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# The Bottle Imp

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**An Outward Looking Land: Suhayl Saadi and Scottish Multicultural Literature  
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Scottish literary criticism has generally tended to focus on how a particular piece of writing can be read within a Scottish context. How Alasdair Gray re-imagines Glasgow for instance, or how James Kelman represents the common Scot. However in recent years there have been a few relatively minor publications that are attempting to draw attention to writers who appear to have been marginalised due to their ethnicity. Publications such as *Wish I Was Here* (2000) and *The Redbeck Anthology of British South Asian Poetry* (2000) anthologise poetry by immigrant writers and attempt to promote their work, perhaps trying to add to the respective national literary canons.

There is no racism behind their apparent exclusion from critical focus. Anthologies such as these have been left on the critical sidelines simply because their work may not align with existent academic frameworks. The writers in question, such as Suhayl Saadi, Irfan Merchant, or even Jackie Kay, may not have attracted as much critical attention as they deserve because they deal with issues that differ from what is usually considered a Scottish trait in literature.

Issues such as race and ethnicity are high on the agenda with these writers, which may seem, at face value to be more at home with Post-Colonial writing, for example, rather than seen within a Scottish context. However, with immigration on the increase and a more globalised society emerging, there will be more and more writers like these who will publish within Scotland, and this will change the texture of the Scottish literary canon.

Suhayl Saadi, having been born to Pakistani parents and brought up in Glasgow, is a writer with a lot to draw from in the context of na-

tional identity. He does, however, on first being asked, have a clear idea of his literary nationality, saying "I am a Scottish writer, with various Scottish literary and other influences".

Having said this, Saadi does go on to recognise the fact that his 'Scottishness' is complicated, by adding, "but of course I am many things", and in his article 'Being Scottish' he elaborates. He lists that he is also "English, British, Pakistani, Indian, Sadozai, Asian, European, Black(-ish), Minority class, Male, Non-resident, 21st Century person, 15th Century being, Glaswegian, Middle-class, Writer, Seeker, Lover, Physician, Agha Jaan, Son, English-speaking, Music-loving, Left-leaning ..."

Perhaps one of the most important of the entries into this almost inexhaustible list, when going on to look at some of Saadi's work in this context, is that he is a "21st Century person". He is a modern man, living in a modern society, in modern Scotland and is involved in the pace of life, the speed of change, the cultural multiplicities and, of course, the multiculturalism that this entails, and existing in this, he notes that "Scottishness becomes a metaphor through which to perceive other things".

Looking at Saadi's poem 'Paradise Gardens Carpet' this perception of many identities within one is succinctly portrayed. We can see a multitude of societal aspects merging in one stanza with the lines "... the letters on the scrolls changed/ into gazelles and lions, dragons and phoenixes", which allows the reader to envisage a coming together of not only different species of animal of the physical world, but also of the mythical and spiritual, in the form of "dragons and phoenixes".

This can be read, then, as being representative of what Saadi refers to in 'Being Scottish'. Within his own identity there is a coming together of many nationalities, cultures and influences, which is paralleled in his poem. In tying up the stanza by writing that everything he talked about within it "came to one, single note: Peace", he appears to reaffirm the sense of multiplicity existing in harmony in a single space, just as Saadi's own multitude of identities exists within himself.

Literature, generally speaking, must stem from the real world, regardless of genre or complexity. In order to put any kind of message across, there must be a point of contact or comparison with which the reader can engage. Often, we see what can be described as a reflection of certain aspects of society which serves the purpose of perhaps highlighting, or even questioning, what is happening in the real

world. Saadi, by writing far reaching works, with many influences, does just this. From his point of view in Scotland he can metaphorically project an image of what is going on in an increasingly multicultural and globalised society.

The renowned Scottish writer and critic, Edwin Muir, wrote in *Scott and Scotland* (1936) that "criticism is a customary and vital function of literature".<sup>1</sup> There needs to be an understanding of what is written in order to appreciate it. By focusing on only certain issues, Scottish literary criticism generally appears to be overlooking modern issues. The frameworks that exist, those that look at works in a national context and examine Scottish society are all perfectly valid, as long as there is a recognition that the Scotland that is examined can, and does, change, and the critical approaches change along with it.

Suhayl Saadi expresses a hope that his work "might help to subvert, enrich and develop the literary (Scottish, British, whatever) canon(s)", and on reading his work, there is a definite sense that it will. Academic articles have recently been including Saadi's work and, so far, have been accepting of his ideas, but for his work to reach the level of mainstream Scottish academic notification there needs to be a shift away from the old representations of Scottish society that has been extensively written about with regards to the likes of Gray and Kelman, towards an uncovering of the modern multi-layered, constantly altering, multicultural society that is in existence today.

Suhayl Saadi's novels do fantastic work in reflecting a mixed culture within Scotland, a concept that is fore-grounded in *Psychoraag* (2004), by fusing Scots language with Urdu, amongst many other things. His latest novel *Joseph's Box* (2009) develops Saadi's sentiment of "I am many things", which is becoming increasingly important these days, and is well worth a read.

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### Notes

- 1 Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland* (George Routledge and Sons, 1936), reprinted (Polygon Books, 1982), page 15.



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