

# Maria Palla

---

## "Narrating the Homeland: The Importance of Space and Place in Canadian Multicultural English-Language Fiction", Judit Molnar, Debrecen 2013 : [recenzja]

---

TransCanadiana 7, 239-242

---

2014-2015

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Maria Palla

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

**JUDIT MOLNÁR (2013). *NARRATING THE HOMELAND: THE IMPORTANCE OF SPACE AND PLACE IN CANADIAN MULTICULTURAL ENGLISH-LANGUAGE FICTION.* DEBRECEN, DEBRECEN UNIVERSITY PRESS. 118 PAGES. ISBN: 978-963-318-369-4**

This recently published book by Judit Molnár, one of Hungary's leading Canadianists, offers the in-depth critical assessment of works by five contemporary immigrant writers now residing in Canada. For those well-versed in vexillology it is enough to take a glimpse at the eye-catching front cover to identify the authors' countries of origin as well as their adopted home signalled by their respective flags. The map of Canada has not been placed there by mere chance either, as cartography, a significant theme in postcolonial theory, will play a crucial role on the pages to come. All this gives an early indication that it is the spatial aspects of literary works that will be the springboard of the analyses here.

The complexities of the issues to be revealed are also pointed out in the title of the volume where the word 'multicultural' calls attention to the fact that these authors of various ethnic backgrounds come from five different countries and have deliberately been selected for the diversity they embody: Austin Clarke, usually regarded as Canada's first major black writer, is from Barbados, Rohinton Mistry comes from India, Michael Ondaatje's home country is called Sri Lanka today, Neil Bissoondath, born in the Caribbean like Clarke, is from Trinidad, while the last author is Nino Ricci and is of Italian descent. In fact, this is the order in which they appear in the study. Admittedly, Ricci is quite different from the other four writers since his ancestral home is not a former colony and he is a second-generation immigrant unlike the other four, who were all born outside Canada.

It is not only the places of origin that distinguish these writers but also their modes of literary expression. As the book progresses, it becomes quite clear that the extent to which the real life experiences gained in the various homelands are fictionalized is much greater in the novels by Bissoondath and

Ricci than in the works of Clarke or Mistry. This implied organizing principle provides Professor Molnár's study with a clear logical structure.

On what grounds are these different writers grouped together in this study then? As the title suggests, all of them share a thematic concern which also marks a shift in the Canadian literary canon: these authors, now in their new country, look back on the years of their or their ancestors' lives spent in their homelands and, apparently, rely on the idea of return migration, which, in Ondaatje's case, turns into even something more, a circular migration, as a major topic in their works. It also becomes obvious that the autobiographical impulse is very strong in all of these works. It is crucial for these writers to try to come to terms with the situation left 'there' in order to find a sense of belonging, to establish their identity 'here', which often turns out to be based on multiple cultural identities. This search for self-definition in geographical space is usually accompanied by an attempt to understand the forces of history at play and the resulting power relations. This is how, as a consequence, topoanalysis supports psychoanalysis since, as Professor Molnár convincingly argues, place is an all-pervasive condition of experience (16).

Although Judit Molnár's book is thoroughly grounded in research focussed on a remarkable spectrum of spatial and geographical theories as formulated by Bachelard, Carter, Foucault, Lefebvre, Tuan and others, she moves among them with great ease. Yet, the methodology of her work, as she explicitly describes in her "Preface," emphasises the close textual analysis of the books selected to allow "the spatial theory implicit in them (...) to be released" (Kort quoted in Molnár 16). This is a welcome departure after the proliferation of studies imposing theories on literary texts sometimes to such an extent that the original texts become forgotten in the theorizing.

The concluding remarks draw further parallels between the five books, highlighting the overall significance of some specific locations, most importantly the houses, these very intimate, private places, serving as the ancestral homes of the protagonists. Other similarly prominent edifices include schools, churches, walls, gardens and places of burial.

The school plays an especially noticeable role in Clarke's memoir set in colonial Barbados because formal education as provided by the colonizing power was among the most influential, though very subtle, means to oppress the local people and immerse them in an alien culture making them forget the value of their native traditions. Consequently, the title of Clarke's book *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack* becomes especially meaningful. In contrast, outdoor places in the natural environment such as the beach or the sugar cane fields, while unmistakably Caribbean, provide a sense of liberation, yet they may also remind readers of the Neo-Romantic tradition of the time in which Dylan Thomas, in the imperial centre on the other side of the Atlantic,

expressed similar sentiments with similar effects in his lyrical recollections of his childhood in some of his poems.

The part about Rohinton Mistry is the longest self-contained section in the study and it is also an exceptional one for focussing on two books by the same author, who, being a Parsi from Bombay, like some of his protagonists, is a double migrant in Canada. This chapter truly abounds in significant places categorized as personal spaces, communal spaces, shared spaces, guarded spaces, gendered spaces, cosmic spaces, and sacred or spiritual spaces. It is here that Judit Molnár makes the best use of Foucault's theory of heterotopias as well as Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope. What is claimed to be the dominant visual image of the novel *Such a Long Journey* is the wall, of which Professor Molnár provides an excellent analysis synthesizing and supplementing the views of several critics on its meaning.

It is in Ondaatje's magic realistic travel memoir *Running in the Family* that maps and cartography take on significance as instruments of colonial control and appropriation of the territory of the island. The search for its true aspects by actually visiting the place and by remembering its history together with that of the author's family there turns into a way of trying to affirm one's self, which is a need characteristically expressed in much multicultural writing. Although the return to the homeland becomes a mixed experience here, it is a necessary one in order for the protagonist to gain a full sense of life.

In his *Casual Brutality*, Neil Bissoondath also deals with the various possibilities involved in interpreting maps, the use of cartographic strategies and the changing of place names implying political control and ultimately leading to a sense of dislocation for those native to a particular place thus concerned. But this novel, more often than the previously mentioned ones, contrasts life in Casaquemada on the imaginary island in the Caribbean with experiences in Toronto and, unlike the above novels, ends with disappointment at the fate awaiting the protagonist on his return to his birthplace. It comes as no surprise that in the end the answer to the vexing question 'Where is home?' is much more uncertain in this book.

In her examination of the last novel, Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, Judit Molnár proves that some of the features she has identified as typical of postcolonial writing – most prominently the trope of the return journey to one's national place of origin – can be located in immigrant writing as well. The problems arising from a dual nationality and a split identity as well as the way places shape individual and communal identity also appear in this novel. Here again attention is called to the character of the different places such as the stable, the school or the family's dwelling as well as pastures and market places to reveal how closely they are connected to the mindset of their occupants.

That is how, after all, this insightful and theoretically most sophisticated book, with its diverse subject matter, becomes a completely unified whole, in which, through the contrasts and comparisons made between the descriptions and the functions of places and spaces, an illuminating and thought provoking reading of some of the seminal works in contemporary Canadian fiction is offered.