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## UNIT 29 THE RECENT DEVELOPMENT OF CANADIAN CRITICISM

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### Structure

- 29.0 Objectives
- 29.1 Postmodernism in Canada : Introductory Remarks
- 29.2 Poststructuralism in Canada : In Concert With Postmodernism
- 29.3 Possible Post-Colonial Perspectives
- 29.4 Diaspora Criticism (General)
- 29.5 Oppositional Criticism
- 29.6 Other Concerns
- 29.7 Conclusion
- Questions

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### 29.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit we shall briefly sum up the present state of Canadian criticism. Post-Frye developments will get as much attention as Frye's work does. The only problem in this regard is that many of the leading tendencies have not so far solidified themselves to the extent one can objectively and exhaustively deal with them from outside Canada. Here the tendencies will be only briefly touched upon. Later, there would be some elaboration on some of them.

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### 29.1 POSTMODERNISM IN CANADA : INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

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Postmodernism in Canada has been tackled well by Linda Hutcheon and Robert Kroetsch. Hutcheon is able to claim for double-edged weapons like irony and parody special efficacy within her culture and Kroetsch's position is not very different from hers.

In an essay on Northrop Frye in the 1994 book *The Legacy of Northrop Frye* (edited by Alvin A. Lee and Robert D. Denham) Hutcheon sees a tension in Frye between what she sees as his dominantly modernist, humanist approach to the literature and culture and his 'postmodern' willingness to study Canadian literature primarily as a part of Canadian life. This move is made by Hutcheon in the essay '*Frye Recorded: Modernity and the Conclusions*'.

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### 29.2 POSTSTRUCTURALISM IN CANADA : IN CONCERT WITH POSTMODERNISM

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Robert Kroetsch is one of Canada's leading postmodernist writers but his critical tools are mostly closer to poststructuralist practices. A good example is the book *Labyrinths of Voice* (1982) – an extended interview Kroetsch has with Shirley Neuman. The same is the case with a number of other Canadian critics including Smaro Kamboureli. Kamboureli, as we shall see in a later unit, is crucial to our understanding of an important part of Canadian Feminism.

A number of Canadian writer-critics like Frank Davey, George Bowering, Eli Mandel, E.D. Blodgett and Stephen Scobie have countered the concept of Canada and of the Canadian canon constructed by some other Canadian critics.

It was Frank Davey who began an effective counter-attack against the line taken by Frye, Atwood, and others. In his 1974 lecture at York University entitled "Surviving the Paraphrase", he acknowledged the legitimacy of cultural poetics as a critical practice but exalted literariness over other criteria. He lashed out at the emphasis on theme that, till the mid 1970s, had dominated Canadian writing and criticism. He argued that the cultural/nationalist critical practice stemmed from a desire to circumvent evaluation, thereby forestalling the treatment of Canadian literature as a serious genre. He considered this critical practice to be reductionist in nature as it did no more than paraphrase the national literature in terms of international issues. He perceived that 'metalingual representation' (or 'the assumption of an invariable content to which words refer') was privileged by thematicist approaches over 'texture' or 'the stylistic particularities of a work'. To remedy the situation he proposed alternative critical practices like technique, linguistic, regional and generic studies, and phenomenological criticism. His stance gave rise to a new school of critical thought that stressed the relevance of formal comparative contexts and argued that a critic's approach and evaluative criteria should be appropriate for the work under analysis. This view precluded neither the thematic nor the structuralist practice.

Kroetsch's stance as a critic is based on an oft-quoted assertion that first appeared in a special 1974 issue of *Boundary*. He declared that 'Canadian literature evolved directly from Victorian to Postmodern', negating the concepts of tradition and heritage, and invoking instead 'a grammar of violence' that engenders the written word [Robert Kroetsch, 'The Exploding Porcupine', *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp.109-110)] He argued that the vertical layering of images, which characterised the metaphors of modernism, was replaced by horizontal extensions of metonymy which characterise postmodernism. He objected to the earlier canonical valuation privileged content, and sought, instead, to centralise the intent of textual construction. He introduced an aesthetics in which emphasis shifts away from the old concerns (like setting and character) towards aspects of form and language. His criteria for canonising works revolves round the identification of that writing which has the potential of influencing future writing. This marks a refreshing change of outlook on canonical selection which should be the function/role of a work in educating readers and potential writers. He visualises an instructional role for the Canadian canon which should choose to focus on changing paradigms rather than the static ones usually associated with a nationalist canon. Kroetsch concentrates on the chaos of origin as he undermines the mythopoetic interpretations of Canadian literary identity in putting forward a radical postmodernist formulation.

*Labyrinths of Voice*, containing Kroetsch's conversations with Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, is an innovative mode of discourse. The conventions of an interview are broken with the presence of three speakers; the form itself is discontinuous as it is interspersed with stimulating quotations from critics/discourse which interact with the speakers' trains of thought. What emerges is 'a rich plurality of signification and discursivity as the text traverses four broad *topoi*: influence, game, narration and myth.' (Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*, Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982, p.xi) Neuman and Wilson declare Kroetsch an author who continually re/reads his own writing in the context of his current thinking. they share his view that 'we construct labyrinths of the airy nothingness of own imaginations', that the labyrinth 'is constructed of our voices, of fragments of discourse, of a mouthful of air'.

Against this backdrop, Kroetsch's critical assertions are charged with a knowledge of postmodern literary practice and post-Saussurean critical thought. The first section of

*Labyrinths of Voice* is devoted to 'influence' which Kroetsch views as engagement with the problem of artistic tradition that underlines a writer's sense of anxiety. He says that his critical stance is derived from James Joyce's perception of the artist. A restrictive influence on the art/artist was geography around which the art/artist had to negotiate, reaching a stage of metaphoric and metonymic possibilities that grow out of physical space. Another cause for the artist's anxiety is the notion of nationalism and its concomitant periodisation. The notion is reductive and far removed from the orbit of impersonality that should guide critical response. Such restrictive cosmologies need to be destroyed to open up the possibilities of language. Games insist on fictionality and openness, thereby corroding modernism's notion of a single cosmology. All -isms make Kroetsch wary; as a postmodernist, he resists enclosure and its reductive terminology of 'naming' which excludes any more interpretations of the named. Like Derrida, he believes that a writer asserts his writerliness by doing violence with words. He advises writers/writings to tread cautiously when negotiating tradition which seeks to stamp out individuality.

In 'Beyond Nationalism' Kroetsch furthers the cause of Canadian postmodernism, saying that the very ability to see ourselves is based on the narrative mode: the I telling the story of I, of we, of the they that mirror us. His words advocate a variety of narrative modes instead of a single grand narrative, pointing to the direction that Canadian writing must take in order to express 'its polyvalent subjectivity'. His writings reject a centred/central monolithic Canadian identity, the centre being an artificial fictional concept serving only to suppress and control. Instead, his work celebrates anarchy, deliberately avoiding conclusiveness and, thereby, negating the view of the text as a fully finished product. This openendedness make writers and readers accomplices in the making of the text. He says that he wants the reader to be engaged with him in fiction making. He is questioning the notion of centre-whether in culture, identity or literature - is contextualised not only in his writing but also in his critical stance, making his voice an important one in the Canadian postmodern discourse.

Linda Hutcheon calls Kroetsch 'Mr. Canadian Postmodern' and her writings follow in his postmodern footsteps. (Hutcheon, Linda, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.160)

Self-reflexive or self conscious art (or artifice) demands 'a new engagement with the social and the historical world' in which she sees postmodernism reflecting

...culture's narcissistic obsession with its own workings - both past and present. In academic and popular circles today, books abound that offer us new social models, new frameworks for knowledge, new analyses of strategies of power. This phenomenon betrays a loss of faith in...the certainties, the master narratives of our liberalist humanist culture...Postmodern literature...has meant a new vitality, a new willingness to enter into a dialogue with history on new terms...Art and theory are both signifying practices - in other words, it is we who both make and make sense of our culture. (p.23)

This gives rise to 'metafiction' or the process of creating order through myth and art. Hutcheon finds Canadian fiction of the 90s 'investigating the relationship between art (and language) and what we choose to call 'reality' between the discourses of art and the structures of social and cultural power'. (p.10) In this scenario, writers occupy an 'ex-centric' position as they embody 'the paradox of undermining cultural 'universals'...going about challenging the notions of centrality in culture'. (p.3)

In the post-modern, says Hutcheon, the periphery and the centre are the same and to illustrate this assertion she compares the writings of Northrop Frye and D.G. Jones to those of Leonard Cohen and Timothy Findley. The former highlight the importance

of the Bible and biblical structures in Canadian literary enterprise; the latter parody them 'both exploiting and subverting their undeniable cultural authority'. (p.7) Hutcheon posits that the new postmodern theoretical framework of reference will bring together separate disciplines like philosophy, linguistics, history, sociology, literary criticism and psychoanalysis. The reader, writer and text have to meet within the context of these. When Canadian postmodern writing takes up issues like ethnicity, feminism, and immigration, it once again reiterates this point. In doing so, says Hutcheon, this writing has transfigured the emphasis on regionalism in literature into a concern for the different, the local, and the particular 'Canadian novelists have refigured the realist regional into a postmodern different'. (p.19) Hutcheon seconds Kroetsch in his assertion that 'the patterns of contraries' are all 'possibilities implied in record and invent' which find their focus 'in the model suggested by the phrase: a local pride'. (Robert Kroetsch, 'On Being an Alberta Writer', *Open Letter* 5th Series, 4, Spring 1983, p.75) She says the glory of Canadian postmodernism lies in 'a (defining) local ex-centricity' (p.19) Postmodernism got a boost in the 1960s through challenges to authority in nationalist politics, gender politics and issues related to indigeneity. Cultural buzz words like 'the national, flower power, communes, hanging loose' were rejected because they were seen as evidence of 'the constructed' which emphasised their intimate relationship with power. (p.12) Hutcheon favours the hermeneutic process of reading which highlights 'metafiction's emphasis on its enunciative situation - text, producer, receiver, historical and social context - reinstalling a kind of (very problematic) communal project'. (p.115) Canadian poetry in the late twentieth century distanced itself from the realist/humanist paradigm and the hegemony of the subject while the prose of the same period has adhered to the realist convention. She supports these tendencies saying that the thematic conventions of paradox and metafiction should predominate rather than the old ones of landscape, survival and region. Her aesthetic revolves round the transposition of art to the realm of life through the text. For her, Canadian postmodernism is a politicised discourse surfacing as an offshoot of global postmodernism. While Kroetsch's stance legitimises various fictional and critical discourses, Hutcheon's stance represents a project to open a new array of texts to interpretation and possible canonisation.

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### 29.3 POSSIBLE POST-COLONIAL PERSPECTIVES

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Applying post-colonial theory to the Canadian situation needs to be done with a number of ifs and buts. But one must go a little into what kind of possibilities exist. The domain in which post-colonial perspective can be quite useful is Native Canadian writing. When we enforce by Bakhtinian concept like heteroglossia and carnivalesque it can help comes to term with not only native Canadian text but also texts by expatriate writers. One fruitful possibility is that of positing against official discourses of education, industrialisation and 'facts', the language rooted in 'play' which liberates the imagination. Thomas King's poem "Coyote Sees the Prime Minister" which was used in block-2 also is quite relevant here. Post-colonial deployment of irony is forcefully at work in this poem. The poem reads:

Coyote went east to see the Prime Minister  
I wouldn't make this up.  
And the Prime Minister was so HAPPY to see Coyote  
That he made HIM a member of cabinet  
Maybe you can HELP us solve the Indian problem  
Sure, says that Coyote  
WHAT's the problem?  
When Elwood tells the story,  
He always LAUGHS and spoils the ending.

One of the questions raised by a leading international post-colonial critic Gayatri Spivak is whether the subaltern is capable of speaking. Such poems give voice to all the marginalised people in different cultures.

## 29.4 DIASPORA CRITICISM (GENERAL)

Here critics like Uma Parmeshwari matter a lot. Smaro Kamboureli theorizes diaspora in her own way in her 2000 book *Scandalous Bodies*. Before that let us see what Victor Ramraj has to say about diasporic community. His view is that diasporic writings are invariably concerned with the individual's or community's attachment to the centrifugal homeland. But this attachment is countered by a yearning for a sense of belonging to the current place of abode. Caught psychically between two worlds, diasporas are.... 'transitional-being(s)' or 'liminal persona(e)', that is, they are in the process of moving from one cultural state of existence to another. In this state of transition, some respond ambivalently to their dual, often antithetical, cultures or societies. Some attempt to assimilate and integrate. For others the liminal or transitional state is too prolonged or too excruciating to cope with and they may withdraw to their ancestral identity or homeland, which is both a cage and a haven.

From outside Canada, the work of Vijay Mishra, a Fijian teaching in Australia, is significant because it marks a considerable advance over the earlier formulations of writers such as William Safran. Safran's model, which he illustrates by listing the six features of diasporas- dispersal, collective memory, alienation, respect and longing for the homeland, a belief in its restoration, and self-definition in terms of this homeland-are more applicable to the Jewish than the South Asian diaspora. Mishra considers Safran's characteristics of the Indian diaspora to be 'oversimplified'. Mishra contrasts the diasporic consciousness with older, primordial, ethnic identities, arguing that diasporic epistemology locates itself squarely in the realm of the hybrid, in the domain of cross-cultural and contaminated social and cultural regimes. In this, Mishra is akin to Bhabha who also elevates the hybrid to the level of a new consciousness the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory-or...a negative transparency. Despite acknowledging the danger that diasporas may well become romanticised as the ideal social condition, in effect, that is what the theoretical stances of critics like Mishra and Bhabha are tantamount to. Neither refers to the fact that diasporic communities are known, at times, to support the most rabidly violent and fanatical of causes, not just ideologically but financially. In South Asia, for instance, it is well known that Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Tamil, and other militants have been supported by overseas communities.

The nature of the diaspora, its cultural location and politics, consequently, depend on the nature of the host, not just on that of the diaspora. Diasporas, despite their common origin, may behave in a totally different manner depending on their country of relocation. A host country like the USA, for example, ostensibly does not distinguish between immigrants and diasporic people.

On a closer examination of the entire South Asian diaspora, we notice that it falls into two distinct phases. To begin with let's call them settler and visitor diasporas, taking our cue from the 19--- book *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcraft et al, which identifies settler and invader colonialists. Of course, both these phrases are not entirely appropriate, but may serve for the time being. To the first category belong all those forced migrations on account of slavery or indentured labour, while the second would encompass the voluntary migrations of businessmen and professionals who went abroad in search of fortune. These two distinct groups may be defined not just by the causes and patterns of their migration, but also by the historical period in which the migrations took place. Furthermore, these two diasporas may also be

contrasted by their destinations, class and class backgrounds, attitude to the mother country, economic status, language of creative expression, market access, and so on.

How do diasporas construct homelands? It seems that they do so in accordance to their own needs and compulsions. In the case of the older diaspora, we see a certain break with the motherland. This break was not voluntary, but enforced by the distances between the motherland and the diasporic settlement, the older, much slower modes of travel and above all, the lack of economic means to make frequent journeys. In fact, the labourers who were shipped out rarely had enough money to make the journey back to India; for most, it was a one-way ticket to another land. In other words, the distance, both physical, but more so psychological, was so vast, that the motherland remained frozen in the diasporic imagination as a sort of sacred site or symbol, almost like an idol of memory and imagination. The poverty of the homeland, which caused the diaspora in the first place, was forgotten or overwritten with the *feeling* that it was home, a place where the present alienation of the diasporic person did not exist. Because a physical return was virtually impossible, an emotional or spiritual renewal was an ongoing necessity. This was done through a process of replication, if not reproduction.

The manner in which the new diaspora imagines India is to be understood in terms of the logic of this dominant culture, of which it is an ambivalent or unwilling part. While the old diaspora was cut off from the motherland, the new diaspora has unprecedented access to it by virtue of its privileged non-resident-Indian status. What we see, then, is a narrative logic of continuous incorporation and appropriation which reinforces the self-validating logic of the new diaspora. Not forced to leave the motherland, these writers have chosen to relocate themselves in the metropolitan centres chiefly for economic gains. This breeds in them a certain anxiety, if not guilt towards the homeland. In the international literary marketplace there is, and has always been, a niche market for fictional representations of India. Earlier, this Anglo-Indian slot was occupied by English, European, and American writers; now the South Asians have moved in.

In a way, the lines dividing the older and newer diasporas are fast disappearing.

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## 29.5 OPPOSITIONAL CRITICISM

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Arnold Harichan Itwaru and Arun Mukherjee are leading names among 'oppositional critics' in Canada.

Here a little information about Itwaru's background would not be out of place. Itwaru born in Guyana in 1942 and has lived in Canada since 1969. Itwaru's poems, stories, critical essays and fiction reflect his concern with alienation and rootlessness. Many of his tales are set in the troubled years of Guyana's slavery and freedom struggle. His two main prose works are *The Invention of Canada* (1990) and *Closed Entrances* (1994). The former is about immigrants and the latter is a study of persistence of racism in Canada. His collections of poetry include *Shattered Song* (1982), *The Sacred Presence* (1985) and *Body Rites: Beyond the Darkening* (1991). His poems are highly evocative and create more a sense of atmosphere and images than a factual recording of the immigrant's experience. They are a blend of the imaginative and surrealistic. Using very bodily images Itwaru conjures up a vision of the immigrants' psychological experience. Eli Mandel praises Itwaru's collection *Shattered Songs* as 'powerful meditative and dramatic lyrics on the role of the outsider in our society.' *Body Rites*'s poems are a celebration of the anguished soul that moves beyond the pain of endurance. Contemporary urban life with its inertia and impotence becomes the milieu for the outsider's feeling of entrapment and discontinuity. His persona conducts a never-ending death in life struggle for survival or self-identity. But

survival is found only in destruction and identity in dissolution. Images of violence and destruction convey Itwaru's mental anguish and struggle in being an outsider. His truncated rhythms and experimental forms proclaim him to be a writer in search of a new world where accepted traditions fails to convey new experiences.

Arun Mukherjee is an 'oppositional critic' like Itwaru. In the 'Introduction' to her 1988 book *Towards an Aesthetic of Opposition* Mukherjee states:

These essays are written by a person who was born and brought up in post-colonial India, had a thoroughly colonial education, both in India and at the University of Toronto in Canada, and then went through a painful and difficult process of decolonisation. The essays record the dialectics of that struggle. In a sense, it is a collective struggle, being waged in the hearts and minds of all Third World people.

Later, in the book in an essay called *Ideology in the Classroom: A Case Study in the Teaching of English Literature in Canadian Universities*, she states that universalist categories of criticism have no means of dealing with the specificity of a text except in terms of setting or backdrop. The universalist methodology, in its exaggerated focus on form and character, neglects referentiality and context, thereby failing to assign inventiveness to writers who structure their works on those principles. The universalist critic, armed with his readymade categories of narrative technique, symbolic patterns, motifs such as journey or quest, bildungsroman, pastoral etc. overlooks the formal complexities that arise when a work openly or cryptically utilises the collectively shared knowledge and experiences of a society: experience of colonialism, legends of heroes and villains, deeply-held belief systems, rhetorical pronouncements of local elite such as politicians, businessmen and movie-stars. The universalist critic's lack of interest in the context also means that the fiercely political confrontations in the works from the Third World are de-radicalized

One can see from all this that Arun Mukherjee is an 'oppositional critic' who voices the concerns of the margins quite forcefully.

In her 'Introduction' to *Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Space* Mukherjee opens up a reading of South Asian Canadian texts as an 'oppositional discourse' to the dominant ideologies of literacy and cultural analysis in Euro-America. The essays in this collection are written from the view point of a person who has lived through the colonial and post colonial experience of being Indian and an immigrant in Canada who as she remarks 'went through the painful and difficult process of decolonization'. Both the entity called 'Canadian Literature and the essentialized Canadian identity it was premised on has been seriously eroded. The hyphenated Canadians, as those of us who are not from the 'two founding nations' have been called, have challenged their otherization by the unitary notions of national identity and asserted that being 'different' by no means equates with being unCanadian.

Itwaru's attempt to read a number of immigrant writers, with diverse cultural baggages from the perspective of a theoretician who sees reality as a flux, and the writer as being caught in the struggle to create meaning of a self that is related to different societal spaces, is an exercise that raises many pertinent issues about nationhood. The changing self struggles for recognition in the very process of 'becoming'. This willed as well as unwilling transformation takes place within an unfamiliar and evolving culture. The writer's consciousness here invents 'meaning' to come to terms with the ambiguities, anxieties and disorientations. Itwaru contends that in this attempt to create meaning of Canada, the immigrant himself is being invented and reinvented at various junctures. Consequently, the reality that is being represented through these writers provides substantive insights into the evolution of the culture in which they conduct their art. Itwaru's critical reading of select novels

written by immigrants from different countries, leads him to the assumption that Canada is merely a synecdoche, that its existence lies in the way individuals and groups experience social life within the landscape named Canada, that it is a quality of experience out of which meanings are invented for conscious navigation in the task of living.

Arun Mukherjee too in her *Oppositional Aesthetics* describes the tendency to use Eurocentric texts to perpetuate the myths of colonial history. Itwaru takes objection to the use of the word 'post-colonial' or the phrase 'the Empire writes back to the Centre'. Both these terms, he points out, presume the continuing existence of the former Empire, whose subject writers are, in extension of the dependency instituted through colonialism, now writing back, talking back to the imperial centre, and in doing so are redefining themselves. Herein the insidious play of the dialogic of imperialism continues. Itwaru rightly claims that it is the circular trope of a negating self-referencing, mired in a delusion of identification - where the order of imperial domination is the trajectory in which a stylized aesthetic of resistance is conceived. In this the imperium prevails.

Both these critics' are thus also aware of the question of canonicity.

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## 29.6 OTHER CONCERNS

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Other concerns that surface in recent Canadian criticism are concerns with ecology, concern with Native expression and plight and gay and lesbian concerns. Among writers/critics with a lesbian orientation two famous names are Daphne Marlatt and Dionne Brand. The latter is a lesbian of colour. Her 1990 book *No Language is Neutral* has made a mark.

Lesbian writing and criticism are quite wide spread in Canada. In conjunction with awareness of gay identity and gay and lesbian rights it forms a significant part of Canadian intellectual life. in a non-immediate kind of way all this has been influenced by the French thinker Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. In the writing of Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, Betsy Warland and so many others the representation of lesbian desire is sometimes undertaken using de-constructed tools. Marlatt specially is quite expressive in her own way. There is a book called *Telling It* edited by Marlatt and others. This book affords us a historical look at the politics involved in the life and writings of lesbians. This book, the matizes difference without alluding either its complexity or difficulty with it raises. The contributors to the book see themselves inhabiting fractured margins. An other important person is in this Lee Maracle. Daphne Marlett's poem *In the Dark of the Coast* is very important in giving us an idea of what lesbianism is writing goes it for. The poem reads:

there is fern and frost, a gathering of small birds melting song in the underbrush. close, you talk to one. there is the cedar slant of your hair as it falls gold over your shoulder, over your naked, dearly known skin - its smell, its answering touch to my tongue. fondant, font, found, all that melts, pours. the dark rain of our being together at last. and the cold wind, curled-up fronds of tree fern wanting touch, our fingers separate and stiff. we haven't mourned enough, you say, for our parting, lost to each other the last time through. in the dark of this place, its fire touch, not fern but frost, just one of the houses we pass through in the endless constellation of our being, close, and away from each other, torn and apart. i didn't know your hair, i didn't know your skin when you beckoned to me in that last place. but i knew your eyes, blue, as soon as you came around the small hill, knew your tongue. come, you said, we slid together in the

spring, blue, of a place we'd been terra incognita known, *geysa*,  
gush, upwelling in the hidden Norse we found, we feel it thrust as  
waters part for us, hot through fern, frost, volcanic thrust. it's all  
there, love, we part each other coming to, geyser, spouting pool,  
hidden in and under separate skin we make for each other through.

The closing section of 'Hidden Ground' another poem by Marlatt is also significant.  
It reads:

My untamed answering one to sally forth, finding alternate names,  
finding the child provoked, invoked, lost daughter, other mother and  
lover, waxing tree, waist i love, water author sounding the dark edge  
of the words we come to, augur- ess, issa, lithesome, *lilaisthai*  
yearning for you, and like a branch some hidden spring pulls toward  
our ground, i grow unafraid increasing ("lust of the earth or of the  
plant"), *lasati*, (she) yearns and plays, letting the yearning play it out,  
playing it over, every haystack, every passing hill, that tongue our  
bodies utter, woman tongue, speaking in and of and for each other.

The same is true of Phyllis Webb poem called 'Naked Poems. Suite I And II'. About  
'Hidden Ground' Janice Williamson writes: 'It is on this site, an unauthorized space  
which is not property, that Marlatt describes woman's sexuality as an unmapped  
'hidden ground'.' In the poem's use of the Demeter-Persephone myth, the lovers are  
simultaneously mother and daughter.

Other concerns include 'thematic criticism'. Thematic criticism of the kind  
exemplified by Atwood's *Survival* also prevails in certain quarters. As far *Survival*  
itself, it was published in 1972 and suggests how prevalent images and themes in  
Canadian literature reveal a collective victim mentality that results from Canadian's  
troubled relation with the wilderness and their pervasive feelings of colonial  
inadequacy.

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## 29.7 CONCLUSION

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Canadian criticism in recent times (i.e. in the post-Frye era) has taken a number of  
directions and has accommodated poststructural and postmodernist strands quite well.

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## QUESTIONS

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1. What is the contribution of Robert Kroetsch to theorising about postmodernism in Canada?
2. How do Arnold Itwaru and Arun Mukherjee together voice 'oppositional' concerns?

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## UNIT 30 NORTHROP FRYE

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### Structure

- 30.0 Objectives
- 30.1 General Introduction
- 30.2 *Anatomy of Criticism*
- 30.3 Frye's 'Conclusion' to *A Literary History of Canada*
- 30.4 Conclusion : The Overall Achievement of Northrop Frye  
Questions

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### 30.0 OBJECTIVES

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Here we shall concentrate on the Canadian critic Northrop Frye. First of all we will give a general introduction about Frye. Then we will concentrate on his *Anatomy of Criticism*. Lastly, we will describe the overall critical contribution of Frye.

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### 30.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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Northrop Frye was born in 1912 in Quebec in Canada in a place called Sherbrooke. He graduated in 1933 from Victoria College, University of Toronto. He won a scholarship to Oxford and got a First in English at Merton College, Oxford. In 1940 he returned to Toronto. Almost the whole of his remaining life he taught at the University of Toronto. He died in 1991.

Three of Frye's important books are :

*Fearful Symmetry* (1947)

*Anatomy of Criticism* (1957)

*Fables of Identity* (1963)

We shall focus (briefly) on his most famous book *Anatomy of Criticism* in the next section of this unit. We shall also talk briefly about his 'Conclusion' to *A Literary History of Canada*. In this extremely important 'Conclusion' Frye first talks of a 'garrison mentality' as part of the Canadian psyche and then charts a way past this.

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### 30.2 ANATOMY OF CRITICISM

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The general thrust of *Anatomy* is anti-New Criticism. Frye attacks the New Critical notion that the proper perspective for criticism is microscopic linguistic analysis and that each poem is a self-contained unity. His own argument is that criticism should 'stand back' far enough from the poem to be able to perceive its archetypal and mythic connection with other poems. It is these patterns which serve to unify literature as a whole and comprise a 'literary universe' or 'order of words' created by the poetic imagination. The poet draws on the reservoir of archetypes and conventions contained in the literary universe.

The opening essay focuses on 'Historical Criticism', first by defining it and then by classifying two fictional modes. The basis of identification is the protagonist's power of action. If he is superior in kind to other men or environment, the story/fiction is a myth about a god. If the power of action is superior in degree to other men and

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### 30.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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Northrop Frye was born in 1912 in Quebec in Canada in a place called Sherbrooke. He graduated in 1933 from Victoria College, University of Toronto. He won a scholarship to Oxford and got a First in English at Merton College, Oxford. In 1940 he returned to Toronto. Almost the whole of his remaining life he taught at the University of Toronto. He died in 1991.

Three of Frye's important books are :

*Fearful Symmetry* (1947)

*Anatomy of Criticism* (1957)

*Fables of Identity* (1963)

We shall focus (briefly) on his most famous book *Anatomy of Criticism* in the next section of this unit. We shall also talk briefly about his 'Conclusion' to *A Literary History of Canada*. In this extremely important 'Conclusion' Frye first talks of a 'garrison mentality' as part of the Canadian psyche and then charts a way past this.

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### 30.2 ANATOMY OF CRITICISM

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The general thrust of *Anatomy* is anti-New Criticism. Frye attacks the New Critical notion that the proper perspective for criticism is microscopic linguistic analysis and that each poem is a self-contained unity. His own argument is that criticism should 'stand back' far enough from the poem to be able to perceive its archetypal and mythic connection with other poems. It is these patterns which serve to unify literature as a whole and comprise a 'literary universe' or 'order of words' created by the poetic imagination. The poet draws on the reservoir of archetypes and conventions contained in the literary universe.

The opening essay focuses on 'Historical Criticism', first by defining it and then by classifying two fictional modes. The basis of identification is the protagonist's power of action. If he is superior in kind to other men or environment, the story/fiction is a myth about a god. If the power of action is superior in degree to other men and

environment, then the story is a romance, legend, or folktale. In case the superiority of the protagonist is greater in degree to other men but not the environment, the work belongs to the high mimetic mode of epic and tragedy. Works in which the protagonist is 'one of us' (that is, superior neither to man nor environment) are illustrations of the low mimetic mode of comedy and realistic fiction. In works where the protagonist is inferior in power and intelligence to the reader, who gets a sense of looking down on him, the work belongs to the ironic mode. The classification of fiction, thus, derives from the hero's power of action. Power here amounts to freedom.

The second essay, 'Ethical Criticism' elucidates the theory of symbols. Here the order of freedom is an ascending one with that 'descriptive' and the 'formal' shapes of symbolic structure both in some way accountable to nature. Words, phrases or images used as kinds of special reference are termed symbols. Symbols are called 'signs' when they "stand for and point to things outside the place where they occur" (AC 73). There are two facets of a symbol: the literal and the descriptive, and Frye leaves it to criticism to include one or both in its sweep. Criticism with a literal bent of mind informs how the pattern of words in a work turns away from the obvious meaning while criticism inclined to be descriptive evaluates the symbolism within works as "as ambiguous structure of interlocking motifs" (AC 82). Frye believes that "formal criticism begins with an examination of the imagery...with a view to bringing out its distinctive pattern" (AC 88). This is done as a commentary that translates into explicit or discursive language what is implicit in the work, thereby forming the basis of rhetorical or new criticism. To Frye, all commentary is allegorical interpretation, that is, an attachment of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery.

Frye's third essay, entitled "Archetypal Criticism", seeks to analytically present his theory of myths. He begins by stating that myth in a literary framework represents "an abstract or purely literary world of fictional and thematic design, unaffected by canons of plausible adaptation to familiar experience.... (it) is imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire" (AC 136). He identifies three tendencies in the archetypal symbols of literature. The first he terms as "undisplaced myth" which concerns itself with gods and demons, and is presented as two contrasting topographical metaphors, one desirable, the other undesirable. The second is the romantic world, suggested in the implicit patterns of human experience. The third, which he calls the tendency of realism, emphasises content and representation rather than the shape of the story. Comedy is on top followed by romance, then, tragedy and then irony and satire.

Frye's fourth essay in *Anatomy of Criticism* has to do with 'Rhetorical Criticism'. He begins by defining rhetoric as a middle term that describes speech writing varying between the ornamental and the persuasive. Ornamental rhetoric draws the hearer's/reader's admiration towards its own beauty and wit while manipulating emotions. Persuasive rhetoric is a kind of applied literature which, by reinforcing the power of argument, articulates emotion. The three traditional Greek genres – drama, epic and lyric – are derived from the rubric of rhetoric. The distinction between the three lie in what Frye "the radical of presentation" which revolves round the "acted, spoken or written word" (AC 247). To these three generic categories, Frye adds a fourth and, for want of a better term, chooses to call it 'fiction' or "the genre of the printed page...which addresses a reader through a book" (AC 2148). He relies on the Greek word *epos* to describe works in which the radical of presentation is oral address. This includes all literature which attempts to preserve the convention of recitation and its listening audience.

The encyclopaedic form of the Bible is discussed at length by Frye in a separate section of the fourth essay. Calling it the central sacred book of our culture, Frye emphasises:

Its systematic construction...as a definitive myth extending over time and space, over invisible and visible orders of reality, and with a parabolic dramatic structure of which the five acts are creation, fall, exile, redemption, and restoration...Myth, legend, historical, reminiscence, and actual history are inseparable in the Bible...The text breaks down into smaller and smaller fragments, taking on the appearance of a sequence of epiphanies, a discontinuous but rightly ordered series of significant moments of apprehension or vision...The Bible may be examined from an aesthetic or Aristotelian point of view as a single form, as a story in which pity and terror...(or) the knowledge of good and evil, are raised and cast out. Or it may be examined from a Longinian point of view as a series of ecstatic moments or points of expanding comprehension. (pp.325-326)

It portrays a heroic quest represented by various royal figures in the Old Testament and by Christ in the New. Symbols of humiliation, betrayal, martyrdom, and suffering-servant complex abound in it as do others of the Messiah as bridegroom, conqueror and leader of people. As a whole, it is an immense cyclical presentation, moving from creation to apocalypse to re-creation. Within this broad cyclical structure are contained three other cyclical movements – the individual, from birth to salvation; the sexual, from Adam and Eve to the apocalyptic wedding; and the social, from the giving of law to established kingdoms of law in rebuilt Zion of the Old Testament and the millennium of the New. These cycles provide the frameworks of various kinds of epics for the human cycle of birth and death; the Messianic cycle of pre-existence, life-in-death, and reservation; the contrast epic which sweeps from the extreme of the ironic human situation to the other extreme of the continuation of a divine society.

*Anatomy of Criticism* was Frye's seminal work in the sense that it transcended parochial nationalist literary debate and carved out a place for itself in the annals of literary criticism for all times to come. This seminal work was followed in 1963 by two lectures that Frye gave on 'The Educated Imagination'. In them he sought to re-emphasise the importance of myth and dream as distinct from so-called reality, and to stress the mythopoeic conceptions of classical mythology and the Bible.

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### 30.3 FRYE'S 'CONCLUSION' TO '*A LITERARY HISTORY OF CANADA*'

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In this very important statement Frye produces a synthesis of Canadian culture. He creates a Canadian myths. He also projects an 'imaginative continuum' which can help Canadian writers and their recorders face new threats to their identity.

English Canada showed an inclination towards maintaining links with the parent culture while French Canada favoured the notion of itself as a fragment pursuing its down separate destiny in North America. Recent canonical and literary debates acknowledge a sense of spiritual continuity with British or American models but insist that ethnic diversity is a reality and will hold sway in the times to come. In his 'Conclusion' to the *A Literary History of Canada* Northrop Frye had posed a significant historical question about Canadian identity when he asserted that it is not the literary voices that chose to respond to the 'What is here?' question that truly addressed themselves to the country's formulation of its literary canon. This assertion underlines the topographical bent of Canadian writing which focused on the physical environment of the land. Canadian national consciousness emphasizes a sense of difference that is steeped in the awareness of the uniqueness of place. Geography

complement history as literary creativity took off. He initially attributes to Canadians, a kind of 'garrison mentality' and also defines a garrison. A garrison is a closely knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable. Within the 'Conclusion' he revises his views and states:

As the centre of Canadian life moves from the fortress to the metropolis, the garrison mentality changes correspondingly. It begins as an expression of moral values generally accepted in the group as a whole, and then, as society gets more complicated and more in control of its environment, it becomes more of a revolutionary garrison within a metropolitan society. But though it changes from a defence of to an attack on what society accepts as conventional standards, the literature it produces, at every stage, tends to be rhetorical, an illustration or allegory of certain social attitude. These attitudes help to unify the mind of the writer by externalizing his enemy, the enemy being the anti-creative elements in life as he sees life. To approach these elements in a less rhetorical way would introduce the theme of self-conflict, a more perilous but ultimately more rewarding theme. The conflict involved is between the poetic impulse to construct and the rhetorical impulse to assert, and the victory of the former is the sign of the maturing of the writer.

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### 30.5 CONCLUSION : THE OVERALL ACHIEVEMENT OF NORTHROP FRYE

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Frank Lentricchia in his book *After The New Criticism* has a chapter on Frye's *Anatomy*. One of Lentricchia's conclusions is that one can not but admire the urbanity and cool justice of Frye's judgement upon the New Criticism. Lentricchia's opinion is that there are moments in the *Anatomy* when Frye's problematic understanding of himself as literary scientist, with critical principles which stand free of ideology, is productive. His acute demonstrations of the provincialism of the New Critics, who assert the universal applicability of ideas which manifestly grow out of the limited reach of symbolist-ironic literature, is a case in point. Many current critical assumptions, he says, have a limited historical context. In our day an ironic provincialism, which looks everywhere in literature for complete objectivity, suspension of moral judgments, concentration on pure verbal craftsmanship...is in the ascendant. His overall conclusion is that no set of critical standards derived from only one mode can ever assimilate the whole truth about poetry.

Another point made by Lentricchia is that there are any number of vantage points from which to assess the historical moment of Frye's system, and his concept of 'existential projection' is one of them. The existentialism itself, is a projection which he claims the New Criticism especially indulges in. The New Critic ought to recognize that the ironic vision of ambiguity and tension in human desire, is ultimately a vision with dark demonic roots and not a reflection of existential reality.

The 'Introduction' to book *The Legacy of Northrop Frye* edited by Alvin A. Lee and Robert D. Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) Alvin A. Lee tells us that Hayden white has called Frye to greatest natural cultural historian of our time. While likens Fries to Vico Hegal, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Weber as a thinker who learned to see dialectically Frye liked to apprehend continuities and interanimation rather than opposition.

Another envoy in the Lee book is by Imre Salusinszky. Here we are told that it is become Frye places beside his 'myth of concern', a 'myth of freedom' that he is also to an articulate as criticism capable of liberating literature from ideology. In the

headnote to an interview which Salusinszky had with Frye in 1985 (published in Salusinszky's book *Criticism in Society*, Mathuen, New York and London, 1987) Salusinszky makes some important points. The first point is about *Anatomy of Criticism*.

*Anatomy of Criticism*, which is precisely a study of myth, ritual and anagogy (or absolute vision) in literature. With marginal confidence, in a series of brilliantly witty arguments supported by copious examples, the *Anatomy* slaughters a veritable herd of New-Critical sacred cows, including the following: that each poem is the realization of some sort of *pre-poetic* mood or emotion or experience; that the proper perspective for criticism is microscopic linguistic analysis; that each poem is a self-contained unity; and that criticism and value-judgement are inseparable. Against these beliefs, Frye argues: that criticism should "stand back" far enough from the poem to be able to perceive its archetypal or mythic connections with other poems; that these patterns serve to unify literature *as a whole* and comprise a "literary universe" or "order of words" created by the poetic imagination; that the poet does not imitate nature, but rather draws on the reservoir of archetypes and conventions contained in the literary universe; and that the proper role of criticism is not to make pronouncements of value, but systematically to describe the literary universe and its internal configurations. The central, unifying concept of Frye's system – its "transcendental signified" – is the idea of myth. (pp.28-29)

The second point Salusinszky makes:

Frye's work since the *Anatomy* has moved in three principal directions. First, he has applied the techniques of myth-criticism which he discovered in the Blake, and systematized in the *Anatomy*, to a wide variety of other poets, publishing detailed studies of Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats, T.S.Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and many others. Second, he has extended his ideas into a liberal-humanist social analysis, proposing the study of myth and literature as keys to understanding the whole shape of culture or civilization. Here, the argument has been that myths, unlike legends or folk-tales, tend to cohere into a *mythology* – something deeper than any ideology – which comprises all of a society's deepest convictions about where it has come from and where it is going. Frye often talks about a social mythology of this kind as a "myth of concern," which he described in 1971 as a "fully developed or encyclopaedia myth" which "comprises everything that it most concerns its society to know" (*The Critical Path*, p.36) third, and most recently, Frye has been re-examining the Bible as a pre-eminent "encyclopaedia" or storehouse of Western imaginative myths. *The Great Code* (1982) is a study of biblical typology from a literary critic's perspective; a companion volume, currently in preparation, will explore the influence of the Bible on Western literature. (p.29)

The third point which Salusinszky makes is about Frye's influence on later critics:

Frye's own influence has worked in two different ways. First – and only semi-intentionally – he had the effect of upsetting the whole basket of New-Critical, Eliotic, "neo-classical" literary values that preceded him; and thus he inspired a new surge of Romantic studies so powerful that we are only now beginning to see the counter-movement (in, for example, the renewed interest in eighteenth

century studies). Second, as the most systemic treatise on poetics since Aristotle, the *Anatomy* was one of the great forces behind the establishment of the field now called "critical theory" – a field which has since grown so crowded that periodic crises can be announced in it. The *Anatomy* demonstrated that, even if we cannot agree about critical methodology, we can at least *disagree* about critical methodology, and the institutional effects of this demonstration can now be seen in the English curriculum of every major university in the world. (pp.29-30)

Wladimir Kryszynski sees Frye's *The Modern Century* as "a discourse which paradoxically announces both the crisis of modernity and the coming of postmodernism".

Page xiv of *The Legacy of Northrop Frye* Lee tells us that for Frye, literature and the language of the imagination were primary to all other form of experience. He was convinced that a consensus does exist in criticism even though it is largely concealed by dialectical divergence and pluralistic tendencies.

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## QUESTIONS

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1. What makes Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* a key text in Canadian criticism?
2. What are the various types of criticism that Frye talks about in *Anatomy of Criticism*?
3. What is the argument of Frye's 'Conclusion' to *A Literary History of Canada*?

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## UNIT 31 LINDA HUTCHEON

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### Structure

- 31.0 Objectives
- 31.1 The Politics of Postmodernism
- 31.3 Hutcheon's Overall View of Postmodernism
- 31.3 Postmodernism at Large (Globally)
  - 31.3.1 Departures from Modernism
  - 31.3.2 Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard
  - 31.3.3 *Midnight's Children* as a Postmodernist Text
  - 31.3.4 Postmodernism's Points of Convergence with Poststructuralism
  - 31.3.5 Implications for Us
- 31.4 Conclusion
  - Questions

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### 31.0 OBJECTIVES

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This brief unit will introduce the general direction of the theorising about Canadian and global postmodernism which we find in the work of Linda Hutcheon, a major post-Frye Canadian critic.

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### 31.1 THE POLITICS OF POSTMODERNISM

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Linda Hutcheon is one of the foremost Canadian critics of recent times. She was born in Toronto in 1947. In her 1989 book *The Politics of Postmodernism* Hutcheon sees postmodernist art as a political practice which criticizes representation from within. More specifically Canadian concerns come through in her 1988 book *The Canadian Postmodern*. Here she says that to render the particular concrete and to glory in a (defining) local ex-centricity is what the Canadian postmodern amounts to.

In the same book Hutcheon sees Robert Kroetsch's novel *The Studhorse Man* as the exemplary postmodernistic novel. This novel is chaotic, irrational, farcical, idiosyncratic, perverse – a veritable gamut of all that 'play' as a postmodern fictional strategy signifies.

*The Studhorse Man*, is a tall tale with Homeric parallels. An Alberta rancher, Hazard LePage, sets out on an 'odyssey', looking for suitable mares for his great blue stallion Poseidon. Much of the book's raunchy humour centres on the parallel between the horse's imposing member and the member of the 'Studhorse Man' himself, which is known as 'Old Blue'. The book is also loosely based on variants of the Isis myth, but in Kroetsch's version the goddess Demeter is a male, whose role is that of LePage's biographer and rival in love. Hazard's disguises enable Kroetsch to indulge in riotous parody of history, myth, religion, morality, form – the whole range of codified sets of beliefs and values. Hazard's journey metaphorically parallels the mythic wanderings of Odysseus. The prevailing tone in other Kroetsch novels like *What the Crow Said* (1978), and *The Puppeteer* (1992) is that of parody.

One page 183 of *The Canadian Postmodern* Hutcheon states that Robert Kroetsch is 'Mr. Canadian Postmodern'. Hutcheon's detailed comments on Kroetsch in her book *The Canadian Postmodernism* go as follows:

For years now critics have been working out the parodic interrelations between the *Odyssey* and *The Studhorse Man*, *Badlands*, and *Alibi*. These parodies of the familiar and seemingly 'universal' do not so much destroy myth as de-myth-ify and demystify it into stories, fictions. These, in turn, are less 'universal' than recognizable and reusable, and the difference is crucial. They can be used and abused. Much of the mythic material is presented ambivalently: water, for instance, is symbolic of both death and rebirth in all of Kroetsch's work (as in Atwood's and Thomas's). While on the surface this resembles, as we have seen before, T.S.Eliot's modernist ambivalence about water in *The Waste Land*, Kroetsch's is more an ambivalence-as-mutual-undercutting, with no balancing of opposites, just underlining of duality.

In Kroetsch's work, there is always a postmodern tension between the implied 'universals' of mythic story and the 'anecdotal texture, narrativity' of fiction. The interchange here is what deconstructs myth and allows a way out of the 'entrapping' tendency of myth to want to explain everything one way. For Kroetsch the response is to 'retell it' and retell it differently. The appeal of myth to modernism, if I may generalize a little recklessly, was in its promise not only of 'universality' but of coherence and lasting meaning. As Kroetsch puts it, 'the Postmodernist is more tempted by those momentary insights that spring up here and there'. Anecdote counteracts the organizing principles of myth in his fiction, as in that of other postmodern writers. There is a paradoxical desire to show the temptation of the 'single' vision as seen in mythic 'universality', sameness, and system and yet to contest it by 'the allure of multiplicity' - parody, fragmentation, decentring. For Kroetsch Babel is a positive story because it recounts the breaking up of that originary single collectivity that allowed the multiple to flourish: 'making everything into *one*' at the expense of historical, cultural, and linguistic diversity is a negative in the eyes of the postmodern.

Kroetsch's parodies are not all mythic, however. Besides the conventions of biography, *The Studhorse* takes on everything from Nabokov's *Pale Fire* to Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' (the mistakenly female-named Demeter, sitting in his bathtub, watches the world as reflected in a mirror). The broader conventions of the western genre are also parodied: Hazard and Poseidon both represent and misrepresent the traditional relationship between cowboy and horse. In *Gone Indian* the ending of the western is parodied: Jeremy and Bea ride off into the sunset, but they are 'seeking NOTHING'. As we shall see later, *Alibi* similarly takes on and takes off on the conventions of the murder mystery. (pp.165-166)

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## 31.2 HUTCHEON'S OVERALL VIEW OF POSTMODERNISM

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Broadly, Hutcheon's is a position that undermines Marxist 'History' and places great value on 'histories' in the plural. This move is part of the general resistance offered by her theory to monadic totalizations of various kinds. She sees post-modern fiction as exploiting and yet putting into question, notions of closure, totalization and universality that are part of challenged grand narratives. It is her belief that rather than seeing this paradoxical use and abuse as a sign of decadence or cause for despair, it might be possible to postulate a less negative interpretation that would

allow for at least the potential for radical critical possibilities. trying to find totalizing narratives that dissolve differences and contradictions is delusive in her view. A novel like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is crucial to her theorising. Rushdie's novel offers 'histories' in the plural and at the same time works to prevent any interpretation of the contradictions within it as simply 'the outer discontinuous signs of some repressed unity – such as Marxist 'History' or 'the Real'. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* Hutcheon writes:

Critique is as important as complicity in the response of cultural postmodernists to the philosophical and socio-economic realities of postmodernity: postmodernism here is not so much what Jameson sees as a systemic form of capitalism as the name given to the cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it. (p.26)

With a view to claiming for postmodernist art the ability to intervene critically in the socio-economic order that grounds postmodernity even while it is itself implicated in that order, Hutcheon tries to posit a distinction between postmodernism as a cultural and aesthetic mode and postmodernity as 'the designation of a social and philosophical period or 'condition'.

Within the Canadian context, that kind of an enabling move opens up spaces for postcoloniality, ethnicity and multiculturalism but all the dangers that Jameson sees inherent in postmodernism do not disappear by that move. After all, Jameson relates his description of postmodern pastiche to the death of modernist norms and characterises post-modern parody as parody in which belief in the impossibility of norms contrasts with the modernist challenge to norms.

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### 31.3 POSTMODERNISM AT LARGE (GLOBALLY)

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#### 31.3.1 Departures From Modernism

Modernism is a cover term for certain tendencies in early twentieth century art and literature. The motivating slogan at the back of these tendencies was 'make it new'. You have already looked at texts like *The Waste Land* (T.S. Eliot) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (James Joyce) as part of your 'British Poetry' and 'British Novel' courses. That should give you some idea as to how texts such as these looked different and 'new' as compared to those written earlier. Experimentation was always looked upon favourably

The heyday of Modernism was the period between 1910 and 1930. Postmodernism fully came into its own in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. What marks it is a mood of radical indeterminacy and a tone of self-conscious skepticism towards previous certainties in personal, intellectual and political life. Modernism also has skepticism but of a less absolute kind. Also, postmodernism is satisfied with surfaces whereas Modernism did strive for a certain kind of 'depth'. Postmodernism's fascination is with popular art forms and its mood is less elegiac than that of Modernism. Postmodernism does not fully abandon modernism's mood of alienation. However, whereas the modernist writer was more keen on trying to wrest a meaning from the world through myth, symbol or formal complexity, the postmodernist writer greets absurdity or meaningless existence with an indifference which combines resignation, fatigue and playfulness. Most postmodernist narratives have great self-reflexivity which means that they double back on their own presuppositions, assumptions and ways of telling the story.

Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have provided the philosophical framework for postmodernism. Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition* has proved to be the major text for debates on postmodernism. Baudrillard's book *Simulations* (first translated into English in 1983) theorized the 'loss of the real'. Lyotard's main argument is that the 'truth claims' and assumed consensus on which a lot of history and its 'grand narratives' stand are an illusion. The 'grand narratives' (talk in terms of progress through rationality) are untenable and repressive. They lack credibility. They impose restrictive boundaries on an otherwise pluralist cultural formation. They delimit discourse and exclude or marginalise voices that do not suit the dominant groups.

Baudrillard's main contention is that 'the real' is now defined in terms of the media in which it moves. The pervasive influence of images from television and advertising has led to a loss of the distinction between the real and the imagined. The same is true of the distinction between reality and illusion and between surface and depth which have also disappeared.

To help us make better sense of these developments Frederic Jameson offers the phrase 'the cultural logic of late capitalism' for the cultural and social condition prevailing in advanced capitalist societies since the 1960s, the period in which capitalism entered a new phase of crisis.

One related danger is 'commodity fetishism'. By this is meant the continuous celebration of the products of late twentieth century capitalist society. That attitude almost approves of our inability to break free from the great communicational networks encompassing the world in which we find ourselves caught as 'subjects' (the term 'subject' points not only to individuality but also to the fact of being subjected or subordinated to non-subjective determinants).

### 31.3.3 *Midnight's Children* as a Postmodernist Text

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1983) which is concerned with the 'life' of Saleem Sinai who was born at midnight on August 15, 1947 is a good example of a postmodernist text. Rushdie seeks to challenge the conventional narrative through blurred boundaries of discourse, through textual play, through explicit or implicit parody and through the hybridization of language. Chaotic multiplicity and plenitude is celebrated as are creative tensions between personal and national identity. The narrator's self is subject to fluidity. His dealings with Padma are sometimes mocking and sometimes loving. He keeps mocking his own self all the time. The hold of realism is loosened through fantasy. The 'local' is celebrated as we find in the loving care which Rushdie bestows on details of Bombay life. Irony is playful and liberating. The family's fortunes and the nation's fortunes are subjected to the same flippancy. Most of the lineages, origins, cultural and religious practices, political manipulations and the working of media all are subjected to a playful treatment. Mimicry also has an important role in the proceedings. Ideas about origins, centre, presence and historical explanation itself are undetermined all the time. More than this, an element of the mock-heroic is also at work. Exaggerations of various kinds and the element of bathos (anti-climax), introduced at crucial points in the narrative are all part of the overall playful thrust. Desire and nostalgia merge in such a way that the 'subject' caught in their net emerges as quite fluid and provisional. Events of the Emergency period and of the war of Bangladesh liberation are given a playful treatment and the parodic element is ever-present. Dreams mingle with reality, mystery with magic and truth with fantasy.

Some other notable postmodern texts also need to be mentioned. Allen Ginsberg's poem 'Howl', Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, Gunter Grass's novel *The*

*Tin Drum* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* all have a palpable presence of postmodern features in them. Sometimes the name given to fiction of this kind is 'magic realism'. This term refers to the techniques of combining the realistic depiction of events and characters with elements of the fantastic often drawn from myth, dreams and fairy tales. Mostly there is a lot of comment on the way the narrative itself got made and on the status (reliability or otherwise) of the narrator himself/herself.

#### 31.3.4 Postmodernism's Points of Convergence with Poststructuralism

Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan state (in the book *Literary Theory: An Anthology* edited by them):

In 1979, Poststructuralism changed names, but, as any Post-Structuralist will tell you, when names change, things change. Poststructuralism (a term used mostly in the anglophone academy) found itself being replaced by a new word (actually an old word transplanted from America to France and back again). That word was 'Post-Modernism'. Lyotard published a book that year entitled *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in which he calls the contemporary historical situation in which the old west European master narratives of progressive subjective enlightenment and rational liberation (Liberal Humanism and Marxism especially) no longer apply to a world of micronarratives that could not be dominated by any single legitimating metanarrative. Instead, a criterion of scientific and economic performativity or usefulness and technical/economic effectiveness has replaced the old rationalist ideal of a legitimating metalanguage, and it is linked to the growing power of corporations. By controlling scientific research, they are setting the terms of what would be construed as useful knowledge (and by implication, of what would be construed as true). Truth is no longer the possession of a rational subject, nor is it a property of a reality that would be described objectively using objective scientific methods. Rather it is determined by the effectivity of knowledge within a particular economic situation dominated by corporations that has the power both to shape the world and to say what counts as scientific truth regarding that world. What will count as true is what is useful from their point of view.

The major point of convergence between poststructuralism and postmodernism is that both are seen as part of the 'logics of disintegration', (the title of Peter Dews's 1987 book) where he sees Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan together as being the major figures putting forward these logics of disintegration. So some of those who do not look favourably on both postmodernism and poststructuralism take the sweeping position that there is little to choose between the two. They say that in 1979 (the year of the publication of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*) poststructuralism changed names and found itself act replaced by postmodernism. That may not be a very accurate way of putting it but the validity of this common criticism of the two trends remains. The common criticism is that both contribute to the 'logics of disintegration'.

Here we need to know a little about 'modernity'. This is a name for the post-feudal era which thinkers like the German Jurgen Habermas treat as one of progressive enlightenment or rationalization. One could say that we have long been under the sway of reason in the pursuit of rational laws and procedures. By choosing the words 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' to characterize the contemporary era, Lyotard was implicitly criticizing Habermas. Lyotard's basic position is that in the contemporary historical situation the old European master-narratives of progressive

subjective enlightenment and rational liberation (especially liberal humanism and Marxism) no longer apply. Truth can no longer be seen as the possession of a rational subject, nor is it a property of a reality that could be described objectively, using objective scientific methods. The so-called 'truth' and 'reality' are determined by the affectivity of knowledge within a particular economic situation dominated by corporations possessing the power not only to shape the world but to say what counts as a scientific truth regarding that world. Most of these awarenesses are reinforced by what Baudrillard has to say about virtual reality or the fact of 'the real' being defined in terms of the media in which it moves. The work of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault and Roland Barthes collectively undermines subjectivity as agency and 'truth' as enabling.

### 31.3.5 Implications for Us

The implications that this kind of a scenario has for us in the 'third world' or in developing countries are far from reassuring. Most of the time we end up being dictated to (directly or indirectly, crudely or subtly) on what constitutes 'reality' and 'truth' in a single-super-power world i.e. a world dominated by the United States of America and its close allies. Consumerism and commodity fetishism have also contributed to our being largely at the receiving end of 'the postmodern condition.'

Another danger is that of the 'degree zero of contemporary general culture'. Thus one listens to reggae; watches a western; eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner; wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong (*The Postmodern Condition* p.76). The hybridization of cultural forms can hypothetically lead to a scenario where some Hindu young men, somewhat fundamentalist in outlook, dance to the beat of updated Sufi music, the full significance of which may be lost on them.

In its extreme Baudrillardian form, the 'loss of the real' may seem to give legitimacy to a callous indifference to disaster and suffering. Think of Baudrillard's notorious comment in which he stated that the Gulf War (involving Iraq on the one hand and western powers on the other) never happened, that what 'really' took place was a kind of tele-visual virtual reality.

Also, marginalized people like the Blacks or those who are doubly marginalized (like Black women) can never feel comfortable in a postmodern setting unless they are given a greater say in the processes of development. In that sense, postmodernism is rightly seen by some Black feminist critics as something primarily for and by comfortable white intellectuals. In any event, anywhere in the world, postmodernism's recycled emptiness and superficiality can always be seen as a cultural crisis.

And yet, to most of us, any absolute wishing away of the effects of postmodernism as a condition is not quite feasible. The experiences of living in a global civilization are forcing a kind of unavoidable relativism upon us. On the positive side, postmodernism is a release from restrictive assumptions and elitist hierarchies. It encourages popular culture and makes us realize that there are as many realities as there are cultures and that the overall scene has become a bazaar of realities.

In any event, holding on to 'history' in a monolithic sense is becoming increasingly difficult. Ours has largely become an era of instantaneous history where technology is capable of making the future obsolete even before the present has vanished. Ideas about origins, centre, presence and historical explanation are continually being undermined. There is a pluralizing and a dispersal at work about which we cannot do much. We might well say with Yeats; "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold" — we live in a world with several centres and several margins and all of them inter-related in exceedingly complex and ever-changing ways. Ruptures, intertextuality etc.

can create space for new and varied forms of bonding which fully accommodate difference, the global and the local.

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## 31.4 CONCLUSION

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Linda Hutcheon is Canada's main theoriser of postmodernism. She theories about this phenomenon in broad global terms as well as in term more suited to the Canadian condition. Robert Krotesch's famous novel *The Studhorse Man* is taken by her as an exemplary Canadian postmodernist text. She attaches a lot of value to postmodern parody and irony.

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## QUESTIONS

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1. In what respects is postmodernism different from Modernism?
2. Why is Jean Francois Lyotard distrustful of grand narratives?
3. In what terms does Jean Baudrillard spell out "the loss of the real"?
4. What are the postmodernistic features of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*?
5. How do both postmodernism and poststructuralism contribute to the 'logics of disintegration'?

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## UNIT 32 SMARO KAMBOURELI

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### Structure

- 32.0 Objectives
- 32.1 Smaro Kamboureli: General
- 32.2 Kamboureli's concern with 'otherness' and 'ethnicity'
- 32.3 Conclusion
- Questions

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### 32.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit briefly discusses the importance of Smaro Kamboureli as a major younger Canadian critic.

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### 32.1 SMARO KAMBOURELI: GENERAL

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Among younger critics teaching and writing in Canada, Smaro Kamboureli is a leading name. She is the author of a number of path-breaking studies.

Kamboureli was born in Thessolinki (Greece). She migrated to Canada and is now a leading Canadian critic. She is Professor of Canadian literature and postcolonial and diasporic theories and Director of the Graduate Programme in the English Department at the University of Victoria. She is a major voice on feminism, multiculturalism and 'diaspora'. She is the author of *On the Edge of the Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem*. She edited *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature*. She is also the co-editor of *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*.

A part of her 'Introduction' to *Making a Difference: An Anthology of Canadian Multicultural Literature* is self-explanatory. Here she states:

*Making a Difference: An Anthology of Canadian Multicultural Literature* at once celebrates what has been called minority literature in Canada and attempts to change our understanding of what minority literature is.

What makes this anthology of Canadian literature different is its gathering together of both poetry and fiction by authors who come from a wide range of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Beginning with F.P. Grove and Laura Goodman Salverson, the first non-Anglo-Celtic writers to achieve recognition in Canada, and including First Nations authors, this anthology belongs to the genealogy of Canadian literature, a body of writings that come from a variety of traditions that used to be kept separate from the so-called main tradition.

One of my primary intentions has been to create a space in which contributors to the anthology might dialogue with each other, without suspending their difference. Through their poetry, their fiction, and their statements about their writing that are cited in the headnotes, this anthology enables these authors to speak with each other across boundaries that are marked by many differences. Be

they differences of race, of ethnic origin, of gender, of place, of ideological affiliations, or of thematic concerns and aesthetics, they characterize this literature in remarkable ways. Each of the seventy-one contributors speaks in her or his particular accent. I use the word accent here not so much as the language marker announcing that the origins of someone – like me, for example – lie outside Canada, but rather as a sign of particularities, of differences that do not become absent or are not rendered silent. The writers in this anthology make a difference because, when read together, they invite the reader to consider the social, political, and cultural context that have produced Canadian literature in general and their work in particular. As a collage of voice, *Making a Difference* fashions an image of Canadian culture that reveals how we have come to our present moment in history. (p.1)

Kamboureli emphasises also the material conditions, under which multicultural writing is produced, consumed and disseminated. She also asserts that the questions that have been central to making of the anthology in question are as to how we function as subjects of our own representations and how we figure as objects in to representation of others; how culture is defined and who implements these definitions, what or who devises the boundaries that determine how cultural difference - be it celebrated or curtailed - is represented.

*A Mazing Space* (1986) is an anthology Kamboureli edited alongwith Shirley Newman. The aim is to engender a special kind of internality with concerns on issues that concerns women writers and as critics. The woman here becomes a site to which the woman writes, as she moves in it and merges with it to lend it substance.

A word here about Kamboureli's treatment of the 'long poem'. In the 'Preface' to *On The Edge of Genre* (1991) Smaro Kamboureli says:

The long poem has been read as a lyric, as an epic, as a discursive narrative, as a postmodern text. But these readings, although partly invited by the long poem itself, are, I argue here, already misreadings based on the generic fallacy that a literary text, no matter how complex, tends to privilege on one genre among the many it might borrow from. The long poem cannot be read as if it were an extended lyric, a strange epic – strange because of our unheroic times – or as if it were a narrative poem; it may share the emotive tonalities of the lyric, but it doesn't sanction the lyric's brevity; it may share the epic's intent to 'sing' of national matters and anxieties – 'O Canada' – but it does so in ways that parody the epic ethos. And when it tries to tell a story, it gets sidetracked and tells instead a story about the telling of the promised story.

These contradictions, this breach of promise, are what this study focuses on. It is not my desire to resolve or reconcile these contradictions; rather, my intention is to understand the generic restlessness of the long poem, why and how it engages itself with disparate elements only to subvert their functions and ideologies. (pp. xiii-xiv)

Kamboureli adds:

The long poem, then, makes itself felt through its discontinuities, its absences, and its deferrals by foregrounding both its writing process and our reading act. While it is interested in the materiality of

language, it is also concerned with the unreadability of the world's textuality. (pp.xiv)

Smaro Kamboureli

In the book as a whole she analyses outstanding examples of the Canadian 'long poem' giving pride of place to bp Nichol's *Martyrology*.

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### 32.2 KAMBOURELI'S CONCERN WITH 'OTHERNESS' AND 'ETHNICITY'

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In her 2000 book 'Scandalous Bodies' Kamboureli goes into the question of 'otherness'. One important text that she talks about is *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fiction*. She says:

*Other Solitudes*, I suggest, has become a prominent text of its kind not because ethnicity has always been a part of the canon, but because it affiliates itself with two dominant national narratives: that of the mainstream literary canon and that of the official multiculturalism policy. Along the same lines, its publication by a major publishing house guarantees it wide distribution and, by extension, critical attention; its exclusive focus on fiction, the most accessible and commodified of literary forms, is also a factor contributing to its marketability. Similarly, the fact that its title is clearly intended to remind readers of Hugh MacLennan's canonical text *Two Solitudes*, an icon of Canadian cultural politics, aligns the anthology with the very canon it wishes to be an extension of, while inviting us to believe that the politics of ethnicity today is not different, at least structurally, from the politics of the two 'founding' nations. Its second-last section, 'The First and Founding Nation Respond', which includes interviews with (but not writings by) Tomson Highway, Jacques Godbout, and Robertson Davies, addresses the title's allusion and is meant to demonstrate the plurality of Canadian culture.

It would seem, then, that *Other Solitudes* is designed to erase the marginalization of ethnic writing. Whereas its selections take a critical look at many aspects of multiculturalism and ethnic experience, its editorial strategies counterbalance what minority as a political and cultural sign entails. The overall editorial intent is to present a single model of Canadian history, a model affirming the magnanimity of the majority culture whose celebration of diversity becomes yet another way of containing it. Thus ethnicity is inscribed in the editorial statement as a domesticated identity. The editors leave no room for representation of ethnicity as what Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd call a 'product of damage – damage more or less systematically inflicted on cultures produced as minorities by the dominant culture' (4). This editorial approach is in contrast to the writings and comments of contributors like Austin Clarke, Dionne Brand, Janeice Kulyk Keefer, and Yeshim Ternar, who, for different reasons, if they embrace official multiculturalism at all, do so without the ease that the editors do. (pp.164-165)

A little later in the book she talks about 'The Other as the Postmodern "Ex-centric"'. She says:

Hutcheon's postmodernist injunction in her response to the reception of *Other Solitudes* demonstrates that, in postmodern terms, ethnic

difference is endowed with political value precisely because it is named, because naming allows identities previously ignored and subjugated to become present. But this presencing, as I will attempt to show, makes ethnicity a sign of cultural excess: ethnic identity is one of the many 'ex-centric' identities that Hutcheon's postmodernism embraces write in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 'The centre no longer completely holds. And, from the decentred perspective, the "marginal" and what I will be calling...the "ex-centric" (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed' (1988,12). One of Hutcheon's operative modes, the 'ex-centric' depends on a (*the?*) centre that, although not 'completely' intact, although reconceptualized as 'fiction', retains its hegemonic function; it is still understood as 'necessary, desired' (1988,58).

Celebrating the visibility of one side of the Us and Them dialectic while asserting the necessity of the other does not promise a 'militantly anti-humanistic' (1988, 176) way of critiquing the legacy of binary thinking. Within this postmodern view of the world, the term 'ex-centric' functions not so much to designate a condition, or a site where the ethnic subject resides, as it does to recast marginality as a palatable, and thus consumable, cultural product. In this heterogeneous yet logocentric postmodernism, ethnicity never moves beyond the 'ex-centric' alliance of '(...black, ethnic, gay, and feminist)' issues (1988,35). This is not an alliance that suggests solidarity or promises to dissolve limits; rather, it is presented as a chain of interchangeable signifiers, what facilitates postmodernism's 'intertextual play and...intellectual contingency' (1988, 54), a spectacle that speaks of a postmodern narcissism of differences. Hutcheon's parentheses hold in (their) place this alliance of Others; they also dramatize her master trope of postmodern poetics and politics, irony. She names ethnicity, but that naming act itself serves to re-repress the already repressed. (p.167)

She raises an important question on page 171 of her book. Her conclusion offered on p.174 is:

What Hutcheon's view of multiculturalism postulates is – in typical postmodern fashion – a paradox: a Canada that 'articulate(s) a totalizing national discourse of consensus and make(s) space for negotiated difference'. Hutcheon does not explain how this consensus is to be achieved when differences are still under negotiation, when the negotiations (as I understand her formulation) are to be conducted by a society whose self-image as dominant remains intact. Perhaps the resolution of this paradox lies in her defence of official multiculturalism as an 'ideal'. In this context, a 'totalizing' national discourse can bring about Hutcheon's proposed unity only if it suspends differences as counter-discourses. It is in this way – the same way in which official multiculturalism 'gives us subjects without history' (Robert Young 1990, 68) – that Hutcheon's Canadian national imaginary can encompass ethnicity. The consensus by which this national discourse can remain 'totalizing' and at the same time embody ethnicity has a disciplinary function: however ethnicity is defined, it must yield to the 'totalizing' impulse of such a nation. A consensual community of this kind, a community presumably without ethnic margins, would include

'negotiated difference', but for this negotiation to succeed, minorities' experience of difference would have to be subsumed. Instead, such a multicultural national will continue to assert its allegiance to the modernist discourses of nationalism. It will be an imagined community, the kind that occupies homogeneous, empty time, a community whose historical materiality will consist in its misremembering of its past. (p.174)

We have quoted extensively from Kamboureli work. Most of the excerpts are self-explanatory. All we need to add is that here is an extremely alive, alert and active critic who has given a new dimension to critical thinking about 'otherness', 'gender', 'multi-culturalism' and 'genre study'.

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### 32.3 CONCLUSION

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Kamboureli is the critic who can also be seen as a guardian of feminist concerns in Canada and a remarkable theorizer of 'otherness' of various kinds. Her range and versatility are really exemplary.

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### QUESTIONS

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1. What, in brief, are the striking individual qualities of Smaro Kamboureli as a critic?
2. In what terms does Kamboureli view 'difference'? Give a brief answer.

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## SUGGESTED READINGS

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