Constructing Canadian National Identity

Confronting multiculturalism, whiteness and the internal Muslim Other

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RESEARCH QUESTION

What role does multiculturalism play in shaping Canadian national identity?

Figure 1

ABSTRACT

The mainstream understanding of Canadian history is that it was founded by two groups, the British and the French, and that it eventually evolved into a society containing multiple ethnicities. This paper challenges the commonplace understanding of multiculturalism by examining how the Canadian government and state structures use multiculturalism as a symbolic tool to manage its diverse society while also maintaining a racial hierarchy that glorifies white Canadians. Specifically, Muslim Canadians are subordinated to white Canadians because their religious identities are often conflated with their cultural identities that depict them as "backwards" and "uncivilized", resulting in the rise of Islamophobia. Though it doesn't address the root causes of the discrimination, multiculturalism manages to keep Muslim Canadians connected to the national imaginary by symbolically recognizing their right to belong.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Primary Sources
- Newspaper articles

Secondary Sources
- Research guides (Critical Race Studies, Canadian Studies, Political Science)
- Database (ProQuest)
- Books

MULTICULTURALISM

- Multiculturalism was never intended to be a social ideal

- It was/ is a tool used by the state to manage its diversity by providing immigrants symbolic recognition of their right to practice their cultures, while also denying them political and economic power

- Multiculturalism helps erase Canada's violent colonial past and makes immigrants stakeholders in the project of colonial expansion

- Canada had to rework its national identity after the Holocaust, and by embracing multiculturalism, the state was able to escape its history of institutionalized racism
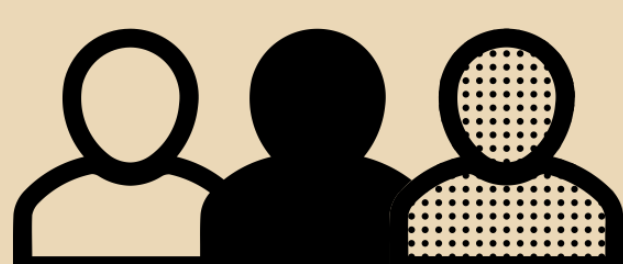
Figure 2

WHITENESS

- Whiteness is a political project: the white national subject is exalted by the Canadian state, so much so that they believe their rights to be "rooted in their own intrinsic worthiness and not in colonial violence, political, racial, and ethnic dominations, or in the classed and gendered exploitations and resistances that characterize nation formations" (Thobani, 2000, 11)

- Labour demands during the 70s and 80s resulted in an open immigration policy, bringing the non-white Other in closer proximity to the white Self

- As a result, white Canadians, who were previously diverse ethnically, linguistically, and religiously, get grouped into one, invisible category, while non-white Canadians are marked by their difference

Figure 3

- Even though the white masses benefit the most from the current mythos of nationhood, their fragmented, socially constructed history disconnects them from their positionality in relation to non-white Canadians, manifesting into white fragility

- Canadian multiculturalism has allowed whiteness to signify tolerance and the capacity to evolve, while for people of colour, it is the exact opposite

Figure 4

THE MUSLIM OTHER

- The post-9/11 experiences of Canadian Muslims reveal how multiculturalism works as an idea and as a practice

- The lived experiences of Muslims Canadians are full of contradictions: on one hand, the rhetoric around multiculturalism gives them multicultural citizenship rights, but on the other, discrimination is a daily occurrence

- Some Muslims use the ideology of multiculturalism to affirm their right to hold on to their Canadian identity and resist discrimination and pressures to assimilate

CONCLUSION

- Canadian national identity is a social construction

- Multiculturalism allows the state to claim its progressive identity even though the policy had nothing to do with moral concerns over equality between people

- It allows everyday practices of racism to remain hidden while also providing a symbolic life raft for those facing discrimination
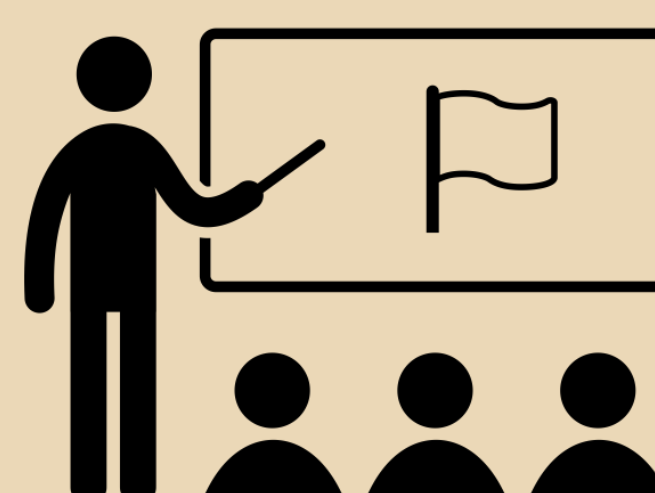
- Canadians must take themselves out of the narrative that exalts them and in turn, homogenizes them as embodying certain values such as: tolerance, democracy, liberty, progressiveness

Figure 5