place where I was able to tell the full truth. It didn't... I spoke rapidly, my words carrying me breathless, beyond thought, beyond conscience, desperate to share my unhappiness with Michael in the only way I seemed able, drawing comfort from his sympathy, from the way he took my hand and pressed it as we walked along. My bewilderment at my failure turned to rage... (317)

Failing to give voice to the violence and grief he experienced after the death of Mili, and haunted by his past, a history of disillusionment and exclusion, Shivan leaves Michael and returns to Sri Lanka in order to bring his grandmother back to Toronto. Shivan's departure from Canada at the end of *The Hungry Ghosts* seems to offer little hope for Shivan's eventual belonging. The ubiquity and oppressiveness of cultural hegemony within the novel provides few opportunities for productive resistance. Unable to acquiesce to the hegemony of effective dominant culture, Shivan is left totally alienated from both Canada and Sri Lanka and he resigns himself to despair: "Soon I will take my place in [Daya's] world, and there will be little that is joyful about doing so" (371).

For Williams, there is a reciprocal relationship between "the literary" and "the social." In seeking to transform cultural practices, writes Williams, "the dominant culture itself changes, not in its central formation, but in many of its articulated features" (1434). Arriving at an intricate depiction of inequality as an intersection of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, Selvadurai moves beyond an expression of the hegemonies to which he responds. The purpose of confronting Sri Lankan politics through fiction, states Selvadurai, is "not to get closure" ("Shyam"). Instead, literary narrative "create[s] space to challenge the single story the government is trying to shove down our throats, that every faction has its single story" ("Shyam"). By drawing attention to the multiple sites of oppression that existed within Sri Lanka during the turbulent period of the Civil War, Selvadurai challenges dominant narratives and creates space for an open dialogue on the inclusion of diverse sexual, ethnic, and social

identities in Sri Lanka. Similarly, by placing the alienating reality confronted by many Canadian immigrants adjacent to the narrative of inclusivity propagated by the Canadian hegemony, Selvadurai exposes contradictions that disrupt the ostensible coherence and continuity of the "continuing story of Canada." When approaching a literary text, writes Williams, "we should look not for the components of a product but for the conditions of a practice" (1443). Accordingly, what Selvadurai's novel reveals is that the importance of immigrant writing in Canada has little to do with whether or not it can be said to express a "latent Canadianness." Instead, what recent immigrant writing in Canada demonstrates is that the literature of any country is not static, but part of a dynamic process whose strength is its potential to articulate, critique, challenge, and ultimately change the conditions of the hegemonies to which it responds.

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