



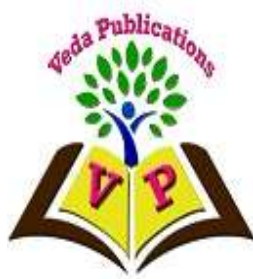
## ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: A LIFE LONG STRUGGLE OF AN ITALIAN IMMIGRANT FAMILY IN *THE ITALIANS*

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### ABSTRACT



Canadian multicultural society can be studied with the help of Canadian ethnic literature. It presents various experiences of ethnic minorities and immigrants. Canada welcomes people from all over the world and thus people find shelter in the country. Immigrants, but then, come across some issues. Identity struggle is apparent. Immigrants with different ethnic identity find it difficult to acquire new national identity because of different values. Thus, we can see identity quest and that is aptly reflected in Canadian literature. *The Italian* is written by F. G. Paci, an Italian-Canadian writer. In this novel, he presents how members of Italian immigrant family are set in conflict to know their real identity. Their lives are caught in between Italian identity and Canadian identity.

**Keywords:** *Identity, Ethnic Identity, National Identity, Identity Conflict, Italian Identity, Immigrant Experience in Canada.*

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Canadian literature is characterized by various experiences as the country is multicultural. The diverse society reflects its diverse colours through its literature. As the country invites people from all over the world with its liberal democratic citizenship, it has encouraged diverse population for the last many decades. The cultural diversity is not new to Canada as it has always welcomed immigrants from European countries. Like many others, Italians are also not new to Canadian society. Italian immigrants can be traced from 1497. Thus Italians are surely one of the early immigrants to Canada and even though it is till 1970s or 80s their voice was unheard in general. It is through various writers like F. G. Paci, who helped to create 'Italian Canadian Literature' phenomenon, Canadian society started noticing Italian immigrants. Paci, through his novels have presented Italian immigrant families in Canada.

The novel *The Italians* wonderfully describes the immigrant experiences through different generations. Alberto and Giulia, the father and mother of the Geatano family represent immigrant parents who emigrate from Italy to Canada to give a good life to children. Alberto and Lorianne are immigrant children who immigrate with their parents to Canada in their childhood. Bill is the one in the family who is born and brought up in Canada. So this family of immigrant parents, immigrant children and a Canadian child suffers and struggles a lot before they realize their identity in new country. Their suffering and struggle is nothing but the result of cultural uprooting as they leave their homeland and of cultural adoption of new country where they have immigrated in the search of better life.

This very process of uprooting and adoption of cultures make them question of their existence. They fail to understand that of which culture they are a part. Parents, even after spending more than twenty years in the new country, i.e. Canada, fail to understand it and thus fail to integrate to it completely. Parents fail completely to understand ways of new country and thus fail to understand their children who grow in new society as a part of it. Alberto tries and works very hard for the better life for the family. He works in the plant without missing a single day. He works in dangerous situation without being afraid of it only because he knows that his

family is safe and comfortable, the life which he could not have had back in Italy. The war and the pathetic conditions at homeland had compelled him to leave his homeland. Thus he is happy to work in life threatening conditions at plant. Canada has given him more than he ever had expected but even though he does not understand Canada. His failure in understanding of new country can be attributed to the culture of new country which is completely different from his homeland. He, after all these years in Canada does not feel to be the part of it. Canada still appears a 'new country' to him. Further, after all these years in Canada, he cherishes memories of Italy. He still thinks of going back to Italy which shows that he is still attached to Italy, his homeland. It is because of this he fails to integrate to 'new society' that has given him bounty. As he is still an 'Italian' to his core, he cannot think himself to be a Canadian. That is the reason why, he wants his children to prove his worth of coming to Canada and reward him with Canadian identity.

Alberto cherishes high expectations from Aldo than Bill. Aldo, is an Italian son. Aldo's becoming priest in a new country means approval of Canadian identity for Alberto. But at the same time, he fails to see that his Canadian child, Bill has already brought that approval not only for his family but for all Italian immigrants in Canada.

Struggle between Alberto and Bill is significant in the understanding of struggle that is influenced by different cultural identities. Alberto thinks himself to be an Italian and Bill knows himself to be a Canadian. Bill, being the Canadian child, is well aware of the taste of the society. He knows very well what is cherished in Canadian society. Thus, he is attracted towards hockey right from the beginning. He comes to realize that it is because of the game he was attracting the attention of the people. Thus he knows that whatever he was doing would surely grant a Canadian identity to his father. But Alberto, who does not understand Canadian ways fail to see his son bringing him the very identity he wants to have.

.... "Babbo, this is Canada and hockey is king. I have a chance to play with teams almost every boy in Canada would give his right arm to



play on. Babbo, the Prime Minister cheers hockey players. Hockey player are the big shots. To hech with school. I'm not smart. It's just a waste. I want to concentrate on the only thing I do well." And his own : "Big shots? Big shots? This hockey is for children, Bill, and those who clap are children too, even the Prime Ministers. We want you to be somebody, somebody important." (28)

This conversation between Bill and Alberto makes clear that Alberto is not at all conscious of ways of Canadian society. He wants his son to be 'someone important' but does not see that his son is playing in NHL. Everyone else in neighborhood feels proud for Bill. Other Italian immigrants honor him in Italian community hall in neighborhood for honoring Italians by representing them on national level through hockey. Alberto also observes Bill's growth as famous and popular national hockey player among others, even though does not see that Bill is proving Alberto's worth of coming to Canada. It is because; ways of Canada confuses him as he had to struggle a lot in order to have his family settled comfortably after coming to Canada. Thus he cannot comprehend that Bill is achieving better life than that of the Alberto's only by playing 'kid's game'. That seems to contradict his understanding and experiences.

With all such conceptions in mind, Alberto remains an Italian and thus his consciousness fights back Canadian cultural influence.

Like Alberto, new country is beyond comprehension of Giulia too. She is the one who always fears for being in the new country in the first place. Any setbacks in the family she starts blaming Alberto for coming and bringing family to Canada. She is the one in the family who does not even learn English language and thus fail to communicate with her children. Her reluctance in learning English language reveals that she does not want to be a Canadian. She does not want herself to be the part of the society, which according to her, has taken her children away from her. An influence of an ethnic identity is so strong on her that she is still an Italian in every aspect. Her habit of preparing an extra food for

her family or using bedpan confirms it. Her experiences of poverty at Italy make her prepare more quantity of food. But like Alberto, she does not reveal feeling of gratitude towards Canada that has provided her and her family a comfortable life that was impossible in Italy. Further, she feels that the Canada has estranged her of her children. For her, children were her world, and the society has taken all of them away from her.

...Illnesses or no illnesses, she had seen her world dwindling year by year as her children had grown older and farther away from her body, and thus from her country and her language. (133)

As Giulia does not learn to speak English, her children face difficulties in having communication with her. None of them can go to her to share their feelings as they know their mother does not understand English. Further, after all these years in Canada, children have lost their touch with Italian language. Thus, whatever they try to speak in Italian does not make any sense as they lack the proper Italian words suitable for the situation or the words that would best suit their conditions and feelings. In this way, she like Alberto continuous to remain Italian even after becoming a Canadian citizen. Their ethnic identity outdoes Canadian identity. They are nothing but citizens of Canada but even after that they cannot bring themselves to think in the same way.

Conflicting forces are explicitly seen with the generation of children. Immigrant children, Aldo and Lorianna, are born in Italy and brought up in Canada. They are the part of family which is Italian and part of the society which is Canadian. They are the one, who are torn between two cultural forces. Their awareness of their cultural ties does not let them integrate freely in Canadian society, while Canadian society with its distinct ways tends to baffle them. As a result of it, both feel confused.

Aldo, because of the influence of Italian culture on him, he cannot fully comprehend Canadian culture and its ways. We see him the influence is so strong that stops him to mix with children at school. He finds himself different among other school children. He maintains his solitude.



... Frail from birth, he had shunned the team sports that served as a melting pot for the Italian and Canadian kids in his neighbourhood. He could remember in grade school how he always dreaded being chosen for the organized games; the team captains always picked him last.. it had been difficult for him to make friends with the Canadian kids, and the Italian kids taunted him. .... He developed a martyred attitude toward the whole neighbourhood. He felt himself to be utterly alone and unwanted outside his home and school. Then he found refuge in the church. (61-62)

This description shows that Aldo cannot bring himself among either Canadian kids or Italian. It clearly reflects his confusion. He does not know who is he and where he belongs to. It is with church he finds some feeling of belongings. It is an Italian thing that connects him to Canadian society. His attachment towards church reflects his urge to belong to something as he feels rootless. Surely he is uprooted from Italian soil but still not firmly rooted in Canada. In all this confusion he grows into a priestly personality. He decides to become a priest. His decision makes his family happy. Family looks forward to his becoming a priest in new country which would grant them Canadian identity. He also accepts the responsibility for being an Italian child of Italian family in Canadian society.

His entering into seminary again brings the confusion to his life. A seminary at Toronto symbolizes outside society. Till then he was secure in neighborhood, but once in Toronto he starts witnessing different type of life that he cannot comprehend. Outside society once again starts confusing him and he finds himself in baffled situation. The incident of an injured person at seminary shakes his belief and reveals him the reality of an outside world that presents futility of seminary. Once again he finds himself rootless. Being unable to comprehend an outside society he starts questioning

again of his cultural affiliation and identity. He cannot understand whether still he is an Italian or Canadian.

"It's such a shocking thing to tell you, I know. But I have to. There are things that I so little understand, not why they happen, but that they have to happen at all. I long sometimes just to find a girl and settle down like you and Lorenzo. I often question the value of it all- to be a priest amidst all this grossness. We do lay work, but with clean-minded people, safe people. I can't understand the promiscuity, the cheapness of everything, the utter degradation of the sacraments. Even the indifference appalls me. At times the people in the new country are beyond me, Lori. They mock. The desecrate. I simply can't understand them. There seems to be too much taken for granted. There's too much money. Too much leisure. Too much fun." (36-37)

He is an Italian child of the family and expects him to be the one in the family who will grant them Canadian identity. He is considered to be the pride of the family. His Italian parents look at him expectantly as he is the one who would prove their worth leaving their homeland and coming to new country. But on other side, because of Aldo's confusion, he does not know his identity. He does not understand whether being an Italian child he should be a priest among the gross society that is beyond his comprehension or to be a Canadian and get settled with girl like any other in the society. It is this confusion that makes him develop an intimate relation with Evleyn. But his father's accident at plant clears his confusion and then he realizes his identity as a son of an Italian family in Canadian society. He understands that he should be the one to connect these two identities with sacrifices on his part.

Like Aldo, Lorianna is also an Italian child who grows Canadian after coming to Canada. Being immigrated in childhood, she like Aldo loses touch with ethnic culture and language. Being confused she



also grows her interest in church and wishes to be a nun. But it is because of her parents marries Lorenzo- 'straight off boat'. It is Lorenzo now, who creates confusion for her. Lorenzo is an immigrant who is struggling like any other Italian immigrant to get settled in Canada. For him Lorianna represents Canadian society that has tormented him. Unable to speak English, he is set in struggle in new country. Culture of new country torments him and thus at home he wants to see his wife to become an Italian wife instead of Canadian daughter. He imposes her to speak in Italian. He reminds her that she is in Italian house and thus should be an Italian wife. Loriann, who herself, after a long struggle in Canada at early childhood is again finds herself under the same circumstances.

She comes to think that it is her ethnicity that is now having revenge upon her for turning her back to it. She is confused as she does not know who is she in real, a Canadian or Italian. But then, she also slowly grows dominant over Lorenzo and situations and realizes that she is a Canadian mother now. She makes Lorenzo understand the truth. This is how, after a struggle with Lorezno she realizes her identity as Canadian mother but an Italian daughter and wife.

Bill, a Canadian child in a family always feels stranger among Italians. He is born and brought up in Canada and thus does not have any connection with his ethnic culture. He is far away from Italian experience and thus its identity. He is sure of himself of his identity to be a Canadian. He is the only one in the family who knows his identity very well. He is not confused like Aldo and Lorianna. But because of it, he never develops a feeling of belongingness to his family. He feels belonging on ice surface with his ice skates on. As Aldo and Lorianna find solace in church, Bill finds his in hockey. Furthermore, he knows that the hockey is the thing that would prove his identity as a Canadian than an Italian. He wants to assert his identity not only on his family but on outside society. He somewhere is aware that he opts for hockey to go away from Italian heritage. But ironically, his ethnic identity follows him everywhere. He is seen as a representative of Italian immigrants in Canada. He is called with racial notions like WOP, DP which represent racial connotation. More surprisingly, it is his neighborhood from which he wants to run away

or does not find any connection; the same neighborhood honors him for doing excellent in new country. Other Italian immigrants of his neighborhood tell him how much they are proud of him. They arrange a felicitation program to honor Bill in Rossini hall, a community owned hall. Among all Italian immigrants like his father, he feels guilty. He sees that he wanted to run away but they were always there with him and these people made him feel important instead of Canadian society of which he thinks himself to be a part of.

This is how this Italian family is confused as it does not understand where they actually belong to. Alberto and Giulia remain Italian and thus they remain in their own Italian core. It is because of this reason their children go away from them as children. Aldo and Lorianna, feel the connection of ethnic heritage, but in new country it proves to be meaningless. Being part of a 'new country' they are forced to inculcate new values that set clashes in their own personality. They know they are Italians but have to grow Canadian. On the other hand, Bill knows that he is a Canadian but still he should respect his Italian heritage. The ethnic and national identities create dilemma for immigrants and that can be studied aptly with the help of *The Italians*.

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