

## Revisiting the Theatre of the *Komagata Maru* Incident

Nandi Bhatia

---

Volume 40, Number 1, 2015

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl40\\_1art02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl40_1art02)

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this article

Bhatia, N. (2015). Revisiting the Theatre of the *Komagata Maru* Incident. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 40(1), 27–44.

# Revisiting the Theatre of the *Komagata Maru* Incident

NANDI BHATIA

THE EXPANDING CORPUS of literary-cultural materials on the *Komagata Maru* episode — available in films, novels, plays, and illustrated accounts — reflects a collective sense of urgency about understanding this story of the failed attempt of Indians to immigrate to Canada in the early part of the twentieth century. Ali Kazimi's film *Continuous Journey* (2004) and visual history entitled *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru* (2012); Anita Rau Badami's novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006); Tariq Malik's novel *Chanting Denied Shores: The Komagata Maru Narratives* (2010); Alia Somani's play *Oh Canada, Oh Komagata Maru, Three Vignettes*, performed on 27 June 2012 in Toronto as part of a project called Brown Canada; along with earlier work such as Ajmer Rode's play *Komagata Maru* (1984) and Sukhwant Hundal and Sadhu Binning's play *Samundari Sher Naal Takkar* (1989) (the latter written and presented for the seventy-fifth commemoration of the *Komagata Maru* incident in Vancouver<sup>1</sup>) suggest the need to understand this moment at a time when discussions of global mobility and cultural flows have taken centre stage. The generic and thematic differences of these texts, which include documentary realism, illustrated accounts, and fictional renditions, accompanied by poems, songs, historical studies, memorials, films, a postage stamp released in May 2014, and memoirs, lend a multiplicity to the story of the *Komagata Maru*. For instance, the narrative of the *Komagata Maru* is largely represented as a Sikh narrative, mainly because most of the passengers on the ship were Sikhs led by a Sikh leader named Gurdit Singh, who chartered the ship from Hong Kong bound for Vancouver. However, Malik's novel casts a Muslim character as the protagonist to tell the story from his perspective. And Badami's novel brings attention to the issue of gender through Sharan Kaur, who dreams of the place from which her father was forced to return to India when he sailed on the *Komagata Maru*. As she plots her way to arrive in Canada through marriage, where she comes to be

identified as Bibi-ji, the story links the *Komagata Maru* episode to the 1947 partition of India, the 1984 massacre of Sikhs in India, and the 1985 Air India bombing that resulted in the deaths of all 329 people on board. These texts, then, provide us with opportunities to explore new understandings and interpretations as the story of the *Komagata Maru* continued to be revisited at conferences and seminars in India and Canada to commemorate its 100th anniversary in 2014.<sup>2</sup>

In light of such literary and cultural developments, this essay examines plays such as Sharon Pollock's *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1976) as performative enactments that contribute to memorialization of the episode, which, as cultural critics, writers, and historians remind us, is barely remembered in Canada and India. Revisiting Pollock's play is important since it marks an early representation of the complex and somewhat effaced history of this moment, a history that Pollock identifies as being "hidden from us" ("Playwright's Introduction" 226). The obliteration of this history and "a hostile outburst of racism against Vancouver's Sikh community" in the early 1970s (Kelly 268) compelled Pollock to represent the moment through a theatrical enactment. First performed in 1976 at the Vancouver Playhouse, her play was recreated at a symposium held in May 2014 at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Following a discussion by Pollock, Rode, Binning, and Hundal, the UBC version amalgamated scenes from her play with scenes from Rode's and Binning's plays into a single performance that invited the audience to rethink the contribution of theatre toward understanding the *Komagata Maru* episode. Pollock's play thus continues to inspire and influence cultural productions on the episode and to revive the story, even though, in her words, the play is "a theatrical impression of an historical event seen through the *optique* of the stage and the mind of the playwright" and "not a documentary account" ("Playwright's Introduction" 226). The act of staging the episode, then, acquires crucial importance for representing the embattled experience of the *Komagata Maru*, one that purports to showcase for audiences the ways in which the ship's Indian passengers were treated by the Canadian state.

To this end, the aesthetic of the circus, strategically deployed to re-enact the political drama of the *Komagata Maru* as a theatrical event, is a critical element that facilitates memorialization of this moment by turning it into a spectacle. This spectacle is enabled through stage imagery of

caged people, whose movements are severely curtailed by the ringmaster, who runs a tight ship and ensures that its passengers are unable to leave. This spectacle, which involves multiple players, including state officials, stranded passengers, and spectators who view the staged performance, represents a multidimensional view of how political power plays and border controls were mobilized while passengers awaited the decision of the Canadian government regarding permission to land. The recurrence of the trope of the circus in Malik's *Chanting Denied Shores* accords an even greater significance to the images of circus acts that appear in Pollock's play. In Malik's text, the protagonist describes the frustrations, humiliations, struggles, and resilience of the ship's stranded passengers:

With nowhere to go and nothing to break their monotony, some of the men have taken to collectively circling the ship's 300 foot long deck. To Gurdit, the scene is reminiscent of the circuitous prancing of captive animals and of those in traveling circus tents. He muses aloud to his Daljit: "Animals in captivity will chew the bars of their confinement, and in extreme circumstances even chew off a limb. What do you think this lot will do next?"

The sight of grown men pacing back and forth the length of the deck like caged animals has also become for the locals a sight that is worth the short journey from the shore. Launched in boats from their unwelcoming shore, these sinister, gawking men in trench coats appear clutching cameras and flashlights that are pointed up directly at us. They gesticulate for us to strike heroic postures, taunting and coaxing with exaggerated motions to elicit a reaction from us, any reaction, to justify their outing. And when we are not obliging enough they show their belligerence with threats. (150)

The repeated references to "caged animals," "circus tents," and "circuitous prancing of captive animals" not only resonate with Pollock's play but also create a dramatic intensity to highlight the ways in which the state wielded its influence on the passengers through circus acts, acts designed for entertainment but derived from a disciplining of animal and human bodies.

However, Pollock's use of the circus also ropes in a careful critique of the contradictory ways in which Canada was imagined in the early twentieth century through an elite nationalism that supported exclusive notions of nation and community. To this end, the play inserts Evy and Sophie — working-class prostitutes — as characters whose marginal

positions with respect to male officials such as Hopkinson are highlighted in the play. Including Evy and Sophie emphasizes the entanglements of class relations with racial exclusions, imperial policies, and official attitudes. In gesturing toward this complex web of social relations, Pollock's play is literally and symbolically important for keeping the memory of the event alive in ways that urge spectators to consider a multiplicity of identities — race, class, and gender — through characters whose subjectivities are embedded in asymmetrical colonial and national power relations. For the contemporary audience, this layered analysis further reinforces the ongoing relevance of the play.

### Circus, spectacle, and memory

As has been documented, the *Komagata Maru*, a Japanese-owned and -operated ship, was boarded in Hong Kong on 4 April 1914 by 376 passengers, mostly Sikh, whose passage was arranged by Gurdit Singh. The ship arrived in Canada on 21 May, and Canadian customs officials asked that it be anchored 200 yards from shore. The passengers waited for two months for Canadian immigration officials to decide whether they would be allowed to disembark. Significantly, while they waited at the Vancouver harbour, the stranded passengers were promised by the Canadian government the basic necessities of subsistence, such as food and water, only if they agreed to return to India. The denial of basic subsistence provisions if they did not agree to do so reduced their existence to a disembodied spectacle through which they were represented as figures of exclusion from a Canada that wanted to maintain its sovereignty through its “white” citizenry.<sup>3</sup> As Pollock comments in a commemorative issue on the *Komagata Maru*, “It reminded me of a racist circus. Crowds on the Harbour docks, hawkers selling balloons and cotton candy, politicians fanning racist fires with bombastic speeches, with media adding a note of hysterical excitement and incitement” (“Creating the Character of the Sikh Woman” 18). Ultimately, except for twenty-four passengers, who established their domicile in Canada, the ship was forced to return to Asia, specifically to Budge Budge, India, where on 23 July the British Indian government arrested several passengers on charges of sedition. Some fled, several were killed when they tried to escape arrest, and Gurdit Singh went into hiding for seven years before he finally surrendered to the government after being persuaded to do so by Mohandas K. Gandhi.

Given the rise of the alternative theatre movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the context within which Pollock was writing, the subject matter of her play is not surprising. Flourishing in these decades, it was a “nationalistic movement” that encouraged the production of “experimental” and “original works” with the intention of protesting against “cultural colonialism” (Usmiani 2). “[R]evolutionary in its social and political ideology,” it aimed to make theatre “physically and financially accessible to the masses, the ideal being free theatre,” and hoped for “audience involvement at some level” (Usmiani 2). It is within this context that Pollock’s play has received critical attention. Sherrill Grace calls it a “national allegory or morality play” that challenges readers/viewers “to recognize the past so that we can change the future by performing new roles in a continually reimagined community” (54). The play, suggests Grace, “makes us witnesses to a traumatic spectacle that we cannot stop” (54-55). George Belliveau, who situates the play in the context of the theatrical scene that emerged during these decades, suggests that this movement provoked “a groundswell of interest in Canadian history, culture and institutions” for playwrights and collectives (85), who engaged in a “national celebration” (95) marked by an attempt to unpack and complicate the past and reimagine Canada against the grain of elite nationalism. The specific dates and the central theme of Pollock’s play entrench it firmly within the realm of historical fiction, which Pollock herself has repeatedly emphasized. In a 1979 interview, she asserted that “Canadians have this view of themselves as nice civilized people who have never participated in historical crimes and atrocities. . . . But that view is false” (qtd. in Belliveau 95). In light of Pollock’s self-conscious motivation for writing the play, Belliveau treats it as “historiographic metadrama” with “self-conscious dramatic devices that make the audience aware that the play they are watching is a representation of the past” (96). Erica Kelly affirms this view by suggesting that the play restages the “moment of national boundary marking,” a moment that “invites audience members to reconsider their seats on the sidelines” (257). Critical responses to the play thus confirm what Pollock had intended as its message.

The play’s circus-like setting foregrounds for viewers how the moment came to be represented by the Canadian government for the public. Pollock’s representation of the episode as a “spectacle,” “scandal,” and “circus” has been noted by Kelly, Grace, and Anne Nothof. Nothof identifies the play’s structure as enabling a “public entertainment or

circus” through which is achieved the “public spectacle” that resulted from “the standoff between officials and Sikhs” when the mayor of Vancouver, T.S. Baxter, “refused to send food to the *Komagata Maru*.” This spectacle “attracted crowds to Vancouver harbor” (480). Kelly suggests that the play’s circus-like setting, along with elements such as a play within the play, stage directions, spotlights, and dialogue, foreground its attempts to implicate audiences in racist practices and draw attention to their inaction. Grace insists that the circus works to emphasize the role and responsibility of the spectator, in addition to highlighting how the different characters — Hopkinson and T.S. — manipulate each other and how the system manipulates and destroys characters such as Hopkinson (53). The tropes of circus and spectacle, while noted in terms of the play’s representational aspects, warrant further discussion of this theatrical form and its relevance to memorializing the entanglements of race, class, and gender underpinning the Canadian government’s nationalistic stance toward the ship’s passengers.

In *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top*, Janet Davis examines the late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century railroad circus in the United States to understand its “ideological” meanings (xiii). An activity of amusement that commanded more “presence” than vaudeville, movies, amusement parks, and dance halls by serving as “a site for imaginative play, violence, and economic opportunity” (25), the circus, Davis argues, reflected “then-prevailing attitudes about gender, race, labor, sexuality, monopoly formation, nationalism and empire” (xiii). As such, it became “a powerful cultural icon of a new, modern nation-state” (10). The “immensity, pervasiveness, and live immediacy [of the railroad circus] transformed diversity — indeed history — into spectacle and helped consolidate the nation’s identity as a modern industrial society and world power” (10). Even though the circus enjoyed diversity, its “celebration of diversity was often illusory, because the circus used normative ideologies of gender, racial hierarchy, and individual mobility . . . to explain social transformation and human difference” (10). In so doing, “the circus helped consolidate a shared sense of white racial privilege among its diverse, white ethnic audiences; Euroamerican spectators came, in part, to laugh at what they ostensibly were not: pre-industrial, slow, bumbling, naïve or ‘savage’” (26). The circus at the turn of the century thus “played a double function because

it codified European ethnicity as racial difference, while simultaneously promoting a uniform 'white' American racial identity" (26). Although associated with disorderliness, indecorousness, violence, and carnival, and a space where acts were performed by African Americans or Native Americans, "it often reinforced stereotypes that confirmed white racist ideologies" (70). Given that the *Komagata Maru* incident took place in 1914, a time when the circus was a dominant form of entertainment, Pollock's use of this trope seems to be an appropriate aesthetic choice for exposing the power relations that influenced the Canadian government's prevention of Indians from landing.

To establish the relevance of the play's use of the circus in order to enable an understanding of the power dynamics operative in the treatment of the *Komagata Maru* passengers, it is useful to report the construction of the event in 1914, especially through the public sphere of newspapers such as the *Vancouver Sun*. Consider the following quotation from a report that appeared on 24 July:

Since the Komagata Maru arrived here on the morning of May 23 she has given the Dominion immigration officers here more trouble than Canadian Immigration officers ever had before. Three regiments of troops, with rifles and maxims, and a powerful cruiser with great guns and blue jackets were needed to drive this pestilential ship out of the port, and the citizens were provided with a spectacle of a sort never beheld before in a Canadian port. ("Cruiser")

If we pay attention to the language of this report, it constructs a discourse on the ship as "trouble," "pestilential," and "spectacle." Many similar reports circulated during the two months that the ship was anchored; newspapers covering the incident with regularity and creating a media frenzy constructed the people on the ship as circus clowns. As reports of a "Hindu Invasion" into "white Canada" permeated newspapers such as the *Vancouver Sun* while passengers waited for the official word, "an audience of locals packed the harbor front, hoping for a view of the action" (Kelly 257). According to Kelly, "When the Canadian government decided in July to call in the Navy to intimidate the ship's passengers, an estimated thirty thousand spectators lined local rooftops" in anticipation of naval action (257). For these spectators, the *Komagata Maru* was indeed represented, in the 1914 national inquiry report, as a site of spectacle, and the stranded passengers were called "sedition mongers" (qtd. in Kelly 266).



Pollock's play recreates this spectacle in order to highlight how the racism that operated at the level of policy had permeated the public sphere through the popular press. How is the spectacle recreated in the play? Here it is important to pay attention to the specifics of the stage. Despite its title, which seems to suggest that the play is a narration of this history, the action is staged in a brothel, which becomes a major playing area that projects it as an "open grill-like frame" to a character named Woman and gives the impression of the "superstructure of a ship" (227). The choice of the brothel was self-conscious. When asked by Rode at the UBC symposium on 3 May 2014 why she chose to locate the action in a brothel, Pollock responded that she wanted to foreground the nation from the margins and throw the spotlight on communities of working-class women that are often overlooked or ignored. The circus frame of the play foregrounds the master of ceremonies, named T.S., whose name, according to Nothof (89), can imply The State or subtly refer to the mayor of Vancouver at the time, T.S. Baxter. The master of ceremonies calls out to the audience as the play opens: "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Right this way, ladies and gentlemen! First chance to see the Komagata Maru! At this moment steaming towards picturesque Vancouver Harbour!" (229). The refrain is repeated as the play unfolds: "Ladies and Gentlemen! The turbaned tide is flowing! May 23, 1914. The first wave of an Asian invasion sits at anchor in Vancouver harbor!" (240). As the ringmaster, T.S. conducts the proceedings and plays the role of the real master, namely The State, maintaining, as he does, corporeal boundaries between himself and the passengers. That the action is staged as a circus show is emphasized by his advice to viewers to get their "[c]otton candy, taffy apples, popcorn and balloons" before they watch "this splendid spectacle" (279).

And finally, T.S. goes on with the following description:

The class of East Indian that has invaded British Columbia is commonly known as Sikh — having been accustomed to the conditions of a tropical clime, he is totally unsuited to this country. He is criminally inclined, unsanitary by habit, and roguish by instinct. The less we speak of his religion, the better. Suffice it to say that unless his ridiculous forms of worship are relinquished, he is an affront to a Christian community. His intelligence is roughly that of our Aborigines. He indeed belongs to a heathen and debased class. (249)

Recorded through a carefully selected vocabulary, this pejorative representation of the passengers aligns with actual representations in the historical record. Indeed, the official Canadian opinion, as presented in the 1914 national inquiry report, was as follows: “The inference to be drawn from the facts presented is that, though a number of East Indians are no doubt quiet, and contented to work without trouble, the poison of sedition must have affected the greater number, and . . . these men . . . have been and are a danger to British rule in India, and a trouble to Canada” (qtd. in Kelly 266). Here is the language of imperialism’s “civilizing mission,” a language highlighted through the circus setting in order to emphasize the asymmetrical power relations arising from racial and imperial politics. The arrest and incarceration of Indians upon arrival at Budge Budge on the charge of “sedition,” along with the firing on passengers that resulted in twenty-six (speculated) deaths, further attest to such asymmetry in that they were seen as “undesirables” “invading” Canada and posing a threat to British India.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, newspaper reports from that time in Vancouver presented the *Komagata Maru* passengers in these terms. Drawing attention to the pervasiveness of such perceptions, Pollock offers insights into the terms around which the potential immigrants were constructed, based on which colonial officials could keep checks on their mobility and thereby safeguard the interests of the British Empire. To this end, the circus is an effective strategy for creating a theatrical space in which T.S. can repeatedly call out to the audience and invite it to watch the spectacle of those stranded on the ship. Yet this spectacle also showcases the helplessness of those stranded and unable to disembark because of the control over the ship by Canadian officials. To highlight the level of official control, the action oscillates between movement (by the officials) and stasis (for the passengers). This demonstrates how the passengers are rendered powerless as they are subjected to the powerful gaze of multiple audiences — colonial officials, the audience within the play to whom T.S. calls out, and us as readers/spectators.

Through this layered representation, the play suggests its ongoing relevance and contribution to cultural memory. Jonathan Crewe has argued that “social memory is always reciprocally linked to social forgetting”; behind every “act of recall” lies “an act of oblivion” (75). This statement resonates strongly with Pollock’s play, which engages in a self-conscious act of preserving and interrogating the ways in which

social memory of the event is produced and maintained. To this end, the character of the Woman is important in showing the links between Indians' claims to mobility within the empire and the services that Indian soldiers offered to the empire: "Woman: (hard, not sentimental) We go back. My husband is dead. He died in their war. His father is dead. He died when they cut back the famine relief. I am a British subject, and my people's taxes have gone to their King. I am not a possession, a thing. I am myself and I will fight for myself and my son and my people. I am strong" (280). Although it is not clear which war is referred to, the fact that the *Komagata Maru* episode took place on the brink of the First World War suggests that the play alludes to other kinds of forgetting, especially with regard to Indian soldiers enlisted as front-line defenders but prevented from settling in other parts of the empire. Here the play functions as an attempt to undo the forgetting of this monumental moment in mediating the triangulated relationship among India, Canada, and the British Empire and the role of ordinary Sikhs in British imperial history. Questioning the forgetting of colonial soldiers is particularly important in complicating the role of public memory that has historically erased not only the memory of the *Komagata Maru* but also the role of Indian soldiers in the Great War. As Shashi Tharoor remarked recently, "The role and sacrifice of Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, and South Africans have long been celebrated in history books, novels, and award-winning films like 'Gallipoli.' But the world hears very little about the 1.3 million Indian troops who served in the conflict, which claimed the lives of 74,187, with another 67,000 wounded. Their stories, and their heroism, have long been omitted from popular histories of the war, or relegated to the footnotes."<sup>5</sup> Pollock's attention to this issue foregrounds this form of forgetting and connects it with how Canada came to be imagined as primarily a "white" nation.

In addition to the female Indian character and her child, the presence of Evy and Sophie is significant. Evy serves as an informant for Hopkinson, an officer of the immigration branch and an undercover spy for the government of Canada. However, the most poignant critique of the incident occurs when Evy narrates watching a Sikh man being attacked as he stands in a queue that she watches from a tram. Describing the violence against him unfold as she sits on the tram, she says to Hopkinson, "They knocked him down, the man in the turban, they were kicking, and then pushing and shoving to get in a blow —

and the tram pulled away. . . . [I]t was gone. As if I'd imagined it. It had never been" (248). Although Evy exposes the racist violence of the crowd and how such instances often go unnoticed, as Kelly observes (264), she is silenced by Hopkinson: "That's why we're sending the *Komagata Maru* back, so things like your fight won't happen" (248).

Pollock's portrayal of Evy as a compassionate and empathetic working-class character aims to highlight how the efforts to maintain a "White Canada Forever" are firmly located in the domain of official politics. Although these politics are questioned by those living at the social margins of Canada, their voices can be drowned out because of their lack of power. Such differentiated attention to the characters is significant since it undoes a kind of social memory that represents "white Canada" in monolithic terms. Rather, the attention to Evy, who questions Hopkinson, suggests the need for alliances across disempowered groups, alliances that, as the play tellingly suggests, can be thwarted by those in power. Pollock's play thus inscribes various class and gender affiliations and interests, yet it does so while suggesting a critique of imperial politics within which Canada is implicated. It therefore becomes a source for understanding how colonial and imperial priorities functioned beyond the boundaries of the colonies. As such, it confirms how preservation of the British Empire took precedence over other concerns and shaped the decision to prevent most of the passengers on the *Komagata Maru* from entering Canada.

The primacy accorded to imperial interests becomes visible in the correspondence among officials in Canada, British India, and London as the *Komagata Maru* passengers awaited the decision of officials. It was especially pronounced in the concern expressed in Ottawa regarding the retaliation that might occur against the English population in India. In a question raised in the Senate on 26 May 1914, the decision about allowing the "Hindu" passengers to land was seen as crucial: "The question is a very-very serious one, as the English white population of India numbers less than 200,000 people, and if something is done to prevent these people from entering this country there may be retaliation in India" (qtd. in Waraich and Sidhu 22). Clearly, the argument for not allowing entry of the passengers into Canada resulted partly from anxiety about the consolidation of anticolonial sentiment in India and its diaspora, especially with the formation of the revolutionary Ghadar Party in California, seen to have links to communities in Vancouver and

several of the passengers. Thus, rejection of the passengers was motivated by the interests of the empire to stave off rebellion in India and the diaspora, and the empire sought the services and complicity of the white Dominion of Canada to prevent such resistance.

Aside from the plot, the afterlife of the text is also significant in enabling the reproduction and perpetuation of social memory of the event. As one of the earliest writings in Canada on the event, Pollock's play has gone down in the annals of historical drama in Canada through anthologization, served as an inspiration for writers and critics at a time when there were few models to follow, and is now part of the archive contributing to the further creation of social memory, namely the Simon Fraser University online archive.<sup>6</sup> This archive carries an interview with Pollock alongside interviews with Punjabi writers, including Ajmer Rode and Sadhu Binning. Taken together, these cultural and textual fragments enable dissemination of the story of the *Komagata Maru* episode in India and Canada and serve as reminders of collective responses to it. Aside from performances of the plays, many of which are ephemeral and thus not part of any archive, the importance of cultural fragments lives on in numerous critical articles and university theses.<sup>7</sup> Hence, such plays form a crucial link among the public institutions of universities, private citizens who consume the texts, and communities of writers who reincarnate the event in different forms: poems, novels, documentaries, films, and so on.

In highlighting the vitality of such cultural fragments, I want to turn my attention to Budge Budge, the place to which the *Komagata Maru* passengers returned. Home to the memorial unveiled by Jawaharlal Nehru on 1 January 1952, in memory of the "martyrs" of the *Komagata Maru*, its railway station was renamed *Komagata Maru* on 1 October 2013. Such renaming turns the station into an important performative site that symbolically gestures toward the need to remember this largely forgotten chapter in the histories of Canada and India. The significance of such gestures became especially visible in discussions at the workshop funded by the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute held in April 2014 at Budge Budge and the Indian Institute of Technology in Kharagpur. This workshop allowed for new interpretations of how such representations aid the reconstruction of a triangulated narrative in which colonial India's and Canada's selective policies regarding mobility in and migration from the colonies were deeply linked with the history

of the British Empire.<sup>8</sup> This allusion to the subtle manoeuvrings of the empire is important because such information is often excluded from discussions of globalization and global literatures. Plays such as Pollock's *The Komagata Maru Incident* are therefore crucial because they remind us of the importance of considering questions of national belonging and regulation of borders often overlooked in celebratory narratives of globalization.

Although the character of Gurdit Singh remains absent in Pollock's play, the martyrs' memorial and the railway station in Budge Budge are notable for their images of him. Without collapsing genres, I suggest that these two seemingly disparate representations are linked through their performative associations. Like plays by Pollock, Rode, and Binning and Hundal, the memorials in Budge Budge are visual and consciously staged expressions representing symbolic acts that mark the inequities of imperial relations at a moment of nation building in independent India and in Canada. They become artifacts that recreate the memory of this history through physical symbols that one can touch and see and by transforming non-institutional spaces through acts of renaming, as in the case of the Budge Budge railway station. Interestingly, the station has been renamed in three languages: Hindi, Bengali, and English. This narrative detail additionally suggests that the history of the *Komagata Maru* belongs within a much wider socio-cultural landscape and bears multiple meanings. Such multiplicity is shaped not only by the various viewers and audiences of these artifacts — in Canada and India — but also by the voices that underlie such remembering. In the case of the Budge Budge memorial, political voices work in the interest of nation building along with community voices that strive for a spirit of secularism. In Pollock's play, the underlying voices seek to make sense of the entanglements of race relations with gender and class politics in Canada and the marginalization of stories such as the *Komagata Maru* episode from public memory.

### Moving forward

Pollock's play continues to serve as a site of regenerative possibilities, as exemplified by the reappearance of scenes from her text in a performance on the *Komagata Maru* episode mounted by the UBC Department of Asian Studies in 2014. This bilingual production — performed in

Punjabi and English — was associated with the symposium “Performing the Post-Colonial: The Political Work of Theatre” and staged at the Frederic Wood Theatre on 3 May. The Punjabi sections of the performance were directed by Rupinder Sharma from Rangmanch Punjabi Theatre, and the English sections were directed by Kathleen Duborg from UBC’s Department of Theatre and Film, with actors from Rangmanch and the department. The performance integrated scenes from plays by Pollock, Binning, and Rode presented alternately in the two languages. Following the stylistic convention of traditional theatre in India, the play was introduced by the *sutradhar* (literally, “one who holds the string”), played by M.K. Raina and Anne Murphy, who, by alternating commentaries in Punjabi and English, provided the historical context for the play and the connections among scenes. The bilingual production expanded the focus of Pollock’s play from its two pivotal characters — Evy and Sophie — to include other characters and situations in an attempt to offer a broader picture of gendered, racial, and imperial politics. In this new theatrical incarnation, interpolated with South Asian and Canadian perspectives on the same event, Pollock’s play offered the audience the opportunity to historicize contemporary diasporic communities’ struggles with their own marginalized status



Figure 1. Scene from the UBC production of the Komagata Maru episode. Photo Credit: Ali Kazimi.



within Canada and to foreground the links of the episode with the history of the British Empire. Spectators at the UBC symposium constituted a racially diverse body of students, scholars, playwrights, and community members. In accordance with changes in the social fabric of Canada, and the body of spectators, which, for this production, constituted an already sympathetic, informed, and bilingual audience that had participated in discussions on the *Komagata Maru* incident at the seminar, the play acquired a shift in its representational character. From the “spectacle” produced by the circus-like frame in Pollock’s original play through which the power of the Canadian state is represented, the performance, through the conversation between Evy and Hopkinson, suggested how much questions of gender and working-class marginality continue to haunt Canada. Moreover, the changing socio-political climate in British Columbia, where ongoing cultural activities commemorate the *Komagata Maru* episode and question Stephen Harper’s controversial apology tendered in 2008 in Surrey, the material context of the performance space in Vancouver acquired critical importance. It was a space where spectators could no longer envision the passengers on board the *Komagata Maru* as circus actors tamed by the state; rather, they were seen as agents who played a central role in posing what Hugh Johnston identifies as a “challenge to Canada’s colour bar” and in asserting their rights as subjects of the British Empire.<sup>9</sup> Anne Murphy, who worked with the directors, provides the following reason for toning down this element: “I mentioned the role of TS as a master-of-ceremonies/ringmaster in the narration, gesturing towards that frame, but if we had brought it (the circus) into the performance too much it would have then ended up as a frame to all three, and I did not want any one play to dominate over the others.”<sup>10</sup> In so doing, this performance enabled a rethinking of what Sherrill Grace identifies as “the challenge of nationalism” in “our so-called post-nationalist age” (55), an age that records the need to move beyond the identity politics of earlier decades and reimagine Canada as a community with multiple voices expressed in multiple languages. Thus, this performance demonstrated the relevance of the play to the changing landscapes of Canada where Punjabi is given (in the play) as much primacy as English and offered a sharp contrast to the ideology of “White Canada Forever,” an ideology dominant a century ago. With these representational shifts, one might conclude that such cultural revivals offer invaluable lessons for understanding the



present through links to historical moments such as the *Komagata Maru* episode and for suggesting that Canada is a community whose future lies in the coexistence, recognition, and celebration of its diversity.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This essay has benefitted from numerous conversations. I would like to thank Teresa Hubel, Julia Emberley, and Preet Aulakh for their critical input. I am also grateful to Ali Kazimi, Anjali Gera-Roy, Anne Murphy, Rahul Varma, Alia Somani, Prabhjot Parmar, Ajmer Rode, Sharon Pollock, and Tariq Malik for sharing their thoughts on the topic, and appreciate the invaluable commentary from Mariam Pirbhai and the anonymous reviewers of this essay.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This commemoration was accompanied by a special themed issue of the Punjabi literary magazine *Watan*. See Binning.

<sup>2</sup> The workshops, seminars, and conferences included “Charting Imperial Itineraries,” 1914-2014, University of Victoria, 15-16 May 2014; “Performing the Komagata Maru: Theatre and the Work of Memory,” UBC, 3-4 May 2014 (this event combined scenes from plays by Hundal and Binning, Rode, and Pollock in an integrated performance piece with alternating scenes in Punjabi and English and was conducted under the auspices of the symposium, “Performing the Post-Colonial: The Political Work of Theatre”); “Remembering the *Komagata Maru*: Historicizing Indian Migration to Canada,” sponsored by the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute, 20-21 April 2014, at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, India (see “Komagata Maru Heroes Remembered at IIT Kharagpur, Budge Budge,” <http://newseastwest.com/komagata-maru-heroes-remembered-at-iit-kharagpur-budge-budge/#sthash.hEJ1rtO6.dpuf>); and the 15th Annual South Asia Literary Association Meeting, 6-7 January 2015, on the theme of “Borders, Boundaries, and Margins,” to commemorate 100 years of the journey of the *Komagata Maru*.

<sup>3</sup> In an insightful analysis of the debates between 1906 and 1915 “surrounding the Canadian demand that Indians emigrating to Canada should have passports,” Radhika Mongia shows how this “demand was largely made on the grounds of race, though rerouted via arguments of lack of labour demand, cultural incompatibility, and unsuitability of the climate, and eventually accepted on the grounds of national sovereignty” (528).

<sup>4</sup> For an illustrated history, see Kazimi, *Undesirables*.

<sup>5</sup> Read more at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/shashi-tharoor-is-happy-that-the-1-3-million-indians-who-fought-in-wwi-are-finally-being-recognized#cBk23eTs7am9bTTi.99>.

<sup>6</sup> See “Komagata Maru: Continuing the Journey.” Publisher: SFU Library. [komagatamarujourney.ca/videos](http://komagatamarujourney.ca/videos).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Somani.

<sup>8</sup> The Interdisciplinary International Workshop titled “Remembering the *Komagata Maru*: Historicizing Indian Migration to Canada” was held by the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, 21 April

2014. On 15-17 February 2015, the institute held another workshop titled “Memorializing a Forgotten Chapter: The Komagata Maru Episode.”

<sup>9</sup> Johnston’s history is subtitled *The Sikh Challenge to Canada’s Colour Bar*.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Murphy, email correspondence with the author, 10 February 2015.

## WORKS CITED

- Badami, Anita Rau. *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Toronto: Vintage, 2006. Print.
- Belliveau, George. “Investigating British Columbia’s Past: *The Komagata Maru Incident* and *The Hope Slide* as Historiographic Metadrama.” *BC Studies* 137 (2003): 93-106. Print.
- Binning, Sadhu. “A Page from My Diary: May 23rd, 1989.” Category Archives: Sadhu Binning. Web. 26 Aug. 2014.
- Crewe, Jonathan. “Recalling Adamastor: Literature as Cultural Memory in White South Africa.” *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. Hanover: UP of New England, 1999. 75-86. Print.
- “Cruiser Was Ready to Slip Anchor of Komagata Maru if Needed.” *Vancouver Sun* 24 July 1914: 1. Print.
- Davis, Janet M. *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002. Print.
- Grace, Sherrill. “Imagining Canada: Sharon Pollock’s *Walsh* and *Fair Liberty’s Call*.” *Performing National Identities: International Perspectives on Contemporary Canadian Theatre*. Ed. Sherrill Grace and Albert-Reiner Glaap. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2003. 51-69. Print.
- “Hindu Invaders Now in the City Harbour on Komagata Maru.” *Vancouver Sun* 23 May 1914: 1. Print.
- Johnston, Hugh. *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada’s Colour Bar*. Vancouver: UBC P, 1989. Print.
- Kazimi, Ali, writer and dir. *Continuous Journey*. Peripheral Visions, 2004. Film.
- . *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2012. Print.
- Kelly, Erica. “‘This Is Not Where We Live’: The Production of National Citizenship and Borderlines in Sharon Pollock’s *The Komagata Maru Incident*.” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33.1 (2008): 257-71. Print.
- Malik, Tariq. *Chanting Denied Shores: The Komagata Maru Narratives*. Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2010. Print.
- Mongia, Radhika. “Race, Nationality, Mobility: A History of the Passport.” *Public Culture* 11.3 (1999): 527-56. Print.
- Nothof, Anne. “Crossing Borders: Sharon Pollock’s Revisitation of Canadian Frontiers.” *Modern Drama* 38.4 (1995): 475-87. Print.
- Pollock, Sharon. “Creating the Character of the Sikh Woman aboard Komagata Maru on Stage.” *Komagata Maru 1914-2014*. Surrey: *Komagata Maru* Heritage Foundation, 2014. 18. Print.
- . “*The Komagata Maru Incident*.” *Six Canadian Plays*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1992. 224-86. Print.
- . “Playwright’s Introduction.” *Six Canadian Plays*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1992. 226. Print.

- Somani, Alia Rehana. "Broken Passages and Broken Promises: Reconstructing the Komagata Maru and Air India Cases." Diss., U of Western Ontario, 2012. Print.
- Usmiani, Renate. *Second Stage: The Alternative Theatre Movement in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC P, 1983. Print.
- Waraich, Malwinderjit Singh and Gurdev Singh Sidhu, eds. *Komagata Maru — A Challenge to Colonialism. Key Documents*. Chandigarh: Unistar Books, 2005. Print.