

## The Komagata Maru Incident

Ragini Chakraborty<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract:*

Komagata Maru was a Japanese ship carrying hundreds of aspiring South Asian immigrants to the Canadian shores in 1914. It was stopped at the Burrard Inlet, Vancouver by the Canadian officials on the grounds of the Continuous Journey Act of 1908 that prevented ships from entering into Canada if they were not on a continuous journey from their country of origin. Even the sale of tickets between India and Canada had been restricted. This, along with the 1908 policy made it impossible for Indians to sail from their motherland to Canada. Thus, the Komagata Maru set sail from Hong Kong. These aspiring immigrants who travelled by the Komagata Maru ship were all British subjects under the British Raj in India, yet they were not allowed entry because of the deep rooted racial bias that permeated the psyche of the Euro-Canadian settlers.

This racially exclusionist policy towards the South Asian diaspora stands as proof of their subsequent treatment of other later immigrant communities. This paper looks into the history of the Komagata Maru through its literary representations and presents three interviews by an author/filmmaker, a playwright and a poet respectively. These interviews are by scholars- people for whom the Komagata Maru was a lived reality as second or third generation South Asian-Canadians and their works question the logic of colonisation and resistance of the white Canadians against settlement of brown immigrants.

**Keywords:** Komagata Maru, Canada, Resistance, Continuous Journey, Policy

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<sup>1</sup> Ragini Chakraborty is currently a doctoral fellow at the Department of Comparative and World Literature, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She completed her M.A and M.Phil degrees from the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University. She has been a Shastri Research Student Fellow during her M.Phil research. She can be reached at [cragini85n@gmail.com](mailto:cragini85n@gmail.com)

The mosaic of Canada is made up of the different cultural, religious, racial and language communities that have inhabited the land since long. The original inhabitants of the land - the First Nations people, the Inuit and the Métis had been forcefully uprooted from their habitable lands by the early immigrants to Canada, i.e. the French and the English. With the passage of time, immigrants from different parts of the world started to arrive, some looking for more lucrative jobs, some as unskilled and cheap labourers, and again some escaping from their original homelands (which were politically troubled) in pursuit of a better life. Thus, the modern Canadian nation is an ensemble of various diasporic communities like the Chinese, Japanese, South Asians to name a few of the more prominent communities.

The modern Canadian nation promises to be a space where cultural harmony and equality are to be maintained at any cost. It has cabinet ministers and other higher officials hailing from other cultural communities. However, Canada has a long history of racial bigotry and has practiced selective assimilation, mainly on the basis of skin colour. Their careful crafting of rules and strategic policy making bears testimony to the prejudice, especially towards the South Asian immigrants in Canada. There have been two infamous incidents that tell us about the injustice and humiliation that had been meted out towards the South Asians in Canada. These two incidents separated by a gap of seventy long years, punctuate the body politic of a neo-liberal, non-racist, multicultural Canada. While the Air India bombing of 1985 has been a more recent disaster, the other incident that had long been kept away from public memory was the Komagata Maru incident of 1914. In 2015, after the hundred years commemorating the Komagata Maru's journey, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized to the people of Canada, especially the present generation of South Asian Canadians for the sufferings that had been caused to the 376 aspiring South Asian immigrants on board the Komagata Maru, on that fateful day, by the then Canadian government.

In the year 1914, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, Canada witnessed on its shores, the arrival of a ship full of South Asian immigrants. The Komagata Maru was a Japanese ship that started from Hong Kong and arrived at Vancouver, British Columbia via Japan carrying a ship full of aspiring immigrants from an undivided India. These people had set off for a new land with the dream of building up a new life. In the process, many of them had even sold off their land, their properties to gather funds for their journey. Many of the passengers, mostly

comprising of Sikhs, had served under the British army and were as such British subjects. Consequently they expected a warm welcome in Canada, which was then being ruled by the same British government. However, the harsh reality dawned on them when the ship led by Gurdit Singh, a wealthy Sikh contractor based in Hong Kong, was stopped at the Vancouver port on its arrival on May 23, 1914.

Sikh migration in Canada mainly began in the year 1903. Before that, no significant numbers of South Asian immigration can be recorded in Canada. Although no particular moment of migration can be marked as the starting point, 1903 onwards the Sikh settlement started to take place in quite large numbers and over the years it increased. It increased at such a rate that from the year 1905 to 1908, the numbers became 2623 from 45 (Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava, 1985, p.7)<sup>1</sup>. However, with the alarming rise of the South Asian immigration, the Euro-Canadians suspected it to be a potential threat to their job market and subsequently the economic condition. Also, their racial bias and fear of inter racial associations made them rise up against the immigration of the South Asians in Canada. All of these had made the Canada government pass the Continuous Journey Act in the year 1908. The Komagata Maru sailing to Vancouver in 1914, had been stopped on the basis of the Continuous Journey Act. Canada's strategic policy making and thus, the ban on the entry of the Komagata Maru, stands as one of the glaring examples of racial prejudice and selective acceptance and assimilation till today.

The Komagata Maru carrying 376 passengers, with women and children on board was left stranded on the Burrard Inlet of Vancouver without proper food and water supplies for two whole months. It is a tale of pain, horror and ignominy and remains as one of the most infamous chapters in the history of modern Canada.

The Komagata Maru incident and its narrative of pain, struggle and loss finds expression in many literary and artistic productions of poets, authors, playwrights, musicians and other cultural producers. Each of these works have carefully crafted the real stories of those prospective immigrants who were ultimately to become the victims of racialized politics and discrimination. Different productions have shown how their skin colour became the determining factor for their lives and subsequent fate.

The ship carrying Indians and mostly Sikhs to Canada was to face unforeseen consequences. The painful stories of the victims of the Komagata Maru incident became one

of the most 'infamous' chapters in the history of Canada. For years, efforts had been made to sweep the facts under the carpet. However there were many sensible Canadian citizens of the diaspora who were not ready to forget it or allow it to fade away into oblivion. They felt it necessary for the issue to be brought to light. These people, authors, scholars and artists chose different media that they were comfortable in, to express their grief and concern regarding the incident. The different versions of this history have been projected through poems, stories, plays, films, art and other forms. These different forms of expressions have captured the nuances of the range of emotions that have been prevalent through the events. Some of these works have focused on particular characters and the role they have played in the whole course, some have shown in details, the socio-political background. There have been fictional accounts where stories of other diasporic women or children have been narrated with the Komagata Maru incident as the background and these have essentially been stories of marginalization, discrimination, pain and misery. However, what all the versions have unanimously brought to light is the brutal, contested, vexed and fragmented history of the South Asians, especially the Sikhs, which is an ongoing saga of conflict (Kazimi, 2012)<sup>2</sup>.

The motive of this piece is to bring to attention, the horrible incident that traumatized and exploited the people on board. It aims to discuss how, in spite of the numerous efforts made by the Canadian authorities to erase the incident from the account of the nation's past, there have been renewed efforts to remember and discuss the issue over and again. 2014, the centenary year of the incident has also led to newer discussions, debates and even the Canadian government's public apology expressing grief and neglect.

The next section includes certain interviews by authors and critics who have worked closely on the Komagata Maru incident. Their discussions are integral to understand the importance of the incident even to this day, and see how it has played a major role in shaping the South Asian diasporic settlement and sentiments in Canada.

### **Interviews:**

#### **Interview I- Ali Kazimi, date: 26.06.2018 (interview over email)**

**I met Professor Ali Kazimi at the University of British Columbia, after a screening and discussion of his film "*Random Acts of Legacy*" (2016): *Asian Canadian History and Film* on 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2018. The following day, I had a long discussion with him**

regarding the Komagata Maru incident and its history. He discussed his personal journey while making his documentary film on the incident. Also, he gifted me his latest illustrated narration of the Komagata Maru. The access to the film, the book, helped me to look at the Komagata Maru incident from different perspectives. I got to listen to Professor Kazimi's readings and discussions further at the relaunch of the *Rung* magazine in Downtown, Vancouver. Ali Kazimi's documentary film is the first full length visual account available on the Komagata Maru. His work was path breaking at a point when only a handful of people were aware of the history of the incident, both in Canada and India. His film opened avenues for discussions and questions and his personal journey along with the film makes it even more interesting.

The interview with Ali Kazimi has been presented below. I will be using the following abbreviations: R.C for Ragini Chakraborty and A.K for Ali Kazimi.

**R.C:** I have read your book, listened to your readings on the Komagata Maru incident, as well as watched the film on the same. I have also come across young scholars who are making films on the incident, or creating awareness about the incident. Hundred years after the incident, how much importance, do you think, the incident holds for the present generation of Canadians? Did your 'location' (as you discuss in the beginning of both your film and your book) enable you to look at it from a different perspective?

**A.K:** Before the so-called incident can hold any meaning for the present generation of Canadians it has to be known, and I'm afraid, that to this day the vast majority of Canadians are completely ignorant of this history. I have given many talks and presentations across the country any time I start by asking the audience how many of them know about the Komagata Maru; invariably there are only a handful who know the gist of the story, no one knows what this story reveals about Canadian immigration policy let alone how it challenges the official nation building narrative.

Allow me to make a small digression here and refer to the title of recent federal commission that spent years looking into the impact of the Canadian government policy of forcibly taking indigenous (historically referred to as Indians) children from their families and putting them in church run residential schools. The intent to "Kill the Indian, save the child", to put it in contemporary terms it was cultural genocide. The inquiry was led by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a term and process borrowed from post-apartheid South Africa.

It is important to note here that “Truth” comes before “Reconciliation”, and the commissioners firmly believed that before Canadians could begin to reconcile with the indigenous communities they must know what happened.

I too am a firm believer in this process, but it is not an easy one; it requires the willingness and the courage to face up to very difficult truths. The history of the Komagata Maru reveals Canada’s strategies of having a hidden “whites only” immigration policy. Some Canadian politicians during the 1900’s had wanted Canada to emulate the White Australia policy, however British Imperial authorities who had warned Canada not to be so overt. They recognised that Canada had to remain a “white man’s country on political and moral grounds” but it had to be seen as not being overtly discriminatory. I argue that Canadians follow this advice so well that most Canadian historians of record see what happened to the Komagata Maru as incidental, hence it was simply a “dark chapter”. This kind of qualified acknowledgement shies away from actually examining the intent of Canadian immigration laws 1867 to 1967 and its continued resonances to this day.

Consequently, as generations of Canadians are only marginally better informed than their parent's generation.

**R.C: You have named your most recent publication, the illustrated narrative on the Komagata Maru incident, the *Undesirables*. Would you like to explain the title?**

A.K: The choice of the title was very deliberate. The book was funded through a grant from a federal program community historical recognition program (CHRP). The program was initiated under a Conservative government led by then Prime Minister Stephen Harper. This is the very government that rolled back many immigration initiatives and made it harder for those seeking asylum in Canada. The Harperites had among them a number of white supremacist, Stephen Harper himself had belonged to approve apartheid group called the Northern Foundation. It was this very party that was now trying to literally buy votes in various communities among them the South Asian communities - specifically the Punjabi Sikh community. Many of the initiatives that emerge from this program did little if anything to challenge the government's idea of what these historical wrongs were. I was deeply disturbed by this not so obvious attempts to buy votes. I was happy and surprised to get the green light to do the book, but I wanted to make it absolutely clear that the government could not have editorial control. My wife Heidi McKenzie, was the project manager and she

negotiated a very clear clause which allowed bureaucrats the right to respond to the book and their response would be considered but underscored the fact that they could not demand editorial changes.

My point of view had to start with the title. Undesirables was a word that often appears in the Canadian context when referring to non-white immigrants however I did not want to stop there, hence the subtitle makes it more explicit with White Canada and the Komagata Maru. So from the title on the readers have to start confronting very uncomfortable truths. When the book came out a white colleague described it as “a beautiful coffee table book that would destabilize any coffee table”

**R.C: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized for the Komagata Maru incident in 2016. Canada has been celebrating its 150 years since the Confederation and it has initiated different reconciliatory programs as a part of it. Do you feel the apology comes as a part of this initiative? Do you see this as a change, which might renew broken ties and help to evolve India-Canada relations?**

A.K: The apology occurred months before the Canada 150 initiatives started, I would say that Trudeau would have wanted apologies out of the way before starting this year long nation building/boosting exercise.

It also had nothing to do with India-Canada relations; it had everything to do with domestic Canadian politics and the electoral ridings with large Sikh populations that are key to any federal party not to forget the fact that there are a record number of Sikhs in the Canadian cabinet.

**R.C: As a South Asian- Canadian, do you feel the existence of hyphenated identities is a problem? The questions of ‘belongingness’ or ‘fitting-in’, do they still apply for a ‘multicultural’ Canada? Or, do you feel it is changing with time, in an era of globalization, where global communities are emerging all over the world.**

A.K: The question of hyphenated identities is complex in your response to it is necessarily fluid. Literally on the face of it, I know that people like me still have a long way to go to be acknowledged as Canadians on first sight. For me personally, there is an acceptance that as an immigrant I will always occupy and in between space, with the passage of time skewed more towards Canada than India. Multicultural Canada is an aspirational project that is still in

its infancy, its impact decreases rapidly once you start moving away from large metropolitan areas such as Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver. The whiteness of small town and rural Canada is quite stark and is set against another dynamic that of First Nation reserves.

I feel what we are seeing is a growing pushback against the notions of global citizenship.

Today with Trump openly espousing views of far right white nationalists and with the rise of nativism in Europe, Canada can feel like an exception. The feeling has quickly disappeared with the last provincial election in Ontario which resulted in an outright majority for a Trump like populist Doug Ford. We are days away from his government taking power and apart from the expected attacks on the fiscal policies I would not be surprised to see roll backs that first indirectly and then directly target programs that affect communities of colour. What makes this even more problematic is the fact that Ford's supporters unlike Trump, include many from immigrant backgrounds. The next four years in this province I'm going to be quite difficult for the 60% of us who did not vote for this man.

**R.C: Japanese Canadian author Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* brought to light the horrible reality of the Japanese internment and the government apologized to the Japanese. How crucial a role do you think literature or art plays in bringing up issues from history that demand justice? Can you talk about specific instances in case of the Komagata Maru incident as well (especially in relation to your works)?**

A.K: I think I have responded to this question in part. I have to say that I was inspired to become a documentary filmmaker and in a way talk to think of documentary in an instrumental way. Filmmakers would go out to make films that highlighted issues of social injustice, audiences would be moved to action and what start working on ways to deal with the issues. It took me a long time to unburden myself and really unshackle myself from the hubris, the responsibility and the expectations embedded in this simplistic formulation.

I recall I started reflecting on this in the late nineties after reading Arundhati Roy's response to a similar question after her essay *The End of Imagination* – she said she considered her work as a contribution to a conversation. This really resonated with me, and it was very liberating to think of my creative output as a contribution to a conversation that has been going on and that will continue, as different people from different generations pick it up and

add to it in their own way. The best one can hope for one's work reinvigorates the conversation

*Continuous Journey* was the first film from a South Asian immigrant perspective to examine this history. It is widely used in universities in Canada, across many disciplines. As a professor, I find myself commiserating with colleagues who complain about students not reading. Films can serve and do serve an important role by allowing engagement to take place in a different way.

The most typical response after every screening has been shock and discomfort – for there is no getting away from the evidence presented which is precisely what I had hoped to do. For the vast majority of South Asian students it comes as a total shock that they did not know this history.

I know for sure that a number of people have been inspired by it and as a result have gone on to do academic research as well as produce creative work of all kinds. It is also worth noting that in many cases the acknowledgement to the film is not included in the work but has been acknowledged in one-on-one interactions. And of course, one never knows and can never know how a work inspires people or motivates them to pursue a particular path. I do know that I have been a several screening that Canadian politicians have attended; many of them would become part of the push for the parliamentary apology.

The apology itself is not a case of justice being served – it is a gesture that is fraught with the possibility of adding to another kind of deeper denial, that of examining the present to see how current policies might have the kind of impact. For example, one of the lessons learned by the government was the indefensible practice of indefinite detention for contravening immigration laws. This was tried and tested on the Komagata Maru, and despite the apology it continues to be used today.

#### **Interview II: Ajmer Rode, date: 10.05.2018 (interview over email)**

**I met Ajmer Rode on March 2018, at Broadway and Cambie St. in Vancouver, Canada. Poet, playwright, translator and an exceptionally warm person, Ajmer Rode introduced me to a set of new works that have been done on the Komagata Maru incident. What made me especially interested in his work is a new kind of approach in reading the Komagata Maru incident that his recent historical-fiction book (illustrated) presents.**

Someone who has been living in Canada for most of his life offers, as expected, a fresh and invigorating perspective on the incident. Although he is well aware of the emotional aspects of history and evolution of the South Asian diaspora in Canada his works reflect a rational and objective reading of the incident.

The interview with Ajmer Rode has been presented below. I will be using the following abbreviations: R.C for Ragini Chakraborty and A.R for Ajmer Rode.

**R.C:** I have read your poems and the illustrated re-telling of the Komagata Maru incident as well, courtesy the books you kindly gifted me. I have also come across some young scholars who are making films on the incident, or creating awareness about the incident. A hundred years after the incident, how much importance, do you think, the incident holds for the present generation of Canadians? Is it merely a story about our Canadian forefathers?

A.R: Komagata Maru incident (KGM) after 100 years is more than a story for new Canadians and will remain so for years to come. It's become a significant chapter in the history of British Columbia and Canada telling us of the interracial attitudes, suspicions and intolerance prevalent at the KGM time. Racial tensions still persist, albeit, in subtle forms. Komagata Maru incident also tells us of the reality of British justice that was so glorified in the colonies of the Raj. India and Canada were both colonies of the British Empire at the time and were supposed to enjoy equal rights for intermigration. In reality, however, it was far from the truth as illustrated by the KGM incident and the writings on it.

**R.C:** You have named one of your poetry collections *Poems At My Doorstep*. Would you like to talk a little about the title? Besides the Komagata Maru incident, what were some other factors that gave birth to these creations?

A.R: The title reflects the urgency with which some of these poems, raw and unformed, came to me and impelled me to give them written forms. But they certainly are not Found Poems. Issues like cultural dislocation, alienation, and unjust social conducts, especially the way they affected our older immigrants, moved me to write these poems. One day I saw my father (living with my brother) sitting on a bench at a nearby bus stand. He didn't have to go somewhere nor do something, he just wanted to sit there to be among people even though he couldn't relate to them. I saw all those immigrant fathers in my father. I felt a poem was

waiting for me at the doorstep as I reached home. KGM incident was a factor but not the central one in composing these poems. The poem, Apology, in this selection shows the direct influence of the KGM incident. In the poem I as a writer made a KGM apology before any activist or politician thought about it.

**R.C: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized for the Komagata Maru incident in 2016 the year Canada celebrated its 150th year since the Confederation; and as a part of the celebrations the country also initiated some reconciliatory programs. Do you feel the apology comes as a part of this initiative? Do you see this as a change that might renew broken ties and help evolve India-Canada relations?**

A.R: The KGM apology movement was already in full swing before Justin Trudeau became Canada's Prime Minister. His predecessor Stephen Harper had already apologized to a huge gathering of Indo-Canadians in a Surrey conference. But Indo-Canadian activists kept pushing for an apology in the Parliament which Trudeau made in 2016. It seemed more a political pursuit on both sides. I don't think the apology had much to do with any kind of reconciliation, for, there were no broken ties. Indo-Canadians, especially Sikhs-who actually have hijacked the KGM incident- have not been treated worst than any other minority people of colour in Canada. It was only at the time of Air India Bombing that Sikh reputation sank really lowing Canada but it recovered fast. It was, ironically, 9/11 that seemed to have helped restore Sikh image as 9/11 made Air India Bombing look insignificant in comparison, and replaced Sikhs with Muslims as perceived terrorists. Today Sikhs are more involved, and happily, in the federal government affairs than any other comparable minority. As for India-Canada relations I doubt if the apology will have a significant effect.

Incidentally, our book *A Journey With The Endless Eye* was also released on the day PM Justin Trudeau made his Komagata Maru apology in the Parliament. The book was released by Roseann O'Reilly Runte the President of Ottawa's Carleton University, the central university of Canada. Ten of Jarnail Singh's KGM paintings from the book were exhibited and permanently acquired by the university. The book release and the exhibition were coordinated with the apology to highlight the pioneer role played by literature and art in starting the KGM movement that culminated in the official apology.

**R.C: As a South Asian-Canadian, do you feel the existence of hyphenated identities is a problem? Are the questions of 'belongingness' or 'fitting-in' still relevant in a**

**‘multicultural’ Canada? Or, do you feel the situation is changing with time, especially, in an era of globalization when global communities are emerging all over the world.**

A.R: Hyphenated IDs may not make many people feel good, though, I feel fine when called Indo-Canadian. I feel extended, feel belonging to two countries at the same time. I think India, in whatever shape it is today, is a great country, greater than Canada. So why should I feel uneasy if my id associates me to India as well? Even though in reality, I feel this id issue is bit overblown by our academic communities (my apologies!). It makes hyphenated people think as if they are somehow lesser and should keep fighting against this hyphenation. Common people don’t care what they’re called unless it’s derogatory like ‘Paki’ or something. Multicultural policy of Canada did influence people’s thinking in a positive way although much remains to be done. Globalization, despite its economic exploitation, is bringing people closer. I as a writer have always shunned nationalist feelings and felt belonging to the world. In our poetry book *Leela* (co-authored with N Bharati) we have written a Writer’s Manifesto:

We believe writers live on earth not in a country or a foreign country. We refuse to accept political boundaries that divide the earth. These boundaries are artificial and drawn with violence. Our concern is with the suffering and solace of humans, with their passion to live, with the blade of grass that holds on to verdure as the desert advances.

**R.C: Japanese Canadian author Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* brought to light the horrible reality of the Japanese internment and the government apologized to the Japanese. How crucial a role do you think literature or art plays in bringing up issues from history that demand justice? Can you talk about specific instances in case of the Komagata Maru incident as well?**

A.R: Art and literature certainly play important roles to bring about cultural changes that may lead to political actions for justice. I met Joy Kogawa years back when she launched her second novel *The Rain Ascends* in Vancouver. Well-known Japanese-Canadian writer Roy Miki who wrote *Redress* (Raincoast Books, 2004) is also a friend, I worked with him on racial minority writers’ issues in The Writers Union of Canada. His brother Art Miki was really the one who led the Japanese Redress movement to victory. Kogawa’s *Obasan* has become a classic in Canadian literature but is considered controversial as to its contribution to

the Redress movement. In the words of Prof. Guy Beauregard of the National Taiwan University “it played a key role in mobilizing support for the 1988 redress Settlement....” However, for most other critics the theme of the novel-cherishing the Christian-Buddhist ideals of forgiveness and reconciliation- goes against the spirit of resistance that was central to the success of the Redress movement.

I wrote and directed the Komagata Maru play in 1979. The premier in Vancouver was attended by some 500 people. Lot of publicity was given to the performance. A mainstream newspaper *The Colonist* covered it; a British Columbia Cabinet Minister showed up uninvited and congratulated us on the stage. Many Indo-Canadians heard about Komagata Maru first time. After the play the incident never vanished from the memory of Indo-Canadian community. In 1982, the entire play was serialised in *The Indo-Canadian Times* weekly published from Surrey, BC. After its publication in the book form (1984) it was prescribed in several universities in Punjab. In 1999, a second edition was published by Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, for its graduate classes. The play has been cited widely in South Asian studies and writings.

The play again came to limelight at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the KGM incident. The Simon Fraser University (SFU) of British Columbia digitized and published it on their website for public and students. An hour-long interview was also recorded with the author. Mangla Bansal, an SFU student converted the first scene of the play into an animated film for elementary school children. Prof. Anne Murphy of the UBC prescribed the play to one of her Punjabi classes. The play was performed at the University of British Columbia, Surrey Arts Centre, and several other places in British Columbia; it was also staged in Amritsar by the leading Punjabi theatre group Manch Rangmanch led by Kewal Dhaliwal. Fourth edition of the book is expected to be published soon.

**Interview III: Phinder Dulai, date: 06.05.2018 (interview over email)**

**I met Phinder Dulai in Downtown, Vancouver on a February evening in 2018 at the re-launch of the *Rungh* magazine. That was when I heard his readings on the Komagata Maru incident. That was a profound moment as his poems moved me deeply. I was on my fieldtrip to Canada, doing research for my dissertation, and his works came to be the texts I was looking for. What followed next was a series of warm exchanges with the poet and I could access his poetry collection for my dissertation. Dulai’s poetry and its**

relevance as a contemporary take on the Komagata Maru incident, has been integral to my research. Phinder Dulai's interview has been cited below. I will be using the following abbreviations: R.C for Ragini Chakraborty, P.D for Phinder Dulai.

**R.C: I have read your poems and listened to your readings on the Komagata Maru incident. I have also come across young scholars who are making films on the incident, or creating awareness about the incident. Hundred years after the incident, how much importance, do you think, the incident holds for the present generation of Canadians? Is it merely a story about the forefathers from the past?**

P.D: One of the reasons I wrote *dream / arteries* was to posit a new narrative for the SS Komagata Maru, and connect this story to a greater story of unprecedented migration that was seen in the late 19th century from Europe to the US and Canada via the shipping routes that served both package shipments, mail and raw resources, as well as the migration of human cargo the these countries.

The Komagata Maru and its documented history leads me to believe that this story was larger and has greater implications to not just future generations, but to government departments that inform and recommend immigration laws and policies. The testing of the very laws of exclusion and the fact that surveilling the ship and Punjabi community in B.C. to such an extent was a result of how the Dominion Government of Canada, the US Government, the India Home Office and the Colonial government in India, perceived the KM passengers and the community not as British subjects, but as the greatest challenge and risk to Imperialism. Writing *dream / arteries* was about exploring our collective commitment towards extending compassion and empathy in the current world. I did this by anthropomorphizing the ship, giving it a persona, voice and emotions.

The Komagata Maru and its documented and editorial story enters the public realm; unfortunately is one that is contained, restricted to a more regional legacy and is a story of the impacts of racism and hatred. This is accurate too, but there is a far greater story we must attend to that has continued to be at risk of erasure, historical insignificance, and further silenced by a dismissive print media legacy. What is really important to note is that much of the surveillance record of this ship was hidden away in public record archives and university collections for a long time; the only one who could view it were scholars and those designated as historian/researchers. The public story of the KM was presented under a well

managed limited frame of study as a ship that arrived, refused to leave, and forced to return within a narrow lens of a migrant and settlement history on the west coast and fused to the bucolic historical agrarian Punjabis settling in British Columbia.

I always found this frame belittling and dismissive of the sacrifices made by those who were part of the Indian revolution and the Ghadr movement in the US and Canada; many who were both Punjabi secularists, atheists and Sikhs. The slow and persistent uncovering of recorded information by previous community historians, community writers and advocates opened up the potential for a more fulsome telling.

Prof. Hugh Johnston provided an exhaustive seminal scholarly book on the ship that was published in 1989. Johnston's book reframed the story as a study in how federal, provincial and municipal levels of government worked together to pass multiple order-in-council legislations that were racist and xenophobic. A broader lens was already beginning to retrieve a story that was not fully told.

Along with my own research, this writing process led me to a significant change in how to view the story. My approach to writing *dream / arteries* was to take the story further into the global and into the contemporary moment - I did this by going back to the documentation and making a creative decision to not replay the arrival, detainment, forced removal story; it had and has been part of a community narrative for a long time. As a writer, I see my role as a writer that further explores the possibility of poetry and story; and experimenting with different approaches to write a poem - the fusing of documentation, media clippings into poetic diction, writing a new narrative about the ship that was grounded in facts, but further imbued with fiction and I hope a sense of humanity. The trajectory of the ship's life was global, and by its arrival in Vancouver, it had already been a sanctuary ship for so many poor immigrants and refugees from Europe; discovering this documentation and also reviewing the documented legacy of public record archives and surveillance records confirmed my belief that this story had broad implications for Canadians as it relates to the changes in immigration policy, laws for arrival and settlement and citizenship, as well as the inclusion of this documentation as a key important aspect of the formation of a nation-state in becoming a progressive country. I also believe it is not limited to Canada, but has international links to histories of migration across the Globe.

**R.C: You have named your poetry collection *dream/arteries*. Would you like to explain the title?**

P.D: I went through 3 different titles before landing on *dream / arteries*. The title comes from one of the poems in the KM section - *Ten Anonymous Journeys* - The words paired in the poem reflect the idea of freedom and emancipation that can be captured through the idea of a dream for a future. The word dream as a metaphor has been used in many written texts - Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a dream" speech; the word can contain the hopes and aspirations of a many people; I was also reflecting on Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" - I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins". The use of the word "artery" is important in this context. The human body could not circulate oxygenated blood to all parts of the body without the arteries; which I liken to the strands of hope and dream to be that blood and adding this as a trope to migration that brings a common physiological aspect for people in this story, regardless of race or ethnicity. The saying "we all bleed the same blood" was another tactic to inspire compassion and affinity. The fact that the two words sit in a maritime poem then brings a further aspect to this collection - the culminating accruing of voices and people, reflected in a multitude of arteries that move forward to sanctuary and the mode of movement being the water; a central part of the physiological makeup of the human body.

**R.C: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized for the Komagata Maru incident in 2016. Canada has been celebrating its 150 years since the Confederation and it has initiated different reconciliatory programs as a part of it.**

**Do you feel the apology comes as a part of this initiative?**

P.D: The Federal apology was a significant moment. It was made through the very same mechanisms of government that denied the passengers and the ship entry into Vancouver: Order In Council legislative process that ascended as a proclamation, and an apology, the procedural steps taken to speak the apology in the House of Commons and the process of bringing family members and their future generations, was a laudable and important moment; I do however see one thing that was completely missing and this is central to the idea of a reconciliatory program - there was no initiation, implementation or an announcement with this apology for an cultural-based education initiative. It was an apology without a program. There are many previous apologies that identified a program of that would support education-

based initiatives. Our local South Asian MPs failed in bringing that commitment to the nation and honouring those who were on the ship by advocating some kind of program that was brought forward as part of the apology in the House. This is where I differ with many. I believe the apology was sincere, but I also believe that even this scenario, the Punjabis on the west coast were dismissed.

**R.C: Do you see this as a change, which might renew broken ties and help to evolve India-Canada relations?**

P.D: I don't think I will answer this question. The answer requires a more detailed answer that also looks at the political history of Punjab and Canada-India relations.

**R.C: As a South Asian- Canadian, do you feel the existence of hyphenated identities is a problem? The questions of 'belongingness' or 'fitting-in', do they still apply for a 'multicultural' Canada? Or, do you feel it is changing with time, in an era of globalization, where global communities are emerging all over the world?**

P.D: The use of identifiers are practical in certain contexts - census forms; other formal ways of engagement within both political and social based conversations. Each use has its purpose. As a writer and a person, I see myself as a person living in Vancouver, BC, Canada. I am Punjabi by origins and was born in the west (England). The notion of a nationalist identity eludes me still given my family migrations. I have no interest in fitting in or belonging at all; I have come to learn that what is most important, if we are to have a notion of a kind nation state, there has to be a reciprocity of compassion, kindness and openness. There are many uses for a multiculturalism act and policy at various levels of government. It can be used as an instrument to bring equity into government institutions, and be the foundation and tool for inaugural programs to educate different sectors of civil society on the benefits of an equitable society. On the other hand, it can also be used for more sinister reasons - the containment of dissenting voices of society along race, gender and ethno-cultural lines. As I think about this and the question of globalization and nationalisms, I keep coming to the simple fact that there is more hate, disregard and violence in the world, while those working in the areas of archival research and documentation, continue uncovering the depravations that existed under previous global empires. The transnational company is the contemporary colonial model that now binds many nation states to corporate subsidization and the accrual of more wealth in fewer hands. If there is a global mode of being and thinking or living, it is because the

infrastructure for that value system has been built by a global corporate elite set of companies. As a poet and writer, I always come back to how one reflects the world one lives in, while writing in a solitary room; the global part of this exercise is research via the internet which is a globalizing tool for engagement information about the world.

**R.C: Japanese Canadian author Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* brought to light the horrible reality of the Japanese internment and the government apologized to the Japanese. How crucial a role do you think literature or art plays in bringing up issues from history that demand justice?**

P.D: As a writer I have a keen interest in bringing social realism into the narrative and the work of writing the world onto the page. Literature, as well as art, provide a clear lens of exploring not just the demand for real justice, but also brings humanity into the subject or thematic underlay of an artistic work. There is a broad spectrum of how creative people do this in their lives. A writer that I go back to is Salman Rushdie, and specifically his earlier novels that explore a plethora of theme specific to the subjugation of people by empire, religious orthodoxy, caste identities, geographic-specific prejudices and the impact of capitalism on geo-political concerns impacting South Asia. Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* was a novel Ondaatje wrote later in life and came to this subject of ethno cultural genocide in Sri Lanka, as a way of exploring his own family history in what was then known as Ceylon. In David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, the use of malleable timelines, mutating language and post apocalyptic landscapes speak to the loss of identity, home or culture, and equally demonstrates that culture is not a static moment but ever changing. In Salvador Dali's work, the phantasmagorical renderings of his canvasses and multimedia work continue to shine brightly on the state of the world and the chaotic excesses of human civilization; and on the other end of this spectrum are writers like Virginia Woolf who brings class, gender and the banalities of the upper classes and empire, into the quotidian space of the homes and people she creates; one Woolf's most notable experimental novels *Orlando*, is a wonderful and wondrous story of gender transformation of a human over a four hundred year timeline, and through this timeline, Woolf never says away from speaking to the underlying theme gender violence and inequity against women.

**R.C: Can you talk about specific instances in case of the Komagata Maru incident as well?**

P.D: In an earlier question about the impact of the Komataga Maru, I noted that for a long time, the KM was framed as a kind of regional parochial moment in the frontier trade post at the edge of the British Empire and an unfortunate incident of racism. The significant documentation amassed by governments, families and advocates tell a different story. Specifically what dream / arteries unearthed was the extreme levels of surveillance that was enacted upon a community of 4,000 Punjabis in Vancouver. A surveillance that was far reaching and monitored from the typewriters of the British Agent and Immigration Insp. William C Hopkinson, Chief Immigration Insp. Malcolm Reid, BC Premier McBride, Prime Minister Robert Borden, the US Government, Home Office in London, and the British India Office in Delhi. Specifically, in dream / arteries, I utilized documentation to bring to light the level of surveillance that impacted the Punjabi community. I also utilized the narrative modes of satire, parody and lyric mode of melancholy, in order evoke and draw the deep psychological trauma the community experienced, as the ship transformed from a site of curiosity, to a public spectacle; for many South Asians, the ship and the site of the ship remained a deep wound for many years.

dream / arteries relies heavily on incorporating fragments of surveillance records into the poems that speak to the exclusionary laws and Order In Council laws passed, as follows:

1907 - South Asians provincially disenfranchised, and in turn denied them the federal vote, access to political office, jury duty, the professions, public-service jobs and labour on public works.

1908 - Continuous Journey Order in Council law prohibiting immigrants who do not come by continuous journey from their country of origin. Landing money required by South Asians increased from \$50 to \$200. Remained in law until 1947

Between 1903 to 1920, the Punjabi millworkers in BC were unable to reunite with their families.

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<sup>1</sup>Buchignani, Norman, Doreen Marie Indra, and Ram Srivastava. *Continuous journey: A social history of South Asians in Canada*. McClelland & Stewart, 1985. ISBN: 9780771017612.

<sup>2</sup>Kazimi, Ali. *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru: an Illustrated History*. Douglas & McIntyre, 2012. ISBN: 9781553659730.