

MÁRIA PALLA

EAST MEETS WEST: AN INTERCULTURAL READING OF
JUDITH KALMAN'S AND SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S
SHORT STORIES

Two writers. Two collections of short stories. Three countries of adoption. Two or more ancestral homelands. A number of different cultures from different continents. This is the striking initial multiplicity one faces when approaching Judith Kalman's and Shauna Singh Baldwin's works. Yet these texts can enter into dialogue with each other and may yield results unobtainable through studying them separately.

Through their joint discussion this essay only continues the tendency noticeable in the recent growth in the number of Canadian multicultural anthologies comprising pieces by authors from diverse ethnic or national backgrounds in the same volume. Kalman here stands for the Hungarian, while Baldwin for the East-Indian diaspora in Canada. Before the appearance of such collections, these immigrant groups already published their own, independent anthologies. John Miska, the notable Hungarian-Canadian critic, writer, translator, bibliographer and librarian, has edited a number of such collections, starting his work as an anthologist with *Antológia 1; a kanadai magyar írók könyve* (Anthology 1: A Book of Hungarian-Canadian Authors) as early as 1969, at a time when he also founded the Hungarian-Canadian Authors' Association (1968). Though the first anthologies were published in Hungarian, definitely catering for the intellectual needs of the diaspora, the choice of the readers' mother tongue was also probably the result of the Hungarian refugees' as yet insufficient knowledge of English, the language of their adopted land. Just as plausibly, the choice of language may also be explained by the strong emotional ties linking the refugees to their mother country, its culture and its language.

The change of the language used in the later volumes, the most recent one being entitled *Blessed Harbours* and published in 2002, indicates the progress of acculturation in the life of the diaspora. Although Hungarian-Canadians never established their own publishing house, their various organizations such as the Rákóczi Foundation or the Hungarian Studies Association of Canada were instrumental in some significant publishing enterprises. At the same time, there are still numerous journals and periodicals published in Hungarian with the only exception as a bilingual magazine being the Toronto-based *Kaleidoscope*.

South-Asian Canadians, a name originating from a geographical designation and used to refer to Indian-Canadians as well, brought out their first joint publication as an ethnic community somewhat later. As Arun Mukherjee notes (24), it was a collection of essays called *A Meeting of Streams* in 1985 that represented the diaspora on its own in a single volume. This was to be followed by *The Geography of Voice*, a literary anthology, in 1992, *Shakti's Words: South Asian Canadian Women's Poetry* a year later (1993), and several other volumes including *The Whistling Thorn: South Asian Canadian Fiction* (1994), *Sons Must Die and Other Plays* (1998), with the most recent being *Her Mother's Ashes*, the third book in a series of writings by South Asian women in Canada and the US (2009). Several of these volumes were published by the Toronto-based TSAR publishing house established in the mid-1980s, growing out of the literary magazine first called *Toronto South-Asian Review*, which, in 1993, changed its name to *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*. Explaining the reasons for this change, Mukherjee calls attention to the realization that "South Asian Canadian writers do not see themselves as members of a self-identified community" (31). However, as demonstrated above, anthologies based on a regional grouping of their authors still keep appearing and the label South-Asian is still applied, even though it is often regarded as "a reductive, constrictive, and false categorization" inadequate to reflect the diversity it is supposed to cover (Dunlop 117).

At the same time, multicultural anthologies exemplified by *Other Solitudes* edited by Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond in 1991 or *Making a Difference* edited by Smaro Kamboureli in 1996 work against the separation of ethnic writings from the mainstream and from each other. Attention is paid to their differences, but an attempt is made to offer the opportunity of a parallel reading. The editors of the *Toronto South-Asian Review* also recognized the significant variety within the

South-Asian community, that it was too broad a term for such a diverse group, but they still wanted to stay true to their mission of reflecting the multifaceted nature of contemporary literature especially in Canada, the United States, Asia and Africa, so they did not limit their focus but rather made their approach a more inclusive one. However, the increasing acknowledgement of and respect for differences can be attributed to the new policy of the country officially proclaimed in the Multiculturalism Act adopted in 1988, a new philosophy also manifest in the resulting changes on the part of government organizations as to what projects to aid financially.

From the list of titles together with the dates of publication of anthologies presented above it is also apparent that the literary output of the Hungarian diaspora in Canada seems to be somewhat decreasing in recent times while that of the South Asian Canadians is on the increase. As early as 1987, George Bisztray, the author of the seminal study *Hungarian-Canadian Literature* concluded his book with a chapter speculating about the prospects of Hungarian-Canadian literature and predicting a rather uncertain future for it (75–76).

These tendencies can, at least in part, be attributed to the different patterns of immigration these groups follow in Canada. Hungarians came to Canada in 4 major waves. In the period before 1914 about 8,000 Hungarian nationals, mainly farmers, emigrated to western Canada; after World War I, from 1925 to 1930, about 26 000 Hungarians arrived; between 1948 and 1952 some 12 000 postwar displaced persons came; and in 1956–1957 about 37 000 Hungarian refugees entered Canada after the collapse of the 1956 Revolution against the Soviet domination of the country. It was the many young students among the 56ers who really left their mark on the Canadian cultural scene, but since then no migration on such a scale has occurred between the two countries. Transnational migrants travelling back and forth between the two continents represent a more recent phenomenon. As one can only guess, the stories in Kalman's collection *The County of Birches* (1998) must be based on her own experiences as a child leaving Hungary with her parents in 1956, finally to find a new home in Montreal.

The first South Asian immigrants arrived at the turn of the twentieth century, mainly in British Columbia, and most of them were Sikhs from the Punjab in the north-western region of the Indian subcontinent. A second wave did not start arriving until the 1960s due to the discriminatory laws of Canada aiming to restrict the immigration of

people of colour. These regulations were changed significantly in 1967, which allowed a more diverse and better educated segment of South Asians to settle in Canada. It is this group that is responsible for the remarkable literary output of the diaspora, an achievement acknowledged by various prizes awarded to their writers (McGifford x). Shauna Singh Baldwin was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Canada/Caribbean region for her first novel, *What the Body Remembers*, in 2000, while her next novel, *The Tiger Claw*, was shortlisted for the Giller Prize in 2004. Her collection of short stories to be discussed here appeared under the title *English Lessons and Other Stories* in 1995, almost the same time as Kalman's book. However, Baldwin belongs to a younger generation and her migration has also taken a different direction from Kalman's as she was born in Montreal but grew up in India and finally settled in the United States, never relinquishing her Canadian citizenship.

Kalman's *The County of Birches* is a collection of linked short stories following the central character Sári's family on their way from Hungary to Canada with the clear indication of a no return ever to their Central European homeland. The titles of the sections in the book make sure the reader does not miss the stages of this journey, where the first one is THE OLD WORLD, the next is THE GREY WORLD and the final one is THE NEW WORLD. This passage through geographical space is Sári's own experience but she also listens to her father's narratives throughout the several stories of the volume. These start with two pieces narrated mainly in the third person, unlike the other stories in the collection, and it is thus that she as well as the readers are provided with a chronologically arranged starting point of the genealogies of the two branches of her family.

Both sides of her family were rooted for centuries in the north-eastern part of Hungary evoked by the title of the whole book, a territory, which is the English rendering of the region known as Nyírség in Hungarian. Part of the land of birches called Beregszász, which once belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, was given to the Soviet Union, now the Ukraine, at the time when Hungary was dismembered under the provisions of the Versailles Treaty concluding the Great War. It is not only her journey in space that determines the identity formation of the young girl but also her Jewish heritage, an aspect of her identity given a prominent role throughout the whole process. The most traumatic event in the life of European Jews during the 20th century, the Holocaust is a

haunting background making its presence felt all the time. The historical facts are well known but on a personal level for Sári it is the time when most of her extended family were lost, an estimated eighty people. Her mother and father are survivors and their traumatic memories of the Nazi concentration camp and the labour camp respectively keep surfacing in their tales and nightmares. They already appear in the opening story “Not for Me a Crown of Thorns”, a narrative where the motif of victimization occurs on three levels. Sári recalls the Biblical story of the Flood, at the end of which Noah sends two pigeons out to survey the situation and the first one is lost, sacrificed. The next innocent child victim is Sári herself, who is punished instead of her sister Cimi for the latter’s misdemeanor. The incomparably larger magnitude of the third disaster, the Holocaust, is foreshadowed by the Biblical event, while the personal involvement is indicated by the second one. It is also a telling feature that the collection ends with “Eichmann’s Monogram”, in which one narrative line involves the trial of the chief Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann, greatly responsible for the mass deportation of Jews. This ending allows some sort of rest finally to be achieved and it closes the collection on a note of resignation.

The specifically Hungarian heritage of the family is mostly present in the language of the stories. Several words appear in Hungarian referring to family members and locations but the issue of the acquisition of a new language is just as crucial. The mother is much more interested in, and much more talented at, learning new languages, so it is not surprising that she is the one who suggests leaving Hungary in the aftermath of the 1956 Revolution. Suffering from the aggression and brutality of the times reminds her of her previous experiences and provokes her into saying, “‘I saw Auschwitz, now this!’ She was not going to raise her children in fear. ‘I’ve had enough cringing and hiding and hoping against the worst that always happens” (65). The father suffers more from the departure emotionally, which is signaled by his turning inward and his being less willing to communicate with those surrounding him. Yet it is also mentioned several times that even the mother is discriminated against both in England and in Canada for speaking the English language with an accent: this is given as the reason for her not being employed in more prestigious jobs such as that of a school teacher for a long time.

Yet the central issue concerns the preservation of the family’s Jewish identity and their relationship with the Jewish community in Canada. Examples of Jews integrating into the mainstream society to the point of hiding their Jewishness include the mother’s brother living in England,

who insists on being called Uncle Larry instead of Laci bácsi, and the mother's sister Cimi and her husband Uncle André, who both converted to Christianity. The latter take things so far as "speaking in a French-accented English to discourage my parents from reverting to Hungarian." This is how they argue their case: "What good had it brought any of them being Jewish? Forget about Hitler; afterwards, Apu [Dad] had had to change his Jewish name to protect himself from Stalin. Show him one time it had ever proved an advantage to be Jewish" (126). Although they cannot accept such an argument, Sári's parents never actually decide to settle in a Jewish neighborhood in Montreal. When the mother can only find employment as a teacher in such an area of the city, she hates it. "It reminded her of Europe. She hadn't come all this way just to arrive into the same old smells, same old faces, same old reminders of disaster." (127) Nevertheless, they do try to be faithful to their religion celebrating the Jewish holidays and observing the traditions in their family circle. However, joining others in a synagogue turns out to be a troublesome experience for the parents and the girls in the family, too. Sári finds it especially hard to deal with the exclusion she is often subject to among the Montreal Jews, who have known each other and have socialized together for years.

Similarly to their creator, the characters in Baldwin's stories travel back and forth between North America and India, unlike the aforementioned refugees in Kalman's book. Baldwin's central figures all have the same very distinct ethnic background: they are Sikhs who as such form one of India's minority groups; like these people, Kalman's Jewish characters are also members of a minority in Hungary. The opening stories in Baldwin's collection address the process of acculturation either in the form of a family member leaving home and family for school or for work and returning as a completely altered person, or Sikh immigrants experiencing the demands made on them by both or either of their cultures, the inherited and the acquired ones. The result is always disastrous. In "Montreal 1962", the unnamed male character is expected to cut his hair and get rid of his turban, an essential part of his traditional clothing, if he wants to be hired. The final suggestion is that doing so would be too high a price, which leaves the reader with a sense of utter hopelessness, a lack of possible reconciliation between the two cultures. The impression thus created is counterbalanced by valiant defiance on the part of the female narrator, his wife. She has this to say:

And so my love, I will not let you cut your strong rope of hair and go without a turban into this land of strangers. [...] My hands will tie a turban every day upon your head and work so we can keep it there. One day our children will say, "My father came to this country with very little but his turban and my mother learned to work because no one would hire him."

Then we will have taught Canadians what it takes to wear a turban.
(16)

In "Toronto 1984", a more tolerant Canadian society is presented. Here the younger narrator Piya is allowed to stay on at her job in spite of offending her employer by refusing to stand up and drink a toast to Elizabeth II, of whom she thinks as "the British Queen, the symbol of the empire my grandfathers fought against for independence, the one whose line had sent my grandfathers to prison. I would not stand." (63) Although afterwards Piya is referred to as a Paki half-jokingly by her boss, she swallows her anger and fights back in the name of the whole subcontinent by becoming an efficient worker. It is her Indian family that tries to hold her back and insists on a traditional arranged marriage. From this she is saved by another similarly catastrophic event, the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for her ordering an attack on the Golden Temple, a sacred location for all Sikhs in Amritsar, resulting in the deaths of eighty soldiers and some five hundred civilians in 1984. The family visit is thus postponed and not without reason: from documents it is known that a wholesale massacre of Sikhs followed in Delhi and some other major cities in the north.

It is not the only traumatic event from India's history which is evoked on the pages of the collection. The Partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan at the time of the subcontinent gaining independence on 15 August 1947 is evoked in the story "Family Ties". This is not surprising since the province of Punjab, home to a significant Sikh population, was divided between the two countries at this time. Partition went together with a large-scale movement of population involving more than ten million people. As the new Indian and Pakistani governments were absolutely unprepared to handle the situation, they had no control over the erupting violence that resulted in the slaughter of about 500,000 people. It is implied in the story that the father's sister was taken advantage of and raped by Muslims; she became pregnant and gave birth to an illegitimate child. The unwanted birth subsequently leads to her being rejected by the

family due to a false sense of pride and shame at the same time, ultimately causing her madness.

Cultural differences survive spatial dislocation as well when, in the eponymous short story, Simran travels to the US to study and meets a fellow student of Pakistani Muslim background, who immediately falls in love with her. The two of them never really get intimate in spite of Mirza's attempts, which, however, always stop short of a proposal of marriage, something he still regards as impossible between a Muslim and a Sikh. His insistent phone calls after Simran's return home destroy her chances of ever returning to the place of study abroad as her parents are abhorred by their mistaken speculations about their daughter's affair with a believer in the Koran.

A complicated view of related affairs is offered in "Nothing Must Spoil This Visit" when a Sikh young man called Arvind, now married to a second-generation Hungarian-Canadian woman, re-visits his family at his birthplace in India with her. The contrast between the active, talkative and initiative Janet and her Sikh counterpart Chaya becomes obvious early on in the story, though the reasons for Chaya's shyness, passivity and hostility towards Janet are only revealed later. As it turns out Chaya, now married to Arvind's brother, was once engaged to Arvind as a preliminary to an arranged marriage, which eventually fell through for two reasons. First, Arvind left for Canada; second, she compromised herself with Arvind's brother and had no other choice but to marry him. Yet, at the end we learn that a child, so important in all the families presented in the collection, will be forever denied to Janet and Arvind because of his childhood illness, while Chaya has already fulfilled this role in her life. Values clash subtly and choices are hard to make in this case. A Hungarian reader also begins to wonder why Baldwin has chosen a Hungarian immigrant for the Sikh boy's wife. One explanation might be the plausibility of such a situation: the Hungarian Janet is not quite part of mainstream Canadian society, which makes her available for this kind of inter-racial marriage, but coming from a European background she is attractive enough for the young man due to her generic European background associating her with the exotic Other.

In addition to this obvious link between the two collections of short stories, the haunting memories of equally catastrophic historical events in the past, the difficulties of adapting to a new culture while also preserving the old-country heritage and the importance attached to one's loyalty or lack of loyalty to the family are the most striking features these volumes

share. The two women writers also find it significant to explore these issues from the viewpoint of women, thus interpreting them from a peculiar, gender-determined, angle presenting them in a new light. Through reading these two sets of stories in near-simultaneous succession, one may find new ways of mutual understanding for these distinct ethnic groups, ways that help bridge the cultural divide separating them. The reader thus discovers in practice what the poet-critic Rishma Dunlop claims about diasporic writing when calling it “a push against the existing order of things, speech that makes possible new understandings of human differences, writing against the grain of history” (116) in an attempt to challenge and dismantle borders.

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