

# Teacher's poetry examines pain and joy of immigrants' search for acceptance

By JOHN STEWART  
Staff

The little boy stood at the classroom door and refused to come inside.

It was 1975 at a Malton public school and Peter Jallal, a black immigrant from Guyana, was in his first year teaching for the Peel Board of Education. The 10-year-old boy was on his own work-to-rule because he didn't want a "Paki" teacher.

As hurtful as those words were to Jallal, he reacted first as a teacher. He coaxed the boy into the classroom that day and he exercised the skills of his "sacred calling" to help the boy adjust.

A couple of years ago, Jallal ran into that former student, at a local mall. The two sat down for a beer and reminisced.

That story typifies the enigma of Peter Jallal. It demonstrates both the deep-rooted racism that he finds so prevalent and offensive in Canadian society and it typifies his measured and optimistic response.

For though Jallal's first book of poetry, *This Healing Place and Other Poems*, is filled with the pain of the immigrant experience, it is also filled with the joy of finding refuge in a "new mainstream" Canadian society that is slowly making its own adjustment to all of its immigrants. That would include what he calls the

"chartered immigrants" of English and French descent, and the more recent immigrants of color.

Ironically Canada is both the source of much of the pain that prompted the 49-year-old Mississauga teacher to write the book and it is also *The Healing Place* of the title.

**Hidden Daggers**

What's going on around here anyway?  
 We woke up one morning  
 From our lengthy winter's lethargy  
 We find intruders in our privacy  
 These foreigners, the silent ones we mean  
 Trying to reshape our simple maple leaf  
 Hindus' Om is scrawled  
 Upon our sacred centre piece  
 Muslims' moon and star  
 Baptized its crisscross veins  
 Sikhs have wrapped the Mounties' heads around  
 Tradition now looks like a fool's dunce cap.  
 Queen's Park has asked her Majesty to leave  
 The prayer is ripped out from the book  
 Kirpans concealed in classroom closets closed  
 And the colours are changing on the Maple Leaf  
 What's going on around here anyway?

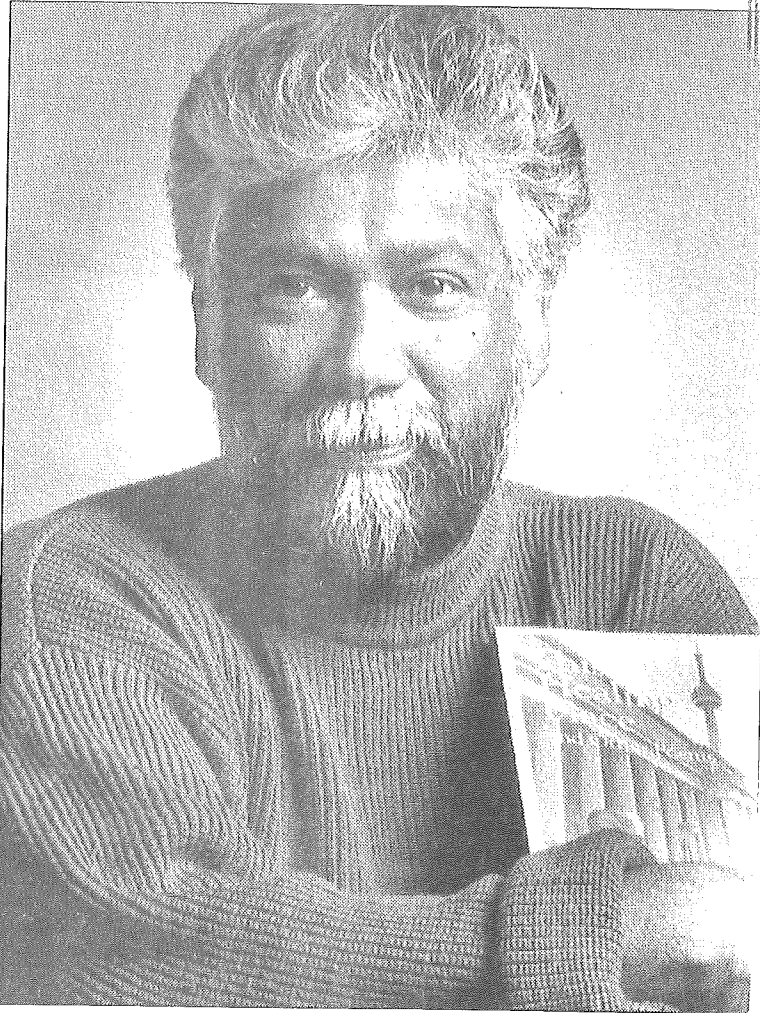
"It's a paradox," explains the English-as-Second-Language teacher at The Valleys Sr. School. The experience of integrating into a new country is "painful, but like art itself, you must go through it."

Jallal's poetry, which started out as personal therapy, is brutally honest. The father of two exorcises his alienation, loneliness and experiences with racism by exercising "the mighty pen." The result is poetry that aims at the solar plexus and hits its target with alarming regularity.

In "Paki Paki" the poet feels the sting of racist taunts from young white men "stetched with drugs and booze." Cheated of the right to work in this decadent economy, the poet says the attackers are "cowards, unable to take on their elders from within."

Yet there is an underlying compassion for these "idle, misinformed children." There is also the iron-clad resolve of the new native son of Canada. The poem ends "Why turn on me?/ I shake my head in pity/ In silence I smile/ Pakil Paki! is here to stay."

And make no mistake, Peter Jallal, for all of his quests for social justice, is a proud Canadian. In "Dave and Nari" he says "Where I came from' is here/ So here I stand/ Tall, dark and proud/ On this my own/ My snow-capped northern hill." The book is available at Cole's bookstores at \$9.95 plus tax.



Mississauga teacher and poet Peter Jallal.