



Ethnocentrism, Xenophobia, and the Praxis Multiculturalism: Reading Canadian Scenario in the Select Stories of Dionne Brand

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Citation: Mr. Roy P P et al. (2024). Ethnocentrism, Xenophobia, and the Praxis of Multiculturalism: Reading Canadian Scenario in the Select Stories of Dionne Brand *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 32(1) 43-46

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v32i1.11526

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article examines how ethnocentrism and xenophobia underlie the multicultural mosaic of the Canadian society as revealed in Dionne Brand's short story collection titled "Sans Souci and Other Stories." It attempts to establish that colonial enterprises largely holds responsibility for the flawed consciousnesses like ethnocentrism, xenophobia and racism. In line with the arguments made by Ludwig Gumplowicz, William Graham Sumner, and Shreya Atrey, the article argues that these consciousnesses stem from "cultural narrowness" created around one's ethnicity, culture, religion, nationality etc. The article analyses the experiences of the characters who migrated to Canada to prove that the feelings of ethnocentrism, xenophobia and racism are still extant. Brand, known for her incisive critique of colonialism, racism, and cultural dislocation, explores themes of exclusion, prejudice, and systemic marginalization in this collection. By analysing the select stories, this article highlights how xenophobia operates at interpersonal and institutional levels and the ways in which Brand's characters navigate and resist these oppressive dynamics. This exploration contributes to a broader understanding of how literature reflects and challenges xenophobic ideologies.

Introduction

Ludwig Gumplowicz, the first to scholarly observe and use the term 'ethnocentrism', opines that the largest part of human history sprang from the glorious narration of one's own culture by humiliating another or alien one. He says: "One can comfortably say that the largest part of historical writing so far actually has only sprung from this subjective need of human beings to glorify their own and nearest and at the same time humiliate and sully what is foreign and distant" (1883, p. 252-253). It shows that human beings have always developed and perpetuated the dichotomies like "ingroup" and "outgroup" (Sumner, 1906) and "alike" and "unlike" (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950).

William Graham Sumner (1906) describes ethnocentrism as the tendency among the members of a cultural group to assume that their culture is the center of reference, and consequentially those members consider themselves and their culture as superior to other ones. Sumner compares ethnocentrism to provincialism, and calls it "cultural narrowness" (1906). At the same time, Gumplowicz calls ethnocentrism as delusional as geocentricism which believed that the earth is the central point of the universe, or anthropocentricism which believed that human beings are the central point in the earth (1883). In both the perspectives, it can be inferred that 'ethnocentrism' thrives on matters arising from delusions and baseless arguments. Ethnocentric overtones in history, philosophy, and literatures prepared grounds for the sociological phenomena like xenophobia, racism and ethnicism which were ostensibly vented out with the inception of colonialism due to the scattering of people of various ethnicities and consciousnesses thereof across the globe.

Xenophobia is defined as “the excessive fear, dislike, and even hostility toward of anything “foreign” or to anything and anybody from outside one’s own social group, nation, or country” (Hjerm, 1998, 2009; McEvoy, 1995; Orenstein, 1985). In this way, one can find lot many similarities and correlations between ethnocentrism and xenophobia. Shreya Atrey, in her article titled "Understanding Xenophobia as Intersectional Discrimination" defines xenophobia and compares it with racism. She says, ...xenophobia appears uncontroversially akin to racism, broadly defined as the preference for one class of persons based on their inherited features such as colour or membership in an ethnic or cultural group. The two are similar in terms of how they are constituted by notions of colour, descent, and national or ethnic origin—characteristics which are often indistinguishable from religion religion, culture, language and citizenship—and what they are constituted for: to express preferences for or superiority of one class of persons over another. (1014)

Atrey differentiates between xenophobia and racism in two ways. According to her xenophobia intersects with nationality, citizenship, religion, ethnicity, gender, etc., whereas racism is exclusively othering on the grounds of racial identity. She says:

First, both xenophobia and racism seems to be related to race even though the former is based on a combination of intersecting grounds and the latter is exclusively based on racial grounds; and second, the two seem broadly relate to the process of othering and exclusion, demarcating who belongs to a particular society, community, or territory in a chiefly political sense. (1015)

As it is the case, any intrusion of a culture or ethnicity to another, especially to the culture or ethnicity of the majority in a region, is expected to encounter the xenophobic attitude. It can be in the form of marginalisation, racial prejudices, and abuse. The encounter of such different cultures or ethnicities becomes problematic for both the parties due to the cultural shock. These encounters were extensively made in postcolonial era due to the movement of the people.

Another phenomenon that human history majored on largely is displacement of peoples from their homelands to alien lands. The scattering of those ethnocentrically-conscious people—extensively witnessed during colonialism—across the cultures that are alien to them exacerbated the situation. Oliver C. Cox in his work *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics (1948)* argues that the European capitalists are liable for promulgating the delusion of racial supremacy of a few ones over many other races. He observes that the colonial enterprises as well as racial prejudices were spread across the globe simultaneously. He states that racial relations attained growth in the nineteenth century along with the colonial enterprises. During the century, European nationalistic powers began to establish superiority over weaker European subjects and also others across the globe:

Racial antagonism attained full maturity during the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the great nationalistic powers of Europe began to justify their economic designs upon weaker European peoples with subtle theories of racial superiority and masterhood. (1948)

It is against this canvass of “racial antagonism”, the discussions of multiculturalism and diversity step in as a the subjects from the colonised east got displaced to the colonising west by the dint of either Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade during the 16th and 19th century, indentured labourship (which intensified after the abolition of slavery in the 19th century), colonial enterprises, etc. Declaration of United Nations in 2001 identifies the slavery and Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade as the major source of racism and xenophobia. It states:

We acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade, including the transatlantic slave trade, were appalling tragedies in the history of humanity not only because of their abhorrent barbarism but also in terms of their magnitude, organized nature and especially their negation of the essence of the victims, and further acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade, and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences. (16)

The declaration establishes the role of colonialism in the spread of racial thoughts across the world.

Colonialism also resulted in the movements and displacement of people from their homeland to the foreign land. These movements—most often forced—were expected to perturb the “pure” monochromic cultural canvass of such host cultures in Europe and America. Whereas these movements were forced, there have been a few voluntary forms ones also. In both the cases, the subjects were expected to encounter the antagonism in the form of racial discrimination based on the xenophobic consciousnesses of the people of the host culture. At the same time, the immigrants also uphold their cultural identity, and attempt to retain their original culture in the alien land. Here comes the conflict between ethnicities and identities. These cultural encounters are inevitable because undoing the dispersion of people across different landscapes and culturalscapes is impossible due to obvious reasons. The United Nations Declaration identifies the xenophobic feelings manifested by the hostcultures towards the migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The declaration clearly states:

We recognize that xenophobia against non-nationals, particularly migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, constitutes one of the main sources of contemporary racism and that human rights violations against members of such groups occur widely in the context of discriminatory, xenophobic and racist practices. (17).

Those transnational and transcultural movements created platforms for multiple cultural entities to encounter the others that were assumed either to be inferior or superior. The colonial and postcolonial history as well as literatures revolve around such encounters among the two entities of the binaries spawned out from these ethnocentric as well as xenophobic consciousnesses.

Dionne Brand's *Sans Souci and Other Stories* delves into the experiences of Caribbean diasporic communities grappling with displacement, racism, and socio-political marginalization. While the collection addresses multiple forms of oppression, xenophobia emerges as a central theme, reflecting the hostility faced by immigrants in their new environments. Brand's nuanced storytelling captures both overt acts of xenophobia and the insidious, systemic structures that sustain it. This article explores how Brand illustrates xenophobia through character interactions, societal attitudes, and institutional practices.

In Brand's narratives, xenophobia often manifests through the social exclusion of immigrant characters. For instance, in the titular story, *Sans Souci*, the protagonist's experience reflects a pervasive sense of alienation. Set against the backdrop of migration and cultural dislocation, the story highlights the tensions between the immigrant community and the dominant society. The protagonist's inability to fully integrate into her host country underscores the barriers erected by xenophobic attitudes, which dismiss the cultural and personal identities of outsiders as inferior or irrelevant.

Brand's characters frequently encounter microaggressions that reveal latent xenophobia. In "Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls," for example, the protagonist's interactions with local residents are tinged with subtle but persistent prejudice. These moments, while seemingly minor, accumulate to create a hostile environment that erodes the characters' sense of belonging. By illustrating these dynamics, Brand underscores how xenophobia operates not just through explicit discrimination but also through everyday behaviours and attitudes.

The story portrays Blossom, a Black woman who migrated from Trinidad to Toronto. She regrets coming to Toronto, reflecting on her bitter experiences there. After being cheated by a pyramid scheme, she takes a job working for a White man. However, she faces an attempt at sexual exploitation in this role: "The white man boss-man was a doctor. Since the day she reach, he eyeing she, eyeing she" (33). Blossom responds decisively to the doctor's advances. When he grabs her, she twists his little finger, causing him such pain that his face turns from white to black, and he screams. When questioned by the police, Blossom upholds her dignity as a woman.

Blossom grab on to the doctor neck, dragging him, to drown him. It take two police to unlatch Blossom from the man the red neck, yes. And how the police get blossom to leave is wonder. But she wouldn't leave without she pay, and in cash money too besides, she tell them. (34)

Dionne Brand suggests that Canadian society remains deeply influenced by the legacies of colonialism and slavery. While Canada is often celebrated as a nation that welcomes immigrants and promotes equal representation for diverse cultures, the pervasive dominance of Whiteness is unmistakable.

The short story "Train to Montreal" illustrates how Black women can experience both gender-based and racial discrimination. The protagonist of the story symbolizes countless women of colour who endure the racialized obsessions of White society. They expect any form of abuse in the streets and public places of Canada. Even the children of the White society seem to reinforce the abhorrent practice of racism:

She was always afraid of the white children, meeting them on the street corners. She asked herself; how can she be afraid of children? Where she grew up it was a sign of insolence to look adults in the eye. These children started blankly and rudely at her. They were singing. (24)

Through the settings and atmosphere of Brand's fiction, it becomes evident that the country operates under patriarchal and racialized surveillance. The protagonist is publicly molested by a White man, a moment that forces her to confront the reality of her gender and vulnerability. She attempts to escape.

"What?" the man beside her. She didn't hear him. The clusters came again, tight and rolling, half gesturing, squeezing her; she, leaping to escape the end of them. "What did you say?" The man nudging her, bringing his lips close to her ear, brought her out of the music. (16)

In her portrayal of the central character in *Train to Montreal*, Dionne Brand conveys the idea that a Black woman in Canada must remain constantly alert, whether walking on public streets or standing in line to purchase train tickets. The negative experiences the character faces highlight Brand's concerns. The White children frequently attempt to insult the Black woman with their hurtful words and songs. In response, the character searches for a way to shield herself as the White children begin to sing:

They were singing "Wops and frogs, Montreal is full of frogs". She understood and was less willing to get up from the grey vinyl seat. The wheels of the train cackled to the song of the children. She wanted to stand, go to the washroom; but the song frightened her, made her sit still. Maybe they would see her and start singing; maybe they don't see her yet. She should stand up before they did, before they started singing about "Wops and niggers." (24)

The ostensibly "civilized" society of Canada remains entangled in a pervasive sense of racial hierarchy, as evidenced by the continued marginalization of the woman of color. Once again, she becomes the target of racial discrimination. Her freedom of movement is restricted by the mere presence of a group of White men ahead of her. In response, she deliberately slows her pace, attempting to avoid drawing attention to herself from the crowd of White individuals. In this moment, she is not merely walking; she is urgently searching for an escape.

Beyond personal interactions, Brand's stories reveal the institutional dimensions of xenophobia. Immigrant characters often find themselves trapped in exploitative labour conditions, denied access to social services, or subjected to bureaucratic indifference. In "Photograph," the protagonist's struggles with employment and housing discrimination highlight the systemic barriers that immigrants face. These challenges are compounded by the protagonist's limited access to resources and networks, reflecting a societal structure that marginalizes non-citizens.

Brand also critiques the legal and political systems that perpetuate xenophobia. In stories like "At the Lisbon Plate," immigration policies and law enforcement practices are portrayed as tools of exclusion. The bureaucratic hurdles faced by Brand's characters symbolize the institutionalized nature of xenophobia, which dehumanizes immigrants and reinforces their outsider status.

In the story "At the Lisbon Plate," Dionne Brand addresses contemporary political issues surrounding Black people and their existence within Canada's White-dominated, racially discriminatory society. The narrative highlights how the media and general public show heightened concern when a White person faces adversity, yet remain silent in the face of violence and injustices inflicted upon Black individuals. The media are also flawed in favour of the also xenophobic psyche of the dominant culture of Canada. They are selective in reporting the news. Most news related to the persecution encountered by the immigrants are not aired whereas news affecting the White people become sensational. Dionne Brand exposes this attitude of the media in the story "At the Lisbon Plate":

One Polish priest had been killed and the press was going wild. At the same time, I don't know how many African labourers got killed and, besides that, fell to their deaths from third-floor police detention rooms in Johannesburg; and all that scribes talked was about how moderate the Broder bond is. (106)

Despite these challenges, Brand's stories also highlight acts of resistance and resilience. Characters find solace in cultural practices, community networks, and personal relationships, which serve as counterpoints to the xenophobic forces they encounter. These moments of connection and defiance underscore the agency of marginalized individuals and their capacity to challenge exclusionary systems.

Conclusion

Dionne Brand's short story collection *Sans Souci and Other Stories* offers a profound examination of xenophobia and its multifaceted impacts on immigrant communities. Through her vivid storytelling, Brand exposes the pervasive nature of xenophobia, from interpersonal prejudice to institutionalized discrimination. At the same time, her characters' acts of resistance and resilience demonstrate the possibility of reclaiming agency and forging new forms of belonging. This collection not only critiques xenophobic ideologies but also affirms the enduring strength and creativity of marginalized communities.

In her article "Understanding Xenophobia as Intersectional Discrimination," Shreya Atrey advocates for a multifaceted approach to combat xenophobia by addressing its intersectional nature. She asserts that xenophobia cannot be disentangled from other forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and classism, as these identities often overlap to exacerbate marginalization. Central to her argument is the implementation of intersectional frameworks in both policy and activism to more effectively address these compounded vulnerabilities. Atrey also emphasizes the importance of legal reforms, advocating for laws that go beyond protecting against direct discrimination to tackle systemic inequalities, while promoting inclusive models of citizenship that foster social belonging. Additionally, she underscores the need for public education and awareness campaigns to dismantle xenophobic stereotypes. Finally, Atrey stresses that community engagement at the grassroots level is vital for fostering solidarity and combating xenophobia, highlighting the role of local organizations in challenging discriminatory attitudes and advancing social change.

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