

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem  
Bölcsészettudományi Kar

## DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ

Palla Mária

Representations of Transcultural Communities in Postcolonial Literature:  
Problematizing Identity in South Asian Diasporic Writing in Britain and Canada  
in the 1980s and the 1990s

*Transzkulturális közösségek ábrázolása Kanadában és Angliában–identitás-  
problémák a dél-ázsiai diaszpóra posztkoloniális irodalmában az 1980-as és az  
1990-es években*

Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskola  
A Doktori Iskola vezetője: Dr. Lukács István DSc, egyetemi tanár

Modern Angol–Amerikai Irodalom és Kultúra doktori program  
A program vezetője: Dr. Ferencz Győző PhD, egyetemi tanár

A bizottság elnöke:  
Dr. Dávidházi Péter MHAS, egyetemi tanár

Hivatalosan felkért bírálók:  
Dr. Kenyeres János PhD, habilitált egyetemi docens  
Dr. Molnár Judit CSc, habilitált egyetemi docens

A bizottság további tagjai:  
Dr. Czigányik Zsolt PhD, egyetemi adjunktus, a bizottság titkára  
Dr. Juhász Tamás PhD, egyetemi docens  
Dr. Ferencz Győző PhD, egyetemi tanár (póttag)  
Dr. Szalay Krisztina CSc, egyetemi docens (póttag)

Témavezető:  
Dr. Takács Ferenc PhD, ny. egyetemi docens

Budapest, 2019

## Object and aim of research

Migration and the related questions of roots, routes, belonging and identity started to feature large as thematic foci of literary works more and more frequently in the changed intellectual climate of the last two decades of the twentieth century. It was in the 1980s and the 1990s that diaspora studies emerged, aiming to specifically address such issues and diaspora criticism also became a theoretical tool employed to study the ever more prolific field of multicultural writing in Britain and Canada, the two locations that this dissertation focuses on.

Due to the virtually overwhelming productivity of diasporic writers as well as their critics in the period surveyed, this dissertation concentrates on the works of a manageable, and in many ways representative, amount of work dating from the designated era and produced by five selected writers of the South Asian diaspora. In order to limit the scope of examination to comprehensible dimensions, only diasporic communities from the modern state of India are studied here, with special attention to the Sikh, Muslim, Parsi, and Hindu groups, each represented by one or two of the five authors whose works are to be discussed. These works, in the order in which they appear in the dissertation roughly following the chronological order of their publication, are *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987), the first novel Ravinder Randhawa published in England, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) by Salman Rushdie, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) by Rohinton Mistry, born, incidentally, in Rushdie's native city of Bombay, now Mumbai and in the same year as Randhawa, but who embarked on a literary career in Canada, *Tamarind Mem* (1996), Anita Rau Badami's first novel, and finally *English Lessons and Other Stories* (1995) by Shauna Singh Baldwin.

A careful examination of such a clearly defined body of primary and secondary sources promises to offer sufficient grounds for identifying the circumstances that facilitated the boom of this kind of writing while creating conditions in which diaspora-related novels and short stories have been able to remain a prevalent category of fiction to this day. To

understand what is at stake in the complex phenomena of migration, transculturation and diaspora for literary narratives, questions of cultural identity, hybridity, home, and memory will be addressed as relevant thematic nodes in the dissertation's subsequent chapters. A review of related theoretical approaches to these issues provided at the beginning of the dissertation is followed by a survey of some pertinent socio-cultural data in order to provide a more specific context at the beginning of each chapter devoted to the close reading of the individual volumes. In the course of this examination some explanations are to be offered as to the lasting presence and popularity of diaspora discourse in general and diasporic literary representations in particular.

### **Structure and methods**

The first chapter is divided into two parts, with the first sub-chapter tracing both the expansion of the semantic field and ever growing comprehensiveness of the term diaspora.

The multiplicity of foci in diaspora studies makes it difficult to strictly separate diaspora as a theoretical concept from diasporic discourses and distinct historical experiences of diaspora.

The situation is further complicated by the various uses of the term by social scientists, cultural theorists and literary scholars. To illustrate various typologies created in diaspora studies, Robin Cohen's and Sudesh Mishra's approaches are discussed in more detail; Robin Cohen also provides a clear outline of how diaspora studies have evolved in the four phases of their history.

The second sub-chapter presents attempts made by various scholars to identify different theoretical strategies and to define and understand the diaspora phenomenon starting with John Armstrong in the 1970s. In a common framework diaspora is examined in a triadic relationship between host countries and homelands, but with the arrival of postmodernism and poststructuralism, in particular, ideas of decentralization, fragmentation and indeterminacy begin to dominate theoretical work in the field. To facilitate the analysis and close reading of

the texts by the five authors listed, the theoretical concepts of Stuart Hall are surveyed in connection with diasporic identity, brief mention is made of Avtar Brah's diaspora space as well as Chelva Kanaganayakam's attempts to sift through the relevant terms identifying migrant subjects, followed by an examination of Mary Louise Pratt's contact zones, Homi Bhabha's Third Space and approaches to the issues of hybridity and transculturality, to end the chapter with interpretations of the psychological entanglements of diasporans who often find themselves alienated from both the homeland and the host society, which is aptly expressed by the concept of the uncanny.

Chapter 2 focuses on Asian-British intercultural encounters in the post-imperial English metropolis as depicted by Ravinder Randhawa, whose central character is Kulwant, also referred to as Kuli in short. She is the wicked old woman of the title, whose wanderings among her friends and family members form the overarching motif in the plot. The way Randhawa's novel negotiates cultural differences, explores diasporic identity and foregrounds the female mental space in multicultural Britain represents a new departure in the body of Asian British writing.<sup>1</sup> The chapter examines Kuli's struggle to avoid liminality, life in between cultures, and her desire for identification. That is why she first embraces complete Englishness in an attempt to assimilate. When that fails, she returns to her Indian heritage reclaiming her traditional self, but she cannot conform to the stereotypical role assigned to her in an arranged marriage, either. Eventually, she departs from all the stereotypes she previously adopted mistakenly hoping for liberation, and turns her attention to her community of women, who are mainly, but not exclusively Asian or female. It is through this community that the characters gain agency, and the novel ends with an affirmation of the need for an active life. There is a sense of integration here of people of the most varied backgrounds, which expresses Randhawa's optimistic view that the South Asian diaspora in Britain is there

---

<sup>1</sup> Sharon Monteith. "On the streets and in the tower blocks: Ravinder Randhawa's 'A Wicked Old Woman' (1987) and Livi Michael's 'Under a Thin Moon' (1992)." *Critical Survey*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1996, p. 33.

to stay and their differences can be accommodated. At the same time, Randhawa is very careful to avoid painting an idealized picture or homogenizing the British Asian community in her kaleidoscopic presentation of women's lives.

Chapter 3 is devoted to a pivotal novel of Rushdie's, *The Satanic Verses*, in which the novel is explored as diasporic writing foregrounding questions of diasporic identity. The connections to the homeland and to the hostland are represented in many different ways in diasporic writing, which also examines the resulting duality of the diasporan's life. This duality, in its turn, can also involve a double gain for some or a complete loss for others. What characterizes the diasporic community located in the interstitial space of the two lands? This question becomes especially important because home as a contested term does not only mean a geographical area but is also the site of one's culture, which in turn shapes one's identity. Can there be metonymic connections between home, culture and identity for a diasporan? Such concerns are expressed by Salman Rushdie when he represents the ambiguous situation of the migrant in his novel. One other issue to be investigated in this chapter is whether Rushdie writes from the position of a diasporic or a migrant writer. What are the differences between the two sensibilities and what are the consequences of occupying one or the other position? How does such a choice manifest itself in his novel?

When defending *The Satanic Verses* in his essay entitled "In Good Faith", Rushdie unequivocally celebrates hybridity; therefore, a more detailed account of the theoretical approaches to the issue of hybridity is deemed expedient before the examination of its narrativized treatment by Rushdie where these approaches can be applied. The novel combines apparently conflicting modes of writing including "political satire and religious fable; realism and fantasy"<sup>2</sup> as well as numerous instances in which the essentialist notions of a monolithic culture together with conceptions of a fixed and coherent authentic self are

---

<sup>2</sup> Dominic Head. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*. Cambridge UP, 2004, p. 179.

undermined. The most prominent examples of a variety of hybrid identities are provided in the chapters that delineate, much like a *Bildungsroman*, the life stories of Saladin and Gibreel, the two central characters, as they develop in the metropolitan centres of London and Bombay. Although Rushdie expressly celebrates mixing and transculturation in his essays, due to the radical indeterminacy of his postmodern discourse in *The Satanic Verses*, his approach to the issue of hybridity involved becomes more uncertain by the end than it might seem at first glance. Tempting as it might be, though, then to interpret his work along the lines of the binaries pitting failed migrant against rooted native, what we find instead is that Rushdie subverts, here as elsewhere, such easy and fixed oppositions.

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag* by Rohinton Mistry, the topic of Chapter 4, the postcolonial encounter takes place in urban Canada between newly arrived East-Indian immigrants and representatives of mainstream English-Canadian society. But what image of Canada is constructed by the new arrivals? What social and cultural exchange, if any, occurs between the newcomers from the East and members of the host society residing in the West? How do the South Asian diasporans define themselves in the liminal space between the homeland left behind and the new home yet to be established? It is questions like these that the chapter endeavours to raise and, where possible, answer.

There are altogether three stories in Mistry's collection thematising the experience of immigration/emigration. The one with the most hopeful ending is the final story titled "Swimming Lessons". Its two storylines set in Canada and India respectively merge into each other in intricate ways and become so intertwined with the same tropes appearing in both that the diasporic identity of the protagonist shaped under their influence appears to successfully unify his different selves in a fluid state.

The same Parsi protagonist called Kersi appears in the story "Lend Me Your Light" too. His efforts to reconcile the two worlds of his life in Canada in this earlier narrative lead to disappointment: all he finds is fake imitations of the home left behind, incongruous with the

new setting. However, during his visit back in India, what Kersi sees confuses him the same way as his Canadian experience. Therefore, his occupying an in-between place is far from the celebratory stance that Homi Bhabha attributes to the liminal Third Space. The third story in the collection which also poses the question of cultural adaptation in a Canadian setting is entitled "Squatter". In a painful but humorous tone it gently ridicules both the main character Sid/Sarosh and the Canadian multicultural policy of the time.

In Badami's novel *Tamarind Mem* discussed in Chapter 5, the relationship of the diasporic subject to home, regardless of its specific location in a landscape or a mindscape and its manifold implications, is a central question and plays a significant role in the formation of diasporic identity as well. The desire to belong to what one might call the home of his or her own is more complex than a search for roots, a nostalgia for the past, or a wish to return home or to have a homeland. It is the younger narrator-protagonist of the novel Kamini who immigrates to Canada and it is by tracing her story that the author can explore the diasporic consciousness of a new arrival in the country. Remembering the ancestral home in India and recreating the past there while coping with her sense of displacement in the host society are key thematic features of this novel. Similarly to Randhawa in her *A Wicked Old Woman*, Badami gives voice to different generations of women, thus trying to redress the omission or marginalisation of these gendered age-groups in the creative literature of the past. While there are instances in the novel that suggest the possibility that Kamini will succeed in constructing a new home for herself in Canada, it is her dislocation, loneliness and isolation both from the ancestral home and the host country that prevail as recurrent motifs in the narrative of Kamini's life.

To come full circle, the last volume to be explored in Chapter 6 is a collection of fifteen short stories by Shauna Singh Baldwin, a female author of Sikh ancestry like Ravinder Randhawa. Her protagonists are also of a Sikh background involved in the process of acculturation either as a family member leaves home and relatives behind for school or for work abroad to return home as a completely altered person, or as Sikh immigrants in North

America experience the demands made on them by both or either of their cultures, the inherited and the acquired ones. The outcome of these negotiations is rather uncertain when not explicitly disastrous.

## **Results**

Emerging from the investigation conducted in this dissertation into the various representations of problems of identity in South Asian diasporic writing is the overall impression that in spite of sharing the same thematic preoccupations and regional background and having published their volumes under scrutiny here in the same ten-year period, the authors of the various texts containing such representations exemplify a multiplicity of attitudes and approaches using widely divergent narrative gambits and discursive strategies. However, some of the features that unite Rushdie's and Randhawa's novels in question include the numerous instances of transformation, literal as well as metaphorical, testing the limits and possibilities of character metamorphosis. The final outcome is far from being unequivocal, which leads to indeterminacy in both novels regarding the issue of hybridity, the result of transformation, although hybridity is presented in a number of different forms in the two novels. However, the two authors also diverge in significant ways due to which they are often considered to be representatives of successive and distinct British Asian generations. The three writers who have made Canada their adopted home write in an environment influenced by a different history and different cultural politics. Their books seem to employ a less radically oppositional mode and are also less overtly political. Yet, negotiations of the protagonists' liminal identities in the interstices of culture are just as complex and problematic as they are in Randhawa's and Rushdie's novels.