



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

HUGVÍSINDASVIÐ

“For better or worse, *I am Canadian*”

**Demand for Ethnic Recognition in *Green Grass, Running Water* by
Thomas King and *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa**

B.A. Essay

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September 2010

University of Iceland

School of Humanities

English

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Abstract

This essay examines the discrimination that native and Japanese Canadians have suffered at the hands of the Canadian government through the ages and how it is reflected in the novels *Green Grass, Running Water* by Thomas King and *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa. Although initially colonized by France and England, Canada eventually came under English domination. A nation of diverse identities due to emphasis on immigration since late 19th century, Canada adopted an official multicultural policy in order to accommodate the cultural diversity of the nation.

In this essay I consider how two Canadian minority writers, King and Kogawa, reject the idea of “universal” or traditional writing and draw instead upon their own cultural tradition regarding literature. In comparing similarities and differences in the novels, I demonstrate in what way these writers present their criticism of the Canadian government’s actions, especially regarding the appropriation of the native Canadian land and the incarceration of Japanese Canadians at the time of WWII. King and Kogawa present a clear difference in values that is unique for each novel. Kogawa’s narrative suggests that Japanese long for assimilation into dominant society as individuals, but King’s that natives wish to keep their own culture and to be acknowledged as a separate nation. However, I find that despite the basic difference between the novels, the demand for ethnic recognition is the same in King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* and Kogawa’s *Obasan*.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
History and Cultural Policy.....	8
Natives in Canada.....	8
Japanese in Canada.....	11
Canadian Multiculturalism.....	13
Canadian Minority Writings.....	16
Reading the Signs.....	18
Thomas King's <i>Green Grass, Running Water</i>	20
Joy Kogawa's <i>Obasan</i>	24
Same but Different.....	28
Conclusion.....	30
Works Cited.....	32

Introduction

Breathes there the man with soul so dead

Who never to himself hath said:

This is my own, my native land! (qtd. in Kogawa 1981, 47)

Canada is a nation of diverse identities, with people of different origins, descended from aboriginals, colonizers and immigrants. This is a nation which has established a multicultural policy in order to prevent racial discrimination and injustice, seeking equality for all of its citizens. The earlier demand of assimilation has come to an end and has slowly been reversing the attitudes towards the literature of ethnic minorities. The wide range of ethnic minorities in Canada offers a broad variety of literature that is growing stronger in an English dominant society. *The Canadian Encyclopedia* informs that Canadian ethnic literature was difficult to access for the English speaking Canadians until after the introduction of the government's multicultural policy in 1971, entered in the constitution in 1988. Japanese Canadians and natives in Canada have a long history of discrimination which is a central problem in their writings.

Thomas King is celebrated as native Canadian author with Greek-German mother and a father of Cherokee origins. He was born in California but emigrated in 1980 to live in Canada, where he began his writing. He has thirty years of experience in teaching and writing novels, short stories and screenplays. King has a PhD degree in English literature and has been a Professor of native studies, native literature and creative writing both in the US and Canada. He is portrayed as a “funny and poignant” writer who pinpoints the “oppression and prejudice” that natives have to face in trying to be accepted as equals to the whites. He has won numerous awards for his novels and is currently employed at Guelph University as a teacher of English and

Theatre Studies. He is one of the most respected contemporary writers of Native American literature (Busby). King's book *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) is his most highly acclaimed novel, written in a funny, engaging and dynamic manner that brings to life the tragic history of the native people, fighting for recognition and against the discrimination they have suffered at the hands of Canadian authorities.

The Japanese-Canadian author Joy Nozomi Kogawa was born in Vancouver in 1935, and lived there with her family until the age of six. She and her family were among the Japanese Canadians who were persecuted and moved by force from Canada's coastline and interned during WWII. At first they were interned in Slocan of British Columbia, but later transported to Alberta to work as farm labourers. Kogawa studied Education at the University of Alberta and later Music in Toronto, in order to become a teacher. She is well known for her writings about the violation of Japanese Canadians by Canadian authorities, and her involvement in the Redress Movement, fighting for reimbursement for her community. Kogawa has written numerous fiction and poems and won various awards. Her most famous award-winning novel is *Obasan* (1981), "a lyrical and heartrending account of the losses and suffering endured by Japanese Canadians during WWII" ("Kogawa").

It should be noted that writers from the ethnical margin bring a new voice and viewpoint into the standard way of reading. Native literature is based on traditional oral storytelling regarding their myths, animals and legends. Natives in Canada are of many different nations with varying cultural narratives. The white man's appropriation of the native voice through translation has changed their tales, and because of that their traditional writings are not easily traced. In addition, despite the similarities in motif and pattern, the aboriginal tradition of storytelling allows invention and alteration for the storyteller, which makes it even more difficult to trace

(Palmer and Rasporich). Ethnic difference is also distinctive in *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa, and how she contemplates her roots as she writes. Her writing is also in protest “against racial discrimination or unfair treatment of ethnic minorities,” as in her novel *Obasan* (Palmer and Rasporich).

In comparing Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* I look at the way these authors write about their respective ethnic communities and how they stress their basic values and their importance in the novels; in both narratives the central community has to fight for its rights and respect from the dominant Anglo-Canadian community. The institutionalized discrimination by Canadian authorities of the ethnic minorities in question is the basis for both novels; King highlights the violation of the natives’ right to their own land, law and culture, but Kogawa stresses the discrimination against Japanese-Canadians as Canadian citizens during the Second World War.

Ethnic injustice and discrimination goes back to the beginning of colonization and immigration in Canada. It is important to be familiar with the history of appropriation and racism in order to gain further understanding of the circumstances regarding the battles native and Japanese Canadians have to fight for recognition, and for their rights and equality. In order to gain more appreciation for the analysis of King and Kogawa I find it necessary to throw some light on the history, cultural policy, and literary criticism of ethnic minorities in Canada. The introduction gives an insight on Canada as a multicultural nation and how difficult it has been for minority writers to gain recognition. There is also a brief introduction of each author’s background (Kogawa and King) and how they stress their criticism towards the government’s discrimination against their ethnic minorities in their prominent novels. History and Cultural Policy is a chapter regarding the history of natives and Japanese

in Canada in order to better understand the vastness of the white man's violation against their ethnic communities. It is significant, for an understanding of such a complex society as in Canada, to give a concise outline of the government's policy of multiculturalism. Furthermore, the chapter on Canadian Multiculturalism is to explain the society's development from the colonizers demand of assimilation towards becoming a nation of multicultural policy in fighting racism and equality for all. An overview of cultural and literary criticism concerning Canadian minority writers is necessary to fully grasp the characterization of their literature, as opposed to the traditional universal way of writing. *Canadian Minority Writers* gives more understanding to my analysis of King and Kogawa as ethnic minority writers, which is considered in *Reading the Signs*. In the following chapters of King's and Kogawa's novels I analyse their narratives by reading the signs of their tradition as ethnic minority writers. This I will consider while demonstrating their criticism of the Canadian government's appropriation and discrimination towards their ethnic communities reflected in each of the novels. The final chapter, *Same but Different*, compares the similarities between the two narratives and the differences with relation to the basic values in each of their communities.

History and Cultural Policy

Raymond Breton presents the history of Canada as being marked by the power struggle between the British and the French, following the British conquest of the Canadian colony (Breton). Furthermore, Barbara J. Burnaby talks about the displacement and bias towards the minority groups which was influenced by systematic racism and through domination of the official language. Canada's colonization by the French and the English included linguistic domination; the languages of natives were soon to be minority languages, as were the immigrant languages from Europe and Asia. However, in the debate on the dominant official language between the two ruling colonizers after mid twentieth century, the Indian and the Inuit languages, along with the other minority languages, were ignored. Until the bilingual and bicultural policy was put into action in 1963, the English were dominant, except in Québec that was predominantly French (Burnaby).

Ann Sunahara points out that the prejudice and propaganda against the minority groups has been accomplished among other things through language domination, and this outlook has been under scrutiny since the Japanese were enfranchised after WWII. Japanese and native Canadians have been fighting for their rights and equality for a long time; even though they have come a long way in gaining compensation and justice the battle is still in progress (Sunahara). Canada's cultural policy is undergoing constant revision and change due to its complexity concerning the multiple ethnicities and cultural traditions. The language policy of equal rights to the English and the French in the face of growing ethnic, racial and linguistic diversity in Canada creates a difficult ongoing challenge for the government (Burnaby).

Natives in Canada

The natives in Canada have a long history of settlement. The website *Canada History* provides historical facts regarding Canada's development as a nation over time. Pre-historically (in the time before European contact in 1492, by definition of the website), many different cultures of aboriginal people started to settle in Canada, in areas providing enough natural resources for survival. These people were migratory, following the buffalo herds which they depended on for food and clothing, in order to endure the winters. This development of settlement was also influenced by changes in weather and new landscape, which emerged with declining ice-masses thousands of years ago. The aboriginal people were dispersed through Canada and the different nations were divided by vast and dangerous landscape, like mountains, lakes and sea. However, although the different nations were separated they still shared many of the same cultural values, beliefs and customs. In the beginning of European colonial expansion, explorers and missionaries, with their own agendas, initiated communication with the natives. Moreover, the empires' struggle for dominance involved engaging the natives in fighting their wars, resulting in a massive loss of the native population. In addition the white man's diseases took a large toll of the natives: "The arrival of the Europeans was devastating to their society for many reasons and they are only fully recovering their cultural self awareness in recent years" ("Eras").

According to Raymond Breton the history of European colonization is the main reason for the displacement of the natives. Interaction between the natives and Canadian society has entailed constant debate over the natives' land, independence, and their right to self-government. The natives' real concern has always been about the land and the treaties made by the dominant society. The Indian Treaties have been a way for the colonizers to gain vast proportions of land in trade for "reserve lands,

money and promises of social assistance” (Breton). The Indian Act of 1876 advanced the government’s power over and management of natives. Registration of natives helped the legal regulators to keep an overview of the population, and those registered were defined as “status Indians” (Breton). This listing of natives included having a particular liaison with the federal administration, and excluding other bands: non-status Indians, the Métis and the Inuit.

James R. Miller maintains that the treaties made by the government with the natives were flawed from the beginning, because of their different ways of interpreting the content of the agreements. The main difference was that natives saw the treaties as an official bond between them which could evolve as needed: “[the agreement] could be amended and expanded as need arose” (Miller). Conversely, the government regarded the agreements as legislation for them to do as little as possible; the government saw “the treaties legalistically, as contracts specifying the minimum it was obligated to do” (Miller).

Nevertheless, all natives in Canada have been influenced by “the dominant society’s ideology of superiority and inferiority,” which situates them at the bottom of the government’s priority list (Breton). In order to change the tradition of “marginality and dependence,” natives will have to unite the almost 600 different bands with “different cultural and linguistic backgrounds,” in order to accomplish self-government, according to Breton.

The Indian Act is a legislation that dates back to the 18th century in some of its main premises (see the *Canada History* web page). The agreement is not seen as being in line with other Canadian law. This view is stated since the Act singles out one part of society because of race, and it has allowed appropriation of Indian land and property. The Indian Act was and has been severely criticized because of its

infringement of equality, where status Indians were denied the right to vote, and, moreover, for the general view that Canadians of European descent were better judges of their interests than they themselves. The Act was a tool to control and to keep natives obedient like house pets. This is evident in the classification of who was considered to be a person; a person included every individual who was not of Indian origin, which remained an official definition until 1951. In order to be classified as a person, a native was to become registered as status Indian and enfranchised according to the Indian Act. When natives tried to object to the government's exploitation the government made an adjustment to the Indian Act, which restricted their rights to seek justice through law. There were further amendments of the Act after WWII and it was revised again around 1960 ("Documents").

In 1969 the government introduced the White Paper Policy, a policy "which would abolish Indian status, Indian reserves, Indian Treaties, the Indian Department and the Indian Department and the Indian Act" ("Documents"). This abolition of special status for Indians was met with resistance and in 1973 the White Paper Policy was withdrawn for the development of more serious policies. With the Constitution in 1982 the Indian people gained official recognition as aboriginals and recovered the rights of the treaties, in addition to the Charter of Rights and Freedom where the automatic enfranchisement of the status Indian was abolished ("Documents").

The Indian Act is still constantly under scrutiny and at the demand of equality, but changes are slow and "only [occur], at best, every quarter century, if then" ("Documents"). Numerous of the native nations are applying for changes of the Indian Act through regional programs called "'Indian Act alternatives'" ("Documents"). The government has promised changes; what the changes will be made "to a statute that

has proved very resilient for a very long time” and when they will occur, only time can tell (“Documents”).

Japanese in Canada

The Japanese community in Canada has compiled a website with an overview on Japanese Canadian history, recounting Japanese immigration to Canada, a history stained with hardship, injustice, racism and sorrow. In 1877 the first recorded Japanese immigrant, Manzo Nagano, settled in Canada. The first generation of Japanese immigrants, the Issei, were for the most part fishermen and farmers who settled in British Columbia along the coastline. These were mainly single males who later on started families with young wives sent from home. They were met with racial hostility from society and the government which worked systematically to force them to leave the country. The Asian people were maligned by all means available in order to discourage them from staying. They were “denied the vote; excluded from most professions, the civil service and teaching; and are paid much less than their white counterparts” (“Historical”).

In her article Ann Sunahara maintains that racial discrimination and bad language skills in English are the reason why the Issei developed isolated communities of their own institutions, with limited connection to the white community. The next generation of Japanese Canadians, the Nisei, born in Canada, were more integrated into the Canadian community as equals, because of better education and fluency in the English language. However, they were fighting the same prejudice as their parents, because of their ethnic origins (Sunahara).

Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in WWII magnified the prejudice towards the Japanese Canadians, since they were stripped of all rights as Canadian citizens and

treated as the enemy alien. This applied to all people of Japanese origin, no matter their citizenship or place of birth and violations against them “required no proof of crimes against Canada” (“Historical”). Japan was correctly the enemy at war, but not the Canadian citizens of Japanese origins. The bombing on Pearl Harbor did not justify the incarceration, because “Canadians of Japanese descent had nothing to do with the attack,” but apparently it had all to do with racism as “[t]here was no due process of law – no charges, no trials” (“Historical”). Canada, as a part of the British Empire, was also at war with Germany and Italy, as well as Japan, but in contrast to the Japanese only some Germans and Italians in Canada had to endure periods of internment and for much shorter time.

Denis Smith explains that the Japanese Canadian internment at the time was due to emergency legislation, the War Measures Act statute in 1914. It allowed the government to exercise the Act for the sake of national security, hence the “existence of ‘war, invasion or insurrection, real or apprehended’” (Smith). Under such circumstances the Act restricted the free will of Canadian citizens with force in addition to specific rules, thus their freedom was limited “during both world wars . . . [where the War Measures Act was used] . . . to imprison Canadians of German, Ukrainian and Slavic descent in WWI and Japanese Canadians during WWII” (Smith).

The government put into effect the War Measures Act, ordering all Japanese Canadians to leave the west coast, and most men had to part with their families and go to road camps. Elderly people, women and children were put in internment camps. In order to hold the family together there was the option to work on farms, on sugar beet fields in Manitoba and Alberta. All who did not comply immediately, or questioned the government’s order, were incarcerated as prisoners of war. This had an enormous

effect on the lives of over 21,000 Japanese Canadians. Their fishing boats, their homes and belongings were appropriated with the promise that it would all be stored, later to be collected by their owners. The government promise to store the confiscated property was not kept; all the properties were sold at auctions and the money used to pay the costs of the storage, handling fees and to keep the internment camps. This imprisonment was a violation against Canadian citizens of Japanese origins: all their civil rights were swept away and then they “were forced to pay for their own internment. Their movements were restricted and their mail censored” (“Historical”).

This outrageous act of discrimination and incarceration lasted until the end of the WWII, and then continued for four more years. When the war was almost over the Japanese Canadian people were forced into exile by the government. They were required to prove their loyalty to Canada, either by moving to the “east of the Rockies” or by being “repatriated” to Japan at the end of the war; it should be noted that most Japanese Canadians of the second and third generations had never seen Japan (“Historical”). Until in 1948, when finally the right to vote was given to all Japanese Canadian people, the Japanese in Canada pleaded to be franchised (“Historical”). In April 1949 the Japanese Canadians were given their full rights as Canadian citizens and they were allowed to return to their homes to the coastal area in British Columbia. However, their community was ruined; they had “no home to return to” (“Historical”).

In 1980 the Japanese community started the Redress Movement for the purpose of fighting for recognition as Canadian citizens and to attain justice for the government’s wrongdoings at the time of WWII and the aftermath. The movement fought for reimbursement, for the War Measures Act to be reviewed and modified, and amendments made to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, in order to prevent this

from happening again to the subjects of Canada. In September 1988 the Redress Movement won their fight for justice and equality when Canada's Prime Minister Brian Mulroney stated a formal apology and a promise that this kind of violation would not repeat itself:

I know that I speak for Members on all sides of the House today in offering to Japanese Canadians the formal and sincere apology of this Parliament for those past injustices against them, against their families, and against their heritage, and our solemn commitment and undertaking to Canadians of every origin that such violations will never again in this country be countenanced or repeated. ("Historical")

Canadian Multiculturalism

The history of ethnic minorities in Canada and their fight against racial discrimination is the forerunner to the multicultural policy of Canada. In order to better understand the background of Canada's steps towards becoming a nation offering equality for all of its peoples of diverse identities, I will briefly introduce the government's official research on the subject and begin with their definition of Canadian multiculturalism:

"multiculturalism" in Canada refers to the presence and persistence of diverse racial and ethnic minorities who define themselves as different and who wish to remain so. Ideologically, multiculturalism consists of a relatively coherent set of ideas and ideals pertaining to the celebration of Canada's cultural diversity through formal initiatives in the federal, provincial and municipal domains. Finally, multiculturalism is the process by which racial and ethnic minorities compete to obtain support from

central authorities for the achievement of certain goals and aspirations.

(Dewing 1)

In a paper on Canadian Multiculturalism, the Parliamentary Research Branch provides an interesting analysis of the sociological facts concerning the people of Canada. Canada's multicultural society is described as a division of three major "forces": the first is the Aboriginals, including status and non-status Indians, the Métis and the Inuit peoples; the second force is the French and the English designating themselves as the "founding members of Canadian society"; and the last force is the racial and ethnic minorities that are "native and foreign-born Canadians with some non-French and non-British ancestry" (Dewing 2).

In regarding the Parliamentary Research on Canada's multiculturalism there is general agreement on how the public policy of multiculturalism at the federal level has developed through three phases: "incipient (pre-1971), formative (1971-1981), and institutionalization (1982 to the present)" (Dewing 3). Until 1971 there was a development of acceptance regarding ethnic diversity in Canada, which was slowly cutting through the dominant British bias: "All Canadians were defined as British subjects" (Dewing 4) until 1947 when the Canadian Citizenship Act was launched, and this emphasis was reflected in all cultural and linguistic aspects of Canadian society. The Act took effect due to pressure put on the central authorities by the immigrants from Europe in the aftermath of WWII. The target of multiculturalism before 1971 had been to destroy the government's earlier aims towards assimilation. The Aboriginal peoples became more assertive in their demands for their rights at the time, insisting upon change. There was also pressure from other groups: nationalism was getting stronger in Québec, along with the "increasing resentment of ethnic minorities towards their place in society" (Dewing 4).

The increasing population of immigrants of visible minorities, whose main concern was regarding social adaptation and to fight injustice and racism, called for a radical change in administrative policy. The aim of the government's program regarding the multicultural policy was to focus on the elimination of racism and to fight all discrimination, both "at personal and institutional levels," due to race or ethnicity (Dewing 5). The policy's real emphasis was to ensure ways for the ethnic minority groups to "fully participate in Canadian society" (Dewing 5).

In 1988 the Multicultural Act was approved by Canada's Parliament. Canada set an example for other nations by being the first nation to pass multiculturalism as law. The Act stated that multiculturalism was "a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society" and a part of the "decision-making process" (Dewing 6). Parliament made further developments over the following years to improve the multicultural legislation. In 1996, following integration to the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism made official an improved program that aimed at better Canadian society with "social justice . . . , civic participation . . . , and identity (fostering a society that recognizes, respects and reflects a diversity of cultures so that people of all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging to Canada)" (Dewing 8).

There have been different attitudes towards the government's multicultural policy. In general Canadians are in favour of the policy, but many are uncertain of what it stands for and what it can do in "a liberal-democratic society such as [Canada]" (Dewing 10). The people of Québec feel that multiculturalism is meant to lower the status of Québec "to the level of an ethnic minority culture under the domination of English-speaking Canada" (Dewing 10). Québec's society sees this policy as a way to eliminate French speaking communities in Canada, which is not

consistent with the agreement between the “two founding peoples of Canada” (Dewing 10). Critics voice the fear that the policy is enhancing diversity which creates a gap instead of unity, neglecting the values of what it means to be a Canadian. However, those supporting the government’s multicultural policy argue that it “encourages integration by telling immigrants they do not have to choose between preserving their cultural heritage and participating in Canadian society. Rather, they can do both” (Dewing 11). Canadian Multiculturalism Day has been held on 27 June since the year of 2002 (Dewing 9).

Canadian Minority Writings

Canada's history of colonization and dominance of patriarchal society has left its mark on the minority writing. The minority writers' request for recognition and respect as equals is reflected in the way they stress their ethnicity, language, history and culture in their narratives.

Literary Pluralities is a collection of essays on subjects concerning cultural and literary criticism in the late 1990s, dealing with issues such as ethnicity and multiculturalism. In an article titled "Ethnicity and Race: Canadian Minority Writing at a Crossroads" Enoch Padolsky sees the writing of Canadian minorities as giving "useful insights to offer on such questions of culture and power" (Padolsky 25). He feels that the political and the cultural elements should not be divided, and rejects the need for proof; regarding the minority writers are aware of the association between ethnicity and supremacy. Furthermore, even though minority writers are of different ethnic origins, and signifying their own specific cultural origin, they do provide "a similar reading of the conjunction between cultural identity and dominant power" (Padolsky 25).

Joseph Pivato's "Representation of Ethnicity as a Problem: Essence or Construction," takes a look at how the writer is identified with his or hers ethnicity, and the history of their origins. He emphasizes that convention of the literary realism combines easily with the writings of the minority groups; "[c]onventional narrative permits the minority writer to tell the story in the most direct manner and to develop characters who exercise some form of agency. It is this agency that allows writers to critique the social values of both the old and the new country" (Pivato 159). Pivato talks about the traditional writing in the first person narrative, for the ethnic

minority's writers. He considers the parallel distinction of the protagonist is the chance for the author to project his own story, with the voice of the main character (Pivato 159).

The work of Arun P. Mukherjee "Teaching Ethnic Minority Writing: A Report from the Classroom," studies the significance of references to small things as food and clothes in the writings of the minorities. The writer is stressing the importance connected to his or her culture to the reader who would be unfamiliar as to what it signifies (Mukherjee 164). Mukherjee recognizes the critique regarding the use of the writer's native vocabulary with the English language by mixing the two together, and not translating the native words, because it will distance the reader from the text (Mukherjee 167). She does not agree that this will create an obstacle, but rather that bilingual and bicultural texts require a special reaction from the readers. The text will have the reader accept the mixed societies of different cultures and language around the world in addition to the grouping of people with different ethnicities and languages.

Mukherjee voices the question, "What do the readers do that are not familiar with the cultural universe of the text?" she suggests that the readers will search and ask around, because the information is near (Mukherjee 167). There is also the question of the gender of ethnic names in the narratives, the difficulty on deciding whether it is a male or female. Canadians are confused at times when unable to discern the gender just by looking at the name (Mukherjee 169).

Mukherjee's conclusion is that ethnic minority texts are informative for the readers, because of the other language, as well as the range of cultural signs, and because they are about the "multicultural and multilingual nature of Canadian society" (170). In other words, she confirms that the works of minorities support and rejoice in

the ethnicity that they present. The reason for the marginalization of the narratives and texts, and their failure to be understood or detected is that they are not met in a positive manner. Mukherjee stresses:

by foregrounding the heritage language for the purpose of code-switching . . . , for signifying heightened emotions, for expressing familial relationships for which English has no words, and for conveying culturally shared memories and meanings that once again have no English equivalents – these texts help us to see how ethnicity, language, and culture are intertwined. (Mukherjee 170)

Mukherjee is certain that there is an understanding that what is familiar and normal for one ethnic group can be seen as something strange and unusual by a group with a another cultural background. She believes that a better understanding of diversity will be reached by studying the ethnic minority texts, for instance, and thereby increase mutual understanding and acceptance between ethnicities. She notes that “arrogance and smugness about one’s own culture is not hard to find” (170). Mukherjee also finds that because these texts are not “universal” there is no easy way of reading the signs. The reader has no easy way of knowing exactly what is being said, and she finds this a good thing. Mukherjee asserts that minority writings will bring us closer to the familiarity of living in a “multicultural and multilingual world where the sounds and rhythms of other languages routinely reach us without our fully decoding them” (Mukherjee 171).

Specialists on minority writings share the opinion that the traditional way of writing is defined by dominant society, and all writers are expected to mould into this basic form for writing. However, the characteristics of the ethnic minority writings are quite the opposite. The minority writers write in a non-universal way that is natural

for them, and introduce what is considered normal for their particular ethnic culture. There is more tolerance for diversity between the minority groups and their way of writing, because even though they are of different origins they are situated in a similar position of marginality in a patriarchal society where English language and culture dominates. The signs are distinct in ethnic minority writings, reflecting the clash of cultural identities and power struggles, and that of multicultural and multilingual Canadian society.

Reading the Signs

The process of decoding multilingual and multicultural signs in minority writings is perhaps never fully complete. However, it keeps the reader interested, and inspires curiosity and his desire to learn more. The minority writer uses untraditional methods of writing in order to get his message through to his readers; whether they fully grasp the meaning depends on the reader.

In an interview with Natasha Davis, Thomas King reveals that he only started his serious writing when he got to the age of forty, in order to impress his wife. He tells how he was inspired to become a writer himself when reading a work by native Pulitzer Prize author N. Scott Momaday. King's idea was that the attention brought to native literature and the oral tradition would improve the market for native writers. King's writing includes articles, short stories, poems, novels, and books for children, radio and finally television. King tells Davis about how the stereotyped view of cowboys and Indians in North America has made it difficult for native writers. The obstacle is the image of the stereotypical Indian that has such a long tradition in non-native writings, but makes it difficult for the native writer to be taken seriously by the non-native reader. King talks about how the narrative strategies are different

depending on who is writing, and claims that the non-natives write in a historical manner with setting in the past but natives narrate in the historical present which often brings to mind the oral tradition of storytelling (King 2002).

In an interview with Karlyn Koh, Joy Kogawa talks about her early years in writing and publishing in the 1960s. Kogawa discusses the problem of having no voice of her own and not being conscious of her ethnicity “I had virtually no consciousness, except in a negative sense, of **Japaneseness**” (Kogawa 1995, 20, original emphasis). Kogawa confesses that she saw herself as a white person, and that she wrote as such, echoing the voice of a white male. Her writings were mimicking what she had read at the time. She admits that when she wrote *Obasan* she was not thinking specifically about Japanese Canadians, but about her own experience and sometimes as the way she wrote poetry. It was first when roaming through sources at the Archives that Kogawa noticed that she had another voice within her. She felt that the voice came from outside, and the voice of Aunt Emily in *Obasan* sounded from outside of her through the writing of the novel (Kogawa 1995, 20). However, Kogawa admits that in the beginning it was the character of Naomi that was within her, a person without a voice which was the way Kogawa used to be. The progress of writing the novel was like a transformation for Kogawa; she transformed from Naomi into Aunt Emily, who emerged as the person she could eventually better identify herself with (Kogawa 1995, 30).

King and Kogawa are both unique in their way of writing about their ethnic communities and how they stress their basic values and their importance. King presents his story in the novel by using three different but planes of time and narration: the main action takes place in contemporary Canada, four shape shifters move in and out of time and take turns narrating their story, and an unidentified but

omniscient “I” seems to be the narrator of the primary narrative. Although it is little confusing to read at first, like trying to solve a riddle, this untraditional way of writing keeps the reader wondering and engaged until the end, and then wanting more. King writes in a very humorous manner, ridiculing the exchange between natives, on the one hand, and Canadian authorities or white society on the other, as well as the question of identity. Kogawa sets her narrative in the present time, with reflections upon the past through memories and letters. She writes in a more sad and serious manner, using historical facts and drawing the reader into a world full of hardship and sorrow. However, in both narratives the ethnic communities have to fight for their rights and gain respect from Canadian authorities and society.

Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*

In King’s novel the emphasis is on the value of the natives’ land, background, and family through the main characters’ search for identity. King uses the elements of native myths and mixes them with stories from the Bible, as if to underline the importance and the complexity of the different ideas on the beginnings of time.

Lionel, Charlie and Alberta are the main characters set in the present time of the story. Their values of identity are mixed up because of their background, as they are Blackfoot, but they are also Canadians, and as a result they are confused when trying to find their own identity because of the way that the past has shaped the present (155). Lionel’s only wish since childhood is to be like John Wayne when he grows up (265). He is not so keen on his native heritage, and he seems to be embarrassed by his background (84). His relatives are aware of his longing to be a white man, but find it hard to understand, as it will not help him in life (36). He has not attended the annual Sun Dance since he was young and has little contact with his relatives. He has low

self-esteem and is very indecisive about his goals in life and at the age of forty he is still living in Blossom working as a TV-salesman. Lionel finds it hard to make any decisions about his future, on whether to go and finish his university studies to make a better life for himself or to find more prestigious work (263-65).

Alberta lives in Calgary and works as a teacher. Her independence is very important to her, and she has no intentions of making a commitment to either Lionel or Charlie (45-46). However, she wants a child and is prepared to go out and sleep with a stranger in order to get pregnant (71). Her reason for not wanting a father for her child is that she feels that men are not to be relied on or to be trusted. Lionel and Charlie are only in the way, always demanding and wanting, and she has bad experience from her childhood, when her father who was a drunkard disappeared one night, never to return (96-97).

Charlie is a successful lawyer, working for a firm that seeks to destroy his own reserve. He lives in Edmonton, and his only aim is worldly success regardless of the consequences. He has little interest in his background and his values lie in money and prestige, as is shown by his negative and arrogant attitude towards Alberta's work as a teacher and Lionel's work as a TV-salesman (44). Charlie's father is a well known Western movie actor living in Hollywood but Charlie has little contact with him and is embarrassed to be recognized because of the resemblance to his father (277). It is as if his father's occupation, and his father being enforced to exaggerate his native origins by wearing a fake nose in the Western movies, has caused Charlie some difficulty in identifying himself with his native background and values.

King is pinpointing the importance of respect regarding native values. He emphasizes how relentless the dominant society is in denying the natives' right to their own "identity" and "voice" (Shackleton 74-81). Refusal to accept the natives'

right to a separate identity is also evident in the former aim of assimilation by Canada's government, so as to erase aboriginal culture. Duncan C. Scott, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs stated in 1920 while he "[encapsulated] the prevailing attitude of his day: 'Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department'" ("Documents"). The novel's title is a reference to the treaty made by the Canadian government with natives about their land. The indication of the title in the narrative is a sarcastic reminder of the white man's empty promises, where "[h]istorically the [Indian] Act evolved to protect the small share of Canada's land base which remained" as aboriginal domain but this agreement was repeatedly broken when "the land base was reduced, often in return for nominal consideration or no consideration" ("Documents"). The Indian Act was an official treaty made with natives of reserved land, and the promise was supposed to last as long as the grass was green and the waters running – or in other words, forever (300).

The native law, their council and police are shunned by the law enforcement of Canada and their system for upholding laws and rules means nothing to the Canadians (340). Lionel exemplifies how the white man tends to regard everything in writing as carved in stone. The earliest example is when his protests are ignored when he is accidentally swapped with another boy, who has a heart condition, in hospital when he is a young boy, and he is flown off for heart surgery when he only wants his tonsils out so that he can get time off from school and get lots of popsicles. It seems impossible for him to correct the different mistakes, because he remains identified by the system as a heart patient, despite the fact that he is perfectly healthy. The same thing happens when he gets arrested and imprisoned by misunderstanding in a chance

encounter with a group of native activists and a criminal record compounds his problems (28, 69). Lionel is pictured with repetitive mishaps without being able to correct them that are symbolic for the situation of natives in the story. Lionel and Charlie are both implicated in the downfall of their people. Lionel is a TV-salesman with no ambitions, specifically hired to prey upon the native clientele, and Charlie working as a lawyer to the advantage of white people against natives. Both of them are shown by the author as helping to dispossess their own people.

The way King narrates his novel through layers of narrative is a means of defamiliarization in order to have the reader see things from a different perspective. This is evident in the way he uses the stories from the Bible and mixes them with the native myths, as a way of ridiculing the white man's need to be superior and to be the one who sets all the rules. An example of ridicule is when Young Man Walking On Water, a reference to the Bible when Christ walked on water, is irritated with the interference of Old Woman floating in the water, a reference to native myths, when she offers him her help. She wants to help him look for a boat filled with men who need to be rescued, and he remarks that she is not aware of the Christian rules: "Christian rules, says Young Man Walking On Water. And the first is that no one can help me. The second rule is that no one can tell me anything. Third, no one is allowed to be in two places at once. Except me" (388). Coyote appears in all the layers of the narrative, like a generating force and is often connected to water; as Coyote pees on the four cars and they sink and disappear, only to reappear when they sail towards the dam with the four shape shifters at the wheel and wreck it, and the Coyote dancing in the rain and making the dam burst, it is as if the author is emphasizing how nothing is certain in the circle of life. The four Indians, the shape shifters, are on a mission to fix things, disappearing and appearing again when there is need for them and changing

and correcting events as they see fit, which is like an act of empowerment, like the killing of John Wayne (358). The act of empowerment is like the white man's need to erase native culture and to mould into their own dominant society, and also for the renaming of places and landmarks, as if natives have no history. This is portrayed by the author through the naming process of Ahdamn in First Woman's garden, a reference to Adam in Paradise with First Woman being the creator in native myths, and Ahdamn renames the animals and the trees in the garden: "You are a microwave oven, Ahdamn tells the Elk. Nope, says that Elk. Try again. You are a garage sale, Ahdamn tells the Bear. We got to get you some glasses, says the Bear. You are a telephone book, Ahdamn tells the Cedar Tree. You're getting closer, says the Cedar Tree" (41). The renaming is also a tendency for George Morningstar, Latisha's white husband, when he renames Latisha, who is Lionel's sister, as Country which reflects his (George's) identity crises and insecurity towards the natives (373).

King suggests a rather unusual twist to the biblical idea of Immaculate Conception in a scene where A. A. Gabriel (presumably Arch Angel Gabriel) uses every trick in the book to manipulate or harass Thought Woman into agreeing to being raped by him. There are numerous indications of the white man's manipulation and harassment throughout the book that connects to history, religion and literature. The deeper meaning regarding the novel's title *Green Grass, Running Water*, which pictures the white man's appropriation of the natives' land comes later, as Gabriel notes, but is obviously more of the same kind of abuse of trust and honour, like the White Paper. Here is the example when Thought Woman meets A. A. Gabriel:

Allow me to introduce myself, says the man with the big briefcase.

And that one hands Thought Woman a card. That card says A. A. Gabriel,
Canadian Security and Intelligence Service.

Insurance? says Thought Woman. Burglar alarms?

Oops, says A. A. Gabriel. Wrong side. And he turns that card over.

The other side says A. A. Gabriel, Heavenly Host. . . .

Here we are, says A. A. Gabriel, and that one opens that briefcase and takes out a book.

Name?

Thought Woman, says Thought Woman.

Mary, says A. A. Gabriel. And he writes that down. Social Insurance number? . . .

Sign here, says A. A. Gabriel.

What is it? says Thought Woman.

Virgin verification form, says A. A. Gabriel. Here's a map of the city. We're here, and this is where you'll have the baby. . . .

I'm not pregnant, says Thought Woman.

No problem, says A. A. Gabriel. Sign this paper.

As long as the grass is green and the waters run, says that White Paper in a nice, deep voice.

Oops, says A. A. Gabriel, and he shoves that White Paper back into the briefcase. Wrong paper, he says. That one is for later. . . .

Let's have you lie down here, and we'll get on with the procreating. Ready? . . .

No, says Thought Woman. Absolutely not. . . .

So, says A. A. Gabriel, you really mean yes, right?

No, says Thought Woman.

But that's the wrong answer, says A. A. Gabriel. Let's try this again.

(King 298-300)

The way A. A. Gabriel is depicted is a significant reminder of how the white man will not listen but to his own reason and logic as the right one.

In order to understand the underlying current of King's criticism of the white man's constant and outrageous abuse and manipulation of natives and their culture in the novel, it is important to concentrate on the reading from the beginning to get some overview on the subject of the story. However, as the story progresses it gets easier as the style becomes less strange, and the reader begins to get a sense for the humour that radiates through the narrative, coating the important message of appropriation and discrimination.

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

In Kogawa's novel she depicts the values of Japanese Canadians, emphasizing the importance of family and mutual respect. The relationship of the young ones with their elders and their cleanliness is a way to show their family bonding, respect, and love for one another. In Japanese culture the body is considered as a natural thing and nakedness is culturally accepted as the means to show yourself to be healthy, as in the communal baths (192). Bathing together is a way to show each other affection and compassion, demonstrating that the other is not alone, as when Nomi bathes with her Obasan after her uncle dies (94). The cleaning facilities at the Pools in the concentration camps in Vancouver are an insult towards the Japanese-Canadian people and underline the humiliation that they had to endure at the time (115-17). Courtesy is an important value in Japanese culture, such as the importance of not looking or staring at strangers, and not looking people in the eyes because the eyes are

the windows of the soul. In their culture there is sensitivity to the invasion of privacy, as when Nomi is young with her mother and sees the man on the streetcar staring at her; she feels it is rude and “as unthinkable as nudity on the street” (58). The privacy of the naked body at the communal baths is not significant, but to keep the eyes averted is important to show the other respect, as when Obasan talking to Schiko’s old grandfather when they are all naked bathing; it is a cultural and indeed a natural manner of courtesy (196).

There is a particular manner by which the author uses the language of the narrative as a method of foregrounding Japanese culture in a highly poetic way, using metaphors like the description when Nomi cleans the fridge at Obasan’s house: “She [Obasan] orchestrates each remainder of a previous dinner into the dinner to come, making every meal like every meal, an unfinished symphony. Our Lady of Leftovers” (54). In *Obasan* the author emphasizes the longing to be integrated into society. Due to their Oriental features, the Japanese black hair, skin colour and slanted eyes, they stand out from others in Canadian society “Strange how these protesters are so much more vehement about Canadian-born Japanese than they are about German-born Germans. I guess it’s because we look different”; this difference makes it hard to blend in and not be identified as the enemy (98). This is also true about them standing out and being misunderstood seeing that the Japanese outlook of never wanting to appear vulnerable and therefore never complaining or asking for help, as in the misunderstanding between Naomi and her date: “The widower never asked me out again. I wonder how I was unsatisfactory. . . . Can people not tell the difference between nervousness and lack of interest?” (9). Silence is important in the narrative as a way to show the cultural value of not wanting to make a scene, or as the difficulty of getting heard. When Nomi is abused as a child by the neighbour she is unable to speak

up. This could be seen as a metaphor for the Japanese people being abused by the Canadian authorities during the war. Nomi is pictured from the beginning of the story as a silent child and she still does not express herself much as she grows up; that is the essence of the Japanese ethnicity, not to show emotions, and not to look other people in the eyes. Nomi does not want to remember or relive the pain she and her family endured in the war, when they laboured in the field and were barely surviving living in a shack “I cannot tell about this time, Aunt Emily. The body will not tell” (235). Nomi does not want to interfere or even read about the things that happened during the war. She only wants to forget and put it behind her, as opposed to her Aunt Emily, who is more Canadian than Japanese, as she keeps on writing letters, fighting for compensation, and tries to make herself heard by the authorities (232).

In reading *Obasan* there is a particular fragment that portrays the heart of the narrative where Naomi reads Emily’s paper about being Canadian. In the paper the twelve-year-old Emily clings to words from the poem “The Lay of the Last Minstrel,” and she tries to convince herself that in spite of all that has happened she is still a Canadian:

So many times after that, I repeated the lines: sadly, desperately, and bitterly. But at first I was proud, knowing that I *belonged*.

This is my *own*, my native land.

Then as I grew older and joined the Nisei group taking a leading part in the struggle for liberty, I waved those lines around like a banner in the wind:

This is my own, my *native* land.

When war struck this country, when neither pride nor belligerence nor grief had availed us anything, when we were uprooted, and scattered to the four winds, I clung desperately to those immortal lines:

This is my own, my native land.

Later still, after our former homes had been sold over our vigorous protests, after having been re-registered, fingerprinted, card-indexed, roped and restricted, I cry out the question:

Is this my own, my native land?

The answer cannot be changed. Yes. It is. For better or worse, *I am Canadian.* (Kogawa 1981, 48)

The circumstance of finding yourself singled out as the enemy of your own country, persecuted by your neighbours and authorities that inflict suffering and project, anguish, having you doubt your own identity, is hard to imagine. Kogawa captures this feeling in a heart rendering and convincing manner by using her own experience and history as the basis for her novel.

Kogawa uses Emily's character as the voice of the Redress movement, and as the embodiment of all Japanese Canadians seeking justice and equality. Aunt Emily fights for reimbursement and for their rights as Canadian citizens. She is the voice of the Japanese Canadians who are persistent on their rights as Canadian citizens, as she stresses with Nomi: "We're Canadian, aren't we? Everything a Canadian does is Canadian" (68). Aunt Emily is pictured as a self-sufficient woman living by her own rules, and she has a different outgoing attitude compared to the other characters, such as Nomi, who is quiet and serious (68). Stephen is drawn to Aunt Emily's way of living in his longing to be accepted as a Canadian. Stephen is Nomi's brother and he is pictured as someone who does not like his heritage. He does not want to stick out

because of his ethnic background, and wants to detach himself and forget everything that is Japanese (276-77). His wish is to be regarded strictly as a Canadian and in a way he gets his wish when he becomes a world famous musician and is regarded as the Canadians' own prodigy and pampered as such (257).

Kogawa uses strong images to picture how the Japanese-Canadian were failed by the Canadian government at the time of World War II. When a mother hen kills all her chicks and maims her offspring, the mother hen represents the white society of Canada and the government, and the yellow chicken can be seen as a metaphor for the Japanese (71). This also refers to how the mother hen should be protective of her offspring, but really betrays their trust and disowns them. The author shows the Japanese as one ethnic minority group in Canadian society, but emphasizes with her story that one should not make the mistake of overall assumptions about the Japanese-Canadians as a group, rather than individuals.

The title of Kogawa's novel is not really informative at first glance, or even suggestive, except for those who are familiar with Japanese culture. However, the reader gets closer to understanding the title as the novel develops, but nothing in the title prepares the reader for the brutality that is revealed near the end of the book, concerning the devastating effect of the atomic bomb at Nagasaki (284). The title of the novel, *Obasan*, is a reference to the wife of Nomi's Uncle, but it can also be seen as a reference to an old lady, or a nurse, that looks after a child and cannot have a baby of her own, and the reference to women like Obasan appears throughout the novel. There could also be a link between the reference of *Obasan* and how the Canadian government should act towards their citizens of other ethnic communities, e.g. the Japanese. The way Kogawa uses real historical facts as basis in her novel makes the reader feel the hardship of the discrimination because of ethnicity, like the

concentration camps in Alberta, and of the questions that rise about ethics and values regarding how the Canadian government treated the Japanese-Canadians in war times (297-300).

The Same but Different

In both of the novels it is the history, the value of family ties and respect for older family members that is of great importance, and shapes the lives of the characters in their ethnic communities. In *Obasan* it is a given when Nomi takes care of Ayko after her Uncle dies, and it is also evident in *Green Grass, Running Water* where Norma, Lionel's Aunt, emphasizes the importance of keeping in touch with your roots, like attending the Sun Dance and meeting regularly with the family on the reserve (King 1993, 66-67). The ethnic community's quiet way of expressing itself in each novel and not being heard is like being "voiceless." An example of the way that they are not heard is when Nomi's family has to evacuate from the coast of British Columbia and no one pays attention to their protest or reasoning (Kogawa 1981, 132). This is also true of Lionel's mishaps that he is unable to correct, and Eli's stand against the construction of the dam because it will ruin his childhood home and is situated on the Indian reserve (King 1993, 286-87).

The image of water is very symbolic in both of the novels. It shows an important different cultural and historical element of value; in Kogawa's narrative the water is a symbol of bonding in the family to show affection, as a token of respect and love. Health is of great importance and of high value in Japanese culture. Cleanliness and the communal baths, as pictured in the novel, are a way of showing yourself to be healthy. When the Japanese are denied by the authorities of sufficient cleansing facilities during the internment, their cultural tradition and basic human rights are violated. In King's narration water is a symbol of a catalyst, or a metaphor of renewal: a turning point, a new beginning or an end in the characters lives. In the native culture water is symbolic for renewal. Water is a cycle of how things repeat themselves, the

cycle of life and death; how the world begins and how the world ends, and everything in between. Water is also of great importance regarding the value of native lands; the white man breaks the treaty in order to build a dam on the lake. The importance of water is eminent in both of the stories but of different cultural and historical value.

There is a clear difference of value in the two stories that is unique for each novel. In *Obasan* there is a certain characterization of the Japanese longing to be regarded as Canadians, and they want to assimilate into the dominant society as individuals and not as group, but in King's novel it is the natives' wish to keep their own culture and originality separate from Canada, and to be recognized as a separate nation with their own laws and own land. However, despite the various unique ways in which the authors display their values it all comes down to one thing: the discrimination of the ethnic minorities by the Canadian government and the dominant society that is stressed in both of the narratives, in King's *Green Grass, Running Water* and Kogawa's *Obasan*.

Conclusion

In Canada ethnic minorities have come a long way in their demand for recognition. The nation's development from the colonizers demand for assimilation to a policy of multiculturalism has been tainted with appropriation and discrimination towards ethnic minorities for almost half of a century. A large part of the English colonizers systematic racism has been through domination of the official language. Canada's aim towards multiculturalism is to meet the ethnic minorities' demands of racial equality and recognition. The policy of a multicultural society has been criticized by people that are still supportive of assimilation, and they argue that multiculturalism is creating gaps in Canada as a nation. However, their criticism is met by a much larger group of those who support the government's multicultural policy. They instead consider that multiculturalism will unite Canada as a nation because of the freedom of enjoying both cultures and not having to choose between the two. The government's multicultural policy is under a constant revision and development against racism and for equality for all.

Natives in Canada and the Japanese Canadian people have been through turmoil of appropriation and infringement at the hands of the Canadian government. Natives' right to their own land has been violated through broken treaties and discrimination, such as not having the right to vote and not being recognized as persons unless they yielded under the dominance of white supremacy as status Indians, the Indian Act. Japanese Canadians have been suffering racial discrimination since the beginning of immigration. This discrimination reached new levels in WWII when, after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, when Canadian citizens of Japanese origins were incarcerated and treated as enemy aliens; all their properties and homes

confiscated to be sold to pay for the families' confinement, and later forced into exile by their own government, all this under the law of War Measures Act. Japanese Canadians have received an official apology, and a promise by the Prime Minister in 1988 that this shameful event against citizens of Canada, will never repeat itself. As for natives they are still fighting for changes of the Indian Act, with promises of changes from the government but without any definition or time. It is safe to say that the ethnic minorities are gaining more recognition with Canada's policy of multiculturalism, but still are climbing the ladder towards equality.

Literature in English has a long tradition in Canada. However, the untraditional way of ethnic minority writing is slowly emerging from under the weight of the dominant culture. Ethnic minority writers break up the style of writing that is traditional in English literature, and is therefore regarded as the universal and accepted way in Canadian literature, and offer their own styles shaped by the diverse cultural background that influences their works. Ethnic minority writers have their own tradition of writing first person narratives that gives them a tool to project their own story, and to criticise social values and questions on culture and power. In *Green Grass, Running Water* by Thomas King and in *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa, both writers draw upon their own cultural origins but present their work in a different manner of writing. King's fiction is about the natives' fight against the white man's appropriation and prejudice, as well as demand for integration into Western culture, and is written with humour as a weapon. Kogawa on the other hand draws on historical facts when writing about the Japanese Canadian fight for reimbursement, recognition and assimilation as Canadian citizens in a disarming and sorrowful manner. Both of the novels are based on real events, contemplating and stressing the discrimination their ethnic communities have suffered by the hands of Canadian

officials and society through the ages. The discrimination against the ethnic minorities in Canada is changing with law and national policy of multiculturalism; however, as for the White Paper implication “as long as the grass is green and the water runs” (King 1993, 300) nothing is stable while the struggle for dominant power remains.

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