

## **Diasporic Activism and the Mediations of “Home”: South Asian Voices in Canadian Drama<sup>1</sup>**

NANDI BHATIA  
Western University, Canada

**ABSTRACT** *Critical analyses of literatures of the Indian diaspora discuss the “home” of origin as a subtext and a site to which diasporas aspire to return even though it remains an unachievable ideal that is refracted through nostalgic retellings of a space that remains at best “imaginary” (Mishra 2007). Alternatively, some critics, as Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald point out, view diasporas’ relationship with the homeland in terms of “loyalty,” obscuring in the process the antagonisms that may arise depending upon one’s circumstances, antagonisms that produce “interactions” between homes of residence and those of origin (2012). In South Asian drama in Canada, many of the concerns regarding race, multiculturalism, job discrimination and violence against women and other marginalized groups are propelled by their links to the playwrights’ “home” of origin. With attention to selected plays, this paper will analyze how the networks between home and spaces of residence in multicultural Canada come alive on theatre stages through visual motifs, actors, props, and photographic collages, which confront the different trajectories of “home” that resurface in these plays. Through live scenes of imagination that speak to spectators, several plays under discussion in this essay expose how, while providing emotional sustenance for some, the baggage of “home” may also pose challenges in the home of residence. So the questions I raise are: How does home appear? To what end? And what does returning “home” teach us about the inequalities and injustices underlying the current global order?*

### **Introduction**

This article examines South Asian drama in Canada as a critical site of activism that addresses issues pertaining to social justice and discrimination through themes and tropes in which the home of origin has a significant role to play. Like literary criticism, South Asian Canadian drama “has passed through its nascent stages and is now part of the theatrical life in several Canadian cities” (McGifford, 1992, p. xii). Despite its contribution to literature and the arts and its commitment to social activism and human rights, this drama has only

*Correspondence Address:* Nandi Bhatia, Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Western University, University College 57, London, ON N6A 3K7, Canada, Tel.: (+1) 519 661 2111 ext. 85817, Email: nbhatia2@uwo.ca

ISSN: 1911-4788

recently begun to receive attention in Canadian literature anthologies such as McGifford's *The Geography of Voice* (1992), which includes two plays and devotes a couple of paragraphs to South Asian Drama in the introduction. It has, however, yet to become the object of extensive critical inquiry and interpretation. Such an undertaking is, therefore, crucial because it offers new ways of thinking about the importance of dramatic performances as social texts that enable alternative visions of the homeland, visions that render visible the entanglements of networks of power that shape nations, localities, and regions.

Critical analyses of literatures of the Indian diaspora discuss the home of origin as a subtext and a site to which diasporas aspire to return even though it remains an unachievable ideal that is refracted through nostalgic retellings of a space that remains at best imaginary. The "diasporic imaginary," identified as "any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied coercion, as a group that lives in displacement" (Mishra, 2007, p. 14), is, as Vijay Mishra argues, marked by a sense of loss and trauma. The need to compensate for this loss produces a return of this repressed object in diasporic narratives. Mishra provides examples of novelists and creative artists who belong to the old and new Indian diasporas: the old diasporas of indenture and classical capitalism who relocated to the Caribbean and Fiji under the British empire, and the new diasporas of transnational capital of the late twentieth century, whose experiences of home are mediated through the discourse of mobility. Alternatively, some critics, as Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald (2012) point out, view diasporas' relationships with the homeland in terms of "loyalty," obscuring in the process the antagonisms that may arise depending upon one's circumstances, antagonisms that produce interactions between homes of residence and those of origin and "involve a multiplicity of actors coming together in a broad range of combinations" (p. 1186). Refugees, for instance, may have no home or may be in a position of fighting to have a home in places from which they are displaced or where they relocate (p. 1188).

In the case of South Asian drama in Canada, a corpus that has resulted from the efforts of playwrights, many of whom are first-generation immigrants, one does not necessarily detect narratives of melancholia, trauma, loss, loyalty or interest deemed as defining features of diasporic literatures. Rather, many of the concerns regarding issues of racism, multiculturalism, job discrimination and violence against women and other marginalized groups, concerns that constitute the subject of plays by Rahul Varma, Rana Bose, Ajmer Rode, Sadhu Binning, and Uma Parmeswaran, Surjit Kalsey, Anosh Irani, and Anusree Roy, among others, are propelled by their links to the playwrights' homes of origin. Even though this home may not be the physical site of action in many of the plays, it appears in multiple dimensions and gets reproduced in terms of a productive tension that serves as the springboard for the thematic/activist content of the plays, content that negotiates the interests of minorities and migrants across home and diaspora. This is accomplished

through dialogue and reflection on the enmeshment of home in contemporary diasporic contexts through a collaborative medium that attempts to bring actors, activists and spectators into partnerships for social action, a partnership sometimes encouraged through post-performance discussions which are “another common way to connect the stage to the ‘reality’ outside” (High, 2011, p. 52) and which provide spectators an occasion to engage in conversations beyond the staged play.<sup>2</sup> South Asian Canadian drama’s activist dimension thus acquires special relevance: first, it calls for the proliferation of a dialogue about issues of social justice through a comparative framework that examines the interconnectedness of different contexts (Canada and India in many of these plays). Additionally, it complicates critical diaspora theories, theories that link diasporic communities to home through the lens of nostalgia, longing, and belonging and focus primarily on the subtext of loss and return. This additional layer of analysis has been perhaps overlooked because drama and theatre have remained largely absent from critical discussions of the literatures of the Indian diaspora, as Aparna Dharwadker (2003) has astutely pointed out based on her survey of the field (p. 303-305). As the discussion that unfolds demonstrates, many of the playwrights have chosen theatre as a means of fostering discussions on politically relevant issues that address the context of Canada but whose energies are inspired by the mediations of home. The networks between home and spaces of residence which generate “not one, but a multiplicity of imagined communities organized along different, often conflicting principles whether related to the scale of aggregation (local or national) or to the opposing visions of the community in question” (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2012, p. 1178) come alive on theatre stages through visual motifs, actors, props, and photographic collages, which confront the different trajectories of home that resurface in the immigrant imagination. Through live scenes of imagination that speak to spectators, several plays under discussion in this essay expose how, while providing emotional sustenance for some, the baggage of home may also pose challenges in the home of residence. So the questions that I raise are: How does home appear? To what end? And what does returning home teach us about the inequalities and injustices underlying the current global order? My attempt to answer these questions calls for an examination of some of the plays performed over the last thirty years or so.

### **Contextual overview**

At the outset, it is necessary to acknowledge that the plurality of diasporic drama in Canada defies its generalization into one particular slot; yet it is important to note that what it offers collectively is a social forum in Canada. Until the 1980s, South Asian drama in Canada was a little known field. The three companies that propelled this drama into an identifiable movement are Vancouver Saath (initiated by Sadhu Binning and other Punjabi activists in 1982), Rahul Varma’s *Teesri Duniya* (co-founded with Rana Bose in 1981,

the title translates as Third World) and Rana Bose's Montreal Serai, in 1985. Concerned with immigrant life in Canada, these playwrights laid out a clear agenda for theatre. For Vancouver Saath, which began "as an informal discussion forum by a group of politically conscious Punjabi writers and community activists" (Binning, 1993, p. 22), it was critical that "literature and art should be created for the betterment of society" (Binning, 1993, p. 22). Inspired by the Saaths in Punjabi villages in India, which promote friendships and solidarity without a formal or hierarchical structure through free-flowing conversations, Saath activists envisioned theatre as a particularly suitable forum for raising issues pertaining to Punjabi immigrants, namely, employment, BC's anti-labour legislation, the divisive impact of the movement for self-determination in Punjab on the Punjabi community in BC in the 1980s, and the rights of women, youth and the elderly at home and in the workplace. In this, the genres of drama and theatre acquired a centrality. Unlike Benedict Anderson's (1983) formulations regarding print culture as being central to the formation of "imagined communities," Saath members questioned the effectiveness of print for raising critical awareness and instead found drama and theatre as more efficacious media for addressing their concerns. So, while such issues were locally addressed in journals such as *Watno Dur* and *Canada Darpan*, Saath members questioned the power of the printed word on the audience: "We realized that most of the Punjabis were not in the habit of reading serious articles in the best of times, let alone at a time when they were simply too involved in their daily struggles to establish themselves in a new land. This realization led us to experiment with theatre" (Binning, 1993, p. 23). From its inception, then, the group's mandate was to form an audience-oriented theatre, one that also aimed to achieve a non-hierarchical framework through plays written and directed collectively and enacted by members from the community, many of whom had never acted before.

Affiliated with the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres, Teesri Duniya identified its ultimate goal as creating "a shared social space in which visible minorities are recognized as different but equal" (Varma, 2009, pp. 193-194). Since its formation, Teesri has sought to achieve this goal "through politically engaged, high quality art that examines relevant issues, challenges audiences and supports the cause of social justice" (Varma, 2009, p. 194). The Serai Collective, which also runs an arts magazine *Montreal Serai* (the name given to its theatre) aims at promoting "works that reflect and assert the diverse world we live in" so as to "counteract exclusion, separation, and marginalization when they occur in the arts and in society at large" (Montreal Serai, 2013). The themes addressed by these groups were various: For Saath, exploitation of farm workers, gender discrimination within the family, social exclusion, racism and discrimination of immigrants based on the lack of English language proficiency were some issues that took center-stage. For Serai, multiculturalism against ghettoization became a looming concern, and Teesri dealt with topical issues in a forthright manner.

Simultaneously, and even before the 1980s, women's theatre groups

proliferated in various parts of Canada. Of note are Surjeet Kalsey's contributions to women's theatre in Vancouver and Uma Parameswaran's in Winnipeg. Kalsey organized plays that foregrounded women-centered issues in Canada in the early 1980s. An actor, playwright and director with several years of experience in broadcasting, Kalsey's first play, which she wrote, "Daughters Behind the Palace Doors" was staged in 1982 in Carpenter Hall in New Westminster, B.C. Considered a landmark production in Punjabi theatre, the play "addressed the issue of family violence for the first time in the Indo-Canadian community through the medium of drama therapy" at a time "when it was hard even to talk about such issues in the community" (Kalsey, n.d.). Instead of professional actors, Kalsey prevailed upon women, who had been victims of domestic abuse and sex selection, to perform in the play, offering the play itself as a site for therapeutic expression. This was a significant step in exposing imposed restrictions, regressive notions of female identity, and patriarchal attitudes that accord primacy to the male child. In this, the genre of theatre itself served as an enabling device through which women could speak, especially those who may be confined within the restrictive parameters of domestic spaces. Kalsey's other contributions include *Nirlujj SamaN* (Shameless Times), a four-act play on sex selection staged in 1994, with subsequent performances in 1994 and 1995 in Abbotsford; *Poh de Agan* (Holy Fire: Lohri), a three-act play staged on the occasion of the Lohri festival in Abbotsford in 1998 to raise awareness about celebrating the birth of a girl; *Vizay toN Baad* (After Getting Visa), a one-act play that focuses on the dynamics of procuring a visa for Canada and the ways in which the protagonist's life unfolds after relocation to Canada, performed on the occasion of the Vaisakhi festival of 1997 in Abbotsford, and *Chetna* (Awareness), co-authored with Ajmer Rode, a play on "four different issues facing the Indo-Canadian community such as drinking, wife abuse, parent-child conflict and safety of women" staged in Vancouver in 1982 and in Abbotsford in 1983" (Kalsey, n.d.). *DhiaN PardesnaN* (Daughters Abroad), a three act play "depicting the current situation of Indo-Canadian women and their sponsors" was staged on the occasion of the Teeyan Festival in Abbotsford in 1997, and *Sat ParaianN: Ghar da Supna* (Distant Women: Dreaming of Home) was staged in Abbotsford in 1996" (Kalsey, n.d.).

As these groups attempted to establish themselves and fulfill their mandates, they looked toward India for their inspirational lessons. Likewise, the community of writers that formed Vancouver Saath initially turned to Punjabi playwright Gursharan Singh when he visited Canada with his theatre group Amritsar Natak Kala Kender for its intellectual and activist energy. Together with the Punjabi Cultural Association, community members began to perform Punjabi plays, something that Saath continued when it decided to produce its first play in 1984. The first few plays used Punjab as the subject matter as in *Panjab di Awaaz* (The Voice of Punjab), Gusharan Singh's *Kursi, Morcha, te Hawa Vich Latke Log* (Chair, Battlefield and People Dangling in the Air, presented at an elementary school auditorium in Vancouver, March 1984) and *Tootan Wala Khoon* (A Well with Mulberry Trees), a play about

the 1947 Partition of Punjab which sought to communicate a message against communal divisions, especially relevant in the wake of the Punjab problem in India and the demand for Khalistan which had spilled over into the diaspora (see Binning, 1993). Similarly, the opening stage directions of Rana Bose's *On the Double*, a play with a feminist theme, which shows the emergence of new forms of patriarchy in an Indo-Canadian setting, clearly states that the "inspiration for this play was a theatre performance by a group of New Delhi women players, but in form and content the play reflects Montreal and Canadian reality" (Bose, 1999, p. 213). In the early years when these theatre companies were trying to get off the ground, it was theatre from home, in various languages, that served as the inspirational impetus. Varma initially wrote plays in Hindi, "which served as a cultural unifier for the South Asian Diaspora" (Varma, 2009, p. 180). According to Varma (2009) Teesri Duniya:

was launched, in 1981, with Badal Sircar's groundbreaking play *Julus* [Processions] and until 1985, produced plays in Hindi from India including: Sharad Joshi's *Ek Tha Gadha urf Aladad Khan* [A Donkey Called Aladad Khan] (1982), Anil Barve's *Thank you Mr. Glad* (1983), Gursharan Singh's *Gaddha* [Pothole] and *Ahsaas* [Realization], and Kishan Chander's *Darwaze kho Dou* [Open Doors] between 1983-1984. During that period, the company also produced locally created plays in Hindi dealing with issues affecting the lives of South Asian immigrants to Canada. These plays included *Bhanumati Ka Pitara* [Pandora's Box], *Ghar Ghar ki Kahani* [Household Story, which was written by Rahul Varma] and *Nazme-Faiz* [Faiz's Poetry] by Azra Naqvi. (Varma, 2009, p. 180).

And Binning and other Punjabi playwrights wrote plays in Punjabi, many of which were subsequently performed in English translation.

Even though Uma Parmeswaran (1998) notes that Indo-Canadian playwrights deal with "'here' Canada, and not with 'there,' halfway across the world," (p. 3), her own plays returned to India through mythological stories, for example, *Meera: A Dance Drama* in order to celebrate, "Indian art traditions and at the same time to educate the outsider into our culture" (Parmeswaran, 1996a, p. ii). Over time, the annihilation of the idea of a mythical (Hindu) India led to a plurality in the way home came to be represented and drama took on an activist dimension in the 1980s and onwards in order to address concerns shaped by multiculturalism, transnational capitalism and its local effects, violence against women, and the effects of war and displacement on women and their families. Such activism became particularly visible in South Asian Women's theatre in Toronto with the staging of South Asian Sisters in Solidarity's play *Baysharam* (Shameless, 1991), Cahoots Theatre Project's *A Canadian Monsoon* (1993), Company of Sirens' *All Whispers/No Words* (1995), "a one-hour piece about South Asian women in Canada...[and] their experience of violence" (James, 1998, p. 48) and Stree Theatre Productions' *Old Wives Tales* by Sri Lankan born Siva Mohan Sumathy, a play that attempted to raise awareness about the civil war in Sri Lanka through a plot that "focuses on six women gathered in a kitchen who speak candidly about the war and the effects it has on their lives" (James, 1998, p. 49). In 1996, *Old*

*Wives Tales* was adapted to a theme that “would move between Sri Lanka and Canada” (James, 1998, p. 49). Also significant here is the fact that the actors, directors, and artists for many of these companies belong to diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

### **Rahul Varma’s *Bhopal***

To elaborate my point further, I turn to an analysis of *Bhopal*, a play set in the Indian city of Bhopal, the site of the biggest industrial disaster in 1984, at the American corporation Union Carbide’s pesticide factory, which claimed 3000 lives overnight. *Bhopal* represents a watershed moment for locating home and the status of powerless groups in the larger context of transnational corporate developments. The play was first produced in Montreal in September 2001 (under the direction of Jack Langedijk) by the Teesri Duniya Theatre at the Arts Interculturels and was next produced by the Cahoots Theatre Project at the Theatre Centre, Toronto, in October/November 2003. Its Hindi translation, *Zehreeli Hawa* (Poisonous Air), was produced by Habib Tanvir’s Naya Theatre, India, in December 2002, and under Tanvir’s direction, it was performed in six Indian cities. Tanvir, in fact, wrote the songs in a language that drew upon the idioms of the Chattisgarhi dialect and interspersed the Hindi play with English words. Paul Lefebvre translated the play into French, after which it was produced at the Theatre Periscope in Quebec City and, under the direction of Philippe Soldevilla, performed at the Espace Libre in Montreal during 2005-2006. This expansive approach, which includes a multilingual cast of actors who performed the play in multiple languages (English, French, and Hindi) in different localities and international venues is not only inspirational but also performs a politically expedient function. It emphasizes the scope of theatrical representations by drawing in a range of viewers who speak vastly different languages (English and French in Canada and Hindi/Chattisgarhi and English in India) and intersects with local aesthetic forms to perform politically meaningful theatre. A play such as *Bhopal* then becomes the site of an emerging political consciousness that can encourage the fostering of cross-border alliances based on an identification of power relations that operate transnationally, and its far-reaching influence can be gauged by its ongoing presentation by theatre groups in Canada, the USA, and India.<sup>4</sup>

Dedicated “to the victims of the Bhopal disaster,” *Bhopal* was written to raise awareness about the Union Carbide disaster and its debilitating effects. Union Carbide came to India in 1905 when India was under British rule. Known for manufacturing Eveready batteries, it moved into the production of agrochemicals in the 1960s and became “one of India’s largest manufacturers of chemical fertilizers and pesticides” by the 1970s (Varma, 2004, p. iii). According to Varma, the “company’s promotional film showed healthy green crops blowing in the wind, birds singing, and men, women and children beaming with happiness as the line scrolled across the screen: ‘Union Carbide

will touch every life in India” (Varma, 2004, p. iii). Contrary to such images, says Varma, when the Union Carbide’s pesticide plant exploded on the night of December 3, 1984, the effects of the poisonous fumes that engulfed the city as a result were deadly:

Small children fell like flies, men and women vainly scurried for safety like wounded animals, only to collapse, breathless and blinded by the gas. By morning, the death toll was more than 500, by sunset, 2,500. By the following day, numbers had no meaning. That night, Bhopal became the largest peacetime gas chamber in history....

Union Carbide did indeed touch many lives in India: more than 20,000 people have died so far, more than 10,000 were seriously injured, 20,000 were disabled, and thousands have suffered the ravages of respiratory diseases, madness, cancer, and other unidentified illnesses. (Varma, 2004, p. iii)

In Varma’s words, the play represents “global environmental issues and their ramifications for living conditions in the Third World,” conditions that “hinge on the relationship between the developed and developing worlds” and the “unstoppable mass murder of the poor—murder which is legitimized in the name of progress, development, and the state” (Varma, 2009, p. 186). Home then returns in this play to showcase “poverty’s relationship to development” (Varma, 2009, p. 188) and its emergence in this form makes *Bhopal* “a play against forgetting” (Varma, 2009, p. 189).

Varma zeroes in on the play’s central issue through a focus on bodies—particularly of children, born and unborn, who are maimed and deformed even before birth. This is highlighted through a plot that includes a Canadian doctor, Sonya Labonte, who is skeptical of the developmental promises made to residents of a slum by Devraj Sarthi, a Non-Resident Indian who has returned to India to serve as company manager of Carbide International. The latter convinces the chief minister to grant him a licence for setting up a plant to produce an agro-chemical known as Karbide Thunder on the pretext that it would increase agricultural output and accrue profits for the country. Convinced that people, animals and babies, many of them deformed at birth, are succumbing to “diseases unknown to medical science” because of the poison emitted by the chemical, Sonya undertakes research that serves as scientific evidence after the disaster strikes at the plant. Her research subjects include a local woman by the name of Izzat, whom she compensates financially for showcasing her deformed baby girl Zarina as exemplary of what Varma calls the “corporate inhumanity” operative at the plant (2004, p. iv). The plot takes a complicated turn when the corporate manager’s secretary and lover, who is carrying his child, faces the prospect of giving birth to a deformed baby. While showing the complicity of local politicians with American multinational corporations, a complicity that facilitated the disaster with fatal consequences, the play forcefully references the malformed bodies at home that continue to be affected by the policies and practices of multinational corporations with little or no accountability. Such a lack of accountability and the motivations of greed on the part of American corporations that amass their fortunes through exploitation of Third World subjects and through the

complicities of local politicians interested in accruing political gains highlight the asymmetries of power between First and Third Worlds by showcasing for the audience bodies that don't matter. This is especially emphasized through Izzat, who, determined to survive her acute poverty, takes advantage of the compensation offered by adversarial groups: from Sonya, on the one hand, and the company manager Devraj, on the other, from whom she takes money to hand out to villagers for erasing from public knowledge any news of their dying babies and animals. The impaired bodies represent both literal and psychic maiming through a realism that showcases bodies infected with disease in the aftermath of the diaster. The allusions to the effects on the corporeal body intensify the message of the play and thereby seek to shatter spectatorial complacency about the debilitating effects of the disaster and highlight the connections between state violence, multinational corporations and local players. This is something that Varma reinforces in his introduction: "Even after twenty years, mothers who inhaled poisonous gas on or after the explosion are giving birth to horribly deformed babies. While still in the womb, babies are inheriting unformed limbs, melted skin, and holes in their brain tissue" (Varma, 2004, p. iv).

### **Beyond *Bhopal*: Remembering "Home" through Gender, Caste, and Class**

While Bhopal takes up the specific issue of the effects of the Union Carbide disaster, it is of importance to note that South Asian (Indian) drama in Canada is not homogenous, nor does it offer homogenizing concerns. Within what we may identify as a corpus of activist drama are plays produced, written and performed by urban first-generation professionals, by working-class groups, and semi-literate women. In these, home is remembered and enacted differently in different sociopolitical contexts. In some plays, it becomes a site of yearning for return which has emerged as a result of racism and exploitation, as in the case of an "Old Female Worker," a character in Sadhu Binning's play, *Lesson of a Different Kind* who, because of her exploitation as a janitor who lacks a union to support her rights, dreamily longs for her home in Punjab: "I want to sit in the winter sun on the roof-top of my home in the village and watch the little children play" (Binning, 1996, p. 87). Or it appears as a way of understanding the "loss" of home in Canada, as in Varma's *No Man's Land*, where an immigrant Muslim family links the impending loss of home in Quebec in the wake of its demand for separation from Canada to the loss of the family's home during the 1947 Partition. Here home appears as an ideological space, a space of tension, and even oppression. In Uma Parameswaran's (1996) play *Rootless But Green are the Boulevard Trees*, Jayant, a child of first-generation migrants in Winnipeg, ruptures his father's nostalgia by describing his home in India as "a sprawling, handed down untouched form from the time of the Peshwas, where you have to walk half a mile to get to the shithouse" (p. 77). This description not only sets

up a contrast with the setting of the family's home in Winnipeg with all the trappings of middle-class comfort as described in the stage directions; it also offers a foil to the home in Canada that Jayant imagines as being idyllic. As Jayant and his friends start discussing race relations and inter-generational conflicts over lunch, they soon discover that the South Asian community too is marked by intra-community tensions and hostilities, exposing the narrow conception of community that gets consolidated in a bid to protect itself from racism and biased perceptions. But underlying the reference to the Peshwas<sup>5</sup> is also the allusion to larger spaces and this points to the inequities of social caste.

Parmeswaran's focus on caste encourages a rethinking of caste practices, which are not only operative at home, as pointed out by activists and theatre groups operating in India, but also continue to play out in diasporic spaces. Hence, this drama remembers home not only in idealized terms to construct what Rushdie (2010) calls, "imaginary homelands" which are versions with little correspondence to the reality of the homeland. But, its preoccupation with real life characters and situations, makes it an enterprise that foregrounds class, caste, gender, and race in the domain of middle-class drama and venues. For example, the performance of Ajmer Rode's *The Rebirth of Gandhi* at the Association of Commonwealth Languages and Literature Studies (ACLALS) held in British Columbia in 2007 raised the topic of caste prejudice and mistreatment of Dalits. Rather than foregrounding this border-crossing practice in terms of the ambivalence that is associated with diasporic experience and remembering this drama engages in a diasporic activism whose themes of social justice link them to the most radical social activist theatre in India, as in Varma's *Bhopal*, and Rana Bose's *The Death of Abbie Hoffman*, a play which is adapted from Badal Sircar's *Procession*.

Remarkably, several plays, such as Varma's *Equal Wages* and Binning's *Lesson of a Different Kind*, also provide a language that addresses the gendered diaspora through a focus on female farmworkers in Binning's play, and through home-working in Varma's play, where immigrant women in Canada sew garments at home for the garment industry but do not have the protection of labour laws. Home-working, as Gayatri Spivak (1996) points out, is an urgent topic involving "women in the transnational world," since it concerns women who "do piece-work at home with no control over wages; and thus absorb the cost of health care, day care, work place safety, maintenance, management" (p. 246). In such situations, suggests Spivak, the "concept of a diasporic multiculturalism is irrelevant. . . . The women stay at home, often impervious to organizational attempts through internalized gendering as a survival technique" (p. 246). But such internalization about gendered roles also results from expectations that migrants bring into diasporic spaces. For this reason, points out Mala Pendurang (2003), in any discussion of diasporic women, it is equally necessary to focus on spaces of departure, spaces that get left out in critical accounts that focus mainly on the enigmas and difficulties of arrival. For, a discussion of the cultural expectations of home, especially with regard to gender, is crucial for understanding gender-relations in the

diaspora. As the plays of Surjeet Kalsey and several plays by Vancouver Saath show, home emerges as cultural baggage that travels into the diaspora and prescribes limited and patriarchal roles for women, adding to the strains of marginalization based on color and class, as in the case of the farm-workers in British Columbia. At the same time, showing female farm-workers fighting for their rights on the picket lines in a play such as Binning and Sukhwant Hundal's *Picket Line*, inspired by immigrant (Punjabi) women's demands for farm workers' rights in British Columbia in 1984, highlights the ways in which diasporic relocation creates contradictory conditions of empowerment and repression. While disempowering when patriarchal ideologies from India are rearticulated here, relocation can also be empowering as women transition from their identities as wives, homemakers, and mothers to wage earners and protectors of their labour rights.

### Revisiting "Home"

In a 2003 article, Aparna Dharwadker applauded South Asian drama in Canada for maintaining a critical distance and detachment from "the culture of origin" and embracing "the experience of residence in the host culture" (p. 305) in order to produce "original" drama. "Without this detachment from origins, diaspora theatre," argues Dharwadker, "can only *re-present* the culture of the nation, in expatriate plays about 'home,' local productions of plays from home, and full-scale imports. . . . In Canada, where the Indian expatriate communities are older, often visibly unprivileged, and entangled in post/colonial histories, an emergent culture of original playwriting and performance has offered a critique of the nation-state as well as of conditions in the diaspora" (Dharwadker, 2003, p. 305). But is detachment from home possible or even necessary? Since connections between home and diasporic spaces are ever-present and lasting (manifested in all their unevenness and differentiated formulations), such an argument produces a potential disconnect between home and diaspora, which risks eliding experiences that are necessary for examining social processes in diasporic spaces and assumes that "attachments to the home left behind are imports that inevitably fade as immigrants and their descendants gradually assimilate into a mainstream whose ties are bounded at the water's edge" (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2012, p. 1193). At a time when the climate of globalization demands a complex negotiation of local, national and global networks, plays produced by diasporic playwrights in Canada seem to be making a concerted effort to engage with the entanglement of issues at home as well as in diasporic spaces, and so they create the conditions for progressive intercultural partnerships.

In the more recent plays, home once again seems to be the central site of action: Bombay in the case of Anosh Irani and Calcutta in Anusree Roy's work. In Irani's *The Matka King*, a play about Hijras (Eunuchs), which premiered at the Vancouver Arts Club in October 2003, the protagonist Top Rani (The Head Queen), a eunuch in his thirties, who was castrated at the age of ten,

says in the Prologue: “in this city [of Bombay], no one is free. I realized that when I was ten years old. I was sent here by my father to work as a servant boy. I had dreams then. Now I can hardly remember what [the dreams] were. The truth is there is no such thing as an Indian dream” (Irani, 2007, p. 5). Instead of a nostalgic journey into Bombay, a city where Irani grew up and which continues to inspire him, he presents us with a horrific tale of ruptured dreams, broken hearts and social entrapment and marginalization of Hijras, prostitutes, and the working poor. Roy’s *Pyaasa*, first produced by Theatre Jones Roy at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto in September, 2007, presents the tragic story of Chaya, an eleven year old Dalit girl, for whom her mother arranges employment at a local tea stall run by a woman of a higher caste, and renders visible for her audiences, Chaya’s exploitation, her giving up of her dreams of continuing her school education so that she can earn money for the family, and her eventual marriage to a much older man after she is raped by the tea stall owner. And Roy’s *Letters to my Grandma* is set in the pre and post-World War II period in India and in Toronto. First produced by Theatre Passe Muraille, Toronto, in November and December, 2009, this play foregrounds the protagonist Molobee’s discovery of her grandma’s survival of the 1947 Partition through her letters, a struggle that enables Bee to deal with her own process of resettlement in Toronto. Even though the Partition, one of the most cataclysmic events of the twentieth century that coincided with India’s independence and led to unprecedented material and personal loss through forced migration across the newly created borders of India and Pakistan and the violence against humanity that erupted, is not slotted in parallel terms with voluntary immigration, the play attempts to show the dislocation of immigrants whose identities are circumscribed by these historical memories, which complicate the processes of resettlement. To highlight the impact of interwoven memories, Roy’s time-frame shifts back and forth between Toronto, India at the time of Partition, and in the contemporary moment, a moment in which spectators encounter the grandmother’s experiences through the phone conversations and letters between Bee and her grandma. Not only do these overlapping time frames, of historical memory and the present, show viewers how one age constructs another; they also explain the grandma’s communal sensibilities, as she struggles with the idea of Bee, the granddaughter, marrying a Muslim in Toronto and subsequently accepts the fact as she begins to confront her own act of bigotry during the Partition riots, when she had a Muslim woman thrown off a jeep so she could take her place in order to safeguard her new-born child. Bee overlays these communal memories with other forms of bigotry she confronts in Toronto when people call her a “Paki,” a racist term used for South Asians. Through an aesthetic framework that makes use of a single actor to play the different roles the individual’s multiple roles and identities are also foregrounded. Like her grandma, who posed both as a Muslim and a Hindu when the Partition carnage threatened her and her newborn baby girl, Bee too finds herself shifting into a multiplicity of roles that she has to constantly negotiate as an immigrant woman: an obedient daughter who is expected to carry out the roles

and responsibilities of a Hindu woman, a young woman with independent opinions, and an immigrant faced with racism. At the very least, viewers are reminded of the value of revisiting home and its history for understanding the complexities of relationships in the present. Overall, Irani and Roy's plays subject India and Canada to critical scrutiny and examine the effects of power networks on those living on the margins (Hijras, bar dancers, prostitutes, and beggars). This scrutiny is especially useful at a time when images of a shining India have been promoted and center-staged in the global imagination.

### Some Concluding Remarks

If the plays forcefully tackle sociopolitical issues, then the activism they have engendered has also not been without achievements. As Thomas Morgan Jones writes in the introduction to Roy's play, "Anusree Roy writes plays because she truly believes that they have the power to change the world" (Roy, 2010, p. iii), something that is confirmed by the audience's reaction after the performance of her plays, described, as follows, by Jones:

Following each performance, audience members were compelled to speak with Anusree. They wanted to share *their* stories and *their* personal experiences. *Letters to my Grandma* moved audiences to offer stories about their grandparents, and about their own families' experiences with war. There was one instance, following a performance of *Pyaasa*, where a woman admitted that she had spit on one of her untouchable servant's face while living in India, and tearfully asked Anusree for her forgiveness. Each conversation with each stranger spoke to a deep and meaningful connection they made with the writing. It was as if the writing invited the audiences into Anusree's world(s) while allowing them to access new perspectives in their own lives. (Roy, 2010, p. iv)

Many playwrights/groups who often operate under little economic support and have to deal with funding practices that provide financial support only if the plays fulfill a certain notion of culture that reproduces the idea of the exotic to accommodate the demands of official multiculturalism have extended their activism to secure more funding. Teesri Duniya, for example, managed to effect reforms in the ways in which the Canada Council for the Arts parsed out funds for multicultural theatre events, funds that led to the eventual growth of the company.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Teesri Duniya managed to become "one of the few culturally inclusive theatre companies in Canada" (Varma, 2009, p. 180) and has produced "cutting edge political plays involving other groups" (Varma, 2009, p. 182).

The moment that Teesri began to receive arts funding from the Canada Council of the Arts marks a turning point in the company's history. The result was a string of avant-garde plays which were properly workshopped and featured actors of colour who were paid unionized salaries. These plays were produced at fully equipped venues known by the theatre-going public and, until that time, exclusively used by Anglo-French companies. (Varma, 2009, p. 182)

Additional funding has thus allowed groups such as Teesri Duniya and Vancouver's Newworld Theatre to collaborate on joint productions of plays such as *My Name is Rachel Corrie* in Montreal and Vancouver, a play about a 23 year old woman by this name, who was bulldozed to death by Israeli Defense Forces while protesting the destruction of Palestinian homes.

Even though Teesri started as a company to address the needs of the South Asian community, like many other groups in recent year, it has continued its commitment to raising awareness about global political issues by launching *Truth and Treason*, a play about the war in Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Such commitment shows itself again in Rahul Varma's most recent play, *State of Denial*, (2012) a play that grew out of Concordia University's History Department project, "Montreal Life Stories" and premiered in March 2012 in Montreal under the direction of Deborah Forde to celebrate, in its Associate Artistic Director Edward (Ted) Little's words, "the culmination of a five-year partnership between Teesri Duniya Theatre and the Performance Working Group—one of seven research clusters comprising the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded project, Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and Other Human Rights Violations" (Varma, 2012, p. 3).<sup>8</sup> The play works with layers of gendered histories of genocides, of Armenians in Turkey in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and in Rwanda, later in the century, to reflect upon the silence that women are subjected to as a result of brutality and violence perpetrated on communities and their bodies. Through a plot in which a Rwandan-born Canadian documentary filmmaker and researcher named Odette attempts to uncover the secret of Sahana, an elderly Turkish woman who dedicates her life to helping female Armenian survivors of the genocide, and who ships off her baby daughter to Canada for safety, Varma tackles several issues. On one level, the play examines the ethics of interviewing and collecting oral histories from displaced and vulnerable victims of war; on another level, Varma unpacks the notion of "cultural diversity" in Canada to throw light upon the manifold reasons for which people migrate to Canada—in this case political refuge, personal survival and safety from war-torn territories. Such a trajectory, then, does not idealize the homes immigrants leave behind; rather, it exposes the fraught histories of war and power-relations and presents them as global problems against which we might understand the stories of refugees in Canada and their difficulties as they wade through a maze of bureaucracy, legal issues and governmental rules. To this end, Varma expands the notion of multiculturalism from recognition of cultural diversity and co-existence to a deeper understanding of the reasons why the (unstable) national pasts of some migrants continue to haunt them (not always nostalgically) in diasporic spaces. The play seeks to achieve its aims through minimalist props and multiple characters, victims, survivors, researchers and state officials, through whose engagement with issues regarding breaking the silence about violence, murder and rape, and the ethics of speaking and listening, a complex and nuanced understanding can emerge.

In his Writer's Statement about the play, Varma says that, as "a part of the

Montreal Life Stories” project, he “read many testimonies of survivors of genocide” and “books and biographies of survivors from Armenia, Rwanda, South Asia and the Balkans, and spoke to their descendants now residing in Canada” (Varma, 2012, p. 7). Based on these, he produced a play that “is not a documentary but an imagined play consisting of multiple personal stories weaved into one and told through characters that come from different continents,” (Varma, 2012, p. 7). Yet, instead of placing emphasis “on the authenticity of the stories being performed on stage,” an important element of “Verbatim theatre” or “theatrical performances based on interview transcripts” (High, 2011, p. 52), Varma offers what Steven High (2011) identifies as “a combination of verbatim and self-authored material” (p. 52), along with post-performance discussions held with audience members after some of the shows, to engage a forum for exchange and groupthink regarding the subjectivities and lived experiences of those displaced by similar human rights violations. One reviewer, who calls the play “highly worthwhile,”<sup>9</sup> affirms Varma’s mandate that “in the face of such shameless denial [of human rights violations] awareness is our only hope” (Varma, 2012, p. 7).

In a 1998 article, Sheila James asserted that “South Asian Canadian theatre is not a movement or a scene unto itself...[but] grows in tandem with First Nations and People of Colour theatre communities” (p. 46). Varma’s *State of Denial* and ongoing projects by playwrights who address the implications of cross-border movements, examine the lived experiences of minorities and survivors and open up topics related to human rights through live bodies that “function as one of the most charged sites of theatrical representation” (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996, p. 203). Their work attests to the ways in which South Asian Canadian drama continues its political engagements on community, regional, national and international stages.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of a panel titled, “Whither South Asian Drama in Canada?” at the Festival of South Asian Literature and Arts (FSALA), held from September 30-October 2, 2011, at the University of Toronto. I would like to extend my grateful thanks to the panelists, especially Rahul Varma, for sharing his insights about *Teesri Duniya*, to Teresa Hubel for her critical input on earlier drafts and to Chelva Kanaganayakam and Rajesh Macwan for inviting me to participate in the panel.
- <sup>2</sup> For a description of this process, see Sheila James (1998), “South Asian Women: Creating Theatre of Resilience and Resistance.” *Canadian Theatre Review*, 94, pp. 45-50, and Sadhu Binning (1998), “Vancouver Saath: South Asian Canadian Theatre in Vancouver.” *Canadian Theatre Review*, 94, pp. 14-17.
- <sup>3</sup> For more commentary on this issue, see Rahul Varma (1998), “Contributing to Canadian Theatre,” *Canadian Theatre Review*, 94, pp. 25-27 and Sheila James (1998), “South Asian Women: Creating Theatre of Resilience and Resistance.” *Canadian Theatre Review*, 94, pp.45-50.
- <sup>4</sup> *Bhopal* was presented by the Masquerade Youth Theatre in association with The Madras Players in 2011 in India. (For a review of the play, see Shonali Muthalaly, “Lots of smoke, no fire.” *The Hindu* June 27, 2011. <http://www.thehindu.com/arts/theatre/article2138995.ece>). Illinois State University’s School of Theatre presented the play in Spring 2011 (<http://www.cfa.ilstu.edu/pguithetheatre/iisbhopal/index>).

html). And to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bhopal gas disaster, a staged reading of the play was presented on March 26, 2010, by the Association for India's Development, Theatre Rasa Nova, and Friends of South Asia (FOSA) in San Francisco, USA.

- <sup>5</sup> A titled designation in Marathi which means Prime Minister, Peshwa was created by Shivaji (1674-1680) during the growth of the Maratha empire, which ended when the British annexed it to the British empire in 1818.
- <sup>6</sup> Some examples of plays that Varma provides include "Main Street Collective's *Divided We Stand* (1994), directed by Harry Standjofski; Jason Sherman's *Reading Hebron* (2000), directed by Wajdi Mouawad; Sylvija Jestovic's *Noah's Arc 747* (2002), directed by Paulina Abaraca; Camyar Chai, Marcus Youssef and Guillermo Verdecchia's *Ali & Ali And The Axis of Evil* (2004), directed by Guillermo Verdecchia; Nina Lee-Aquino and Nadine Villasin's *Miss Orient(ed)* (2005), directed by Sarah Stanley; and most recently, Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner's controversial play *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* (2008), directed by Sarah Stanley" (2009, p.182).
- <sup>7</sup> For information on the play see <http://southasianplaywrights.org/?p=1131>
- <sup>8</sup> See <http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca>
- <sup>9</sup> See <http://www.teesriduniya.com/reviews.html>

## References

- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Binning, S. (1993). Vancouver Saath: A profile by Sadhu Binning. *Rungh: A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment and Criticism*. 2(1 & 2), 22-126. Retrieved from [http://www.tru.ca/ciac/readings/Rungh\\_v2\\_n1-2.pdf](http://www.tru.ca/ciac/readings/Rungh_v2_n1-2.pdf)
- Binning, S. (1996). Lesson of a Different Kind. *SACLIT Drama*. In U. Parameswaran (Ed.), *Plays by South Asian Canadians* (85-98). Bangalore: IBH Prakashana.
- Binning, S. (1998). Vancouver Saath: South Asian Canadian theatre in Vancouver. *Canadian Theatre Review*, 94, 14-17.
- Binning, S. (2006) Punjabi-Canadian literature: A brief introduction. *Journal of Punjab Studies*, 13(1&2), 279-285. Retrieved from [http://www.global.ucsb.edu/Punjab/13.1.2\\_Binning.pdf](http://www.global.ucsb.edu/Punjab/13.1.2_Binning.pdf)
- Bose, R. (1999). On the double. In *The death of Abbie Hoffman and other plays*. Calcutta: Seagull Books.
- Dharwadker, A. (2003). Diaspora and the theatre of the nation. *Theatre Research International*. 28(3), 303-325.
- Gilbert, H., & Tompkins, J. (1996). *Post-colonial drama: Theory, practice, politics*. London: Routledge.
- High, S. (2011). Embodying the story: Oral history and performance in the classroom. *alt. theatre: cultural diversity and the stage*. 9(2), 50-54.
- Irani, A. (2007). *The Bombay plays. The Matka king. Bombay black*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press.
- James, S. (1998). South Asian women: Creating theatre of resilience and resistance. *Canadian Theatre Review*, 94, 45-50.
- Kalsey, S. (n.d.) Stage Plays/Performing Arts. Retrieved from <http://surjeetkalsey.wordpress.com/writings/stage-plays>
- McGifford, D. (1992). *The geography of voice: Canadian literature of the South Asian diaspora*. Toronto: TSAR.
- Mishra, V. (2007). *The literature of the Indian diaspora: Theorizing the diasporic imaginary*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Montreal Serai. (2013). About Serai. Retrieved from [http://montrealserai.com/\\_archives/other/About\\_Serai.htm](http://montrealserai.com/_archives/other/About_Serai.htm)
- Parameswaran, U. (1996a). Introduction. In U. Parameswaran (Ed.), *SACLIT drama. Plays by South Asian Canadians* (pp. i-xxv). Bangalore: IBH Prakashana.
- Parameswaran, U. (1996b). Meera: A Dance Drama. In U. Parameswaran (Ed.), *SACLIT Drama. Plays by South Asian Canadians* (pp. 1-8). Bangalore: IBH Prakashana.
- Parameswaran, U. (1996c). Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees. In U. Parameswaran

- (Ed.), *SACLIT Drama. Plays by South Asian Canadians* (pp. 25-84). Bangalore: IBH Prakashana.
- Parameswaran, U. (1998). Editorial: Drumming Towards a Better Future. *Canadian Theatre Review*, 94, 3-4.
- Roy, A. (2010). *Pyasa & letters to my grandma*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press.
- Pendurang, M. (2003). Conceptualizing *emigrant* female subjectivity: Possible entry points. In N. Puwar & P. Raghuram (Eds.), *South Asian women in the diaspora* (pp. 87-98). Oxford: Berg.
- Rushdie, S. (2010). *Imaginary homelands. Essays and criticism 1981-1991*. India: Random House.
- Spivak, G. C. (1996). Diasporas old and new: Women in the transnational world. *Textual Practice*, 10(2), 245-269.
- Varma, R. (1995). No man's land. In A. Ravel (Ed.), *Canadian mosaic: Six lays* (pp. 164-212). Toronto: Simon and Pierre.
- Varma, R. (2004). *Bhopal*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press.
- Varma, R. (2009). Teesri Duniya Theatre: Diversifying diversity with relevant works of theatre. *South Asian Popular Culture*, 73(3), 179-194.
- Varma, R. (2012). Program booklet. *State of denial*. Presented March 16-April at McCord Museum, Montreal.
- Waldinger, R., & Fitzgerald, D. (2004). Transnationalism in question. *American Journal of Sociology*, 109 (5), 1177-95. Retrieved from [http://works.bepress.com/roger\\_waldinger/25/](http://works.bepress.com/roger_waldinger/25/).