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# Reimagining Canada: Sharon Pollock's *The Komagata Maru Incident*

Réimaginer le Canada : *The Komagata Maru Incident*  
de Sharon Pollock

Tanja Cvetković

## Abstract

The paper focuses on the way Sharon Pollock, a renowned Canadian playwright, reimagines and reconstructs Canadian history and national identity in her one-act historiographic docudrama *The Komagata Maru Incident*. Based on a real event – namely, the May 23, 1914, incident when a group of 376 East Indian immigrants who were British subjects arrived in the Vancouver harbour aboard the *Komagata Maru*, a Japanese freighter, and appealed to the Canadian government for refuge – the play represents Pollock's successful rewriting of a neglected story from history. It proves that her imagination does not “serve the ruling ideas of the time.” Further, in this play Pollock expresses her critical view, primarily through her marginalized female characters – two prostitutes and a Sikh woman – of the white masculinist Canada shaped by racist and sexist attitudes. The play reminds us that the construction of Canada is an ongoing process and that past constructions should be re-examined and reinvented.

**Keywords:** Canadian theatre, identity, immigration, Sharon Pollock

## Résumé

Ce travail traite la façon dont Sharon Pollock, célèbre auteur dramatique canadien, imagine à nouveau et reconstruit l'histoire canadienne et l'identité nationale dans son docu-drame historiographique *Komagata Maru*. L'action du drame est basée sur un événement réel, l'incident du 23 mai 1914 quand un groupe de 376 immigrants de l'Inde de l'Est, sujets britanniques, arrive au port de Vancouver sur le bateau japonais *Komagata Maru* et demande asile au gouvernement canadien. Ce drame représente une nouvelle écriture réussie de l'histoire et de cet événement oublié que Sharon Pollock réalise en prouvant que son imagination « ne sert pas des idées régnantes de l'époque ». Dans ce drame, S. Pollock exprime sa vision critique du Canada blanc fondé sur les préjugés raciaux et sexistes. Il le fait principalement à travers les personnages féminins marginalisés, deux prostituées et une immigrante sikhe. Le drame rappelle que la création du Canada est un processus en cours et que les constructions du passé doivent être révisées et réinventées.

**Mots-clés :** théâtre canadien, l'identité, l'immigration, Sharon Pollock



In the interview “The Many Voices of Sharon Pollock” conducted by Kathleen Flaherty, Sharon Pollock states that in her creative artistic work she starts from the raw material of life (Grace 2008: 396). By using the events from the past, she is not so much “re-creating as creating what the past was” (Grace 2008: 395). When Pollock turns an event into a story, she rewrites it, adding new meaning. Many of Pollock’s stories have a basis in history, bringing into awareness significant events of the past, speaking not only to history but also to the Canadian national character. When Pollock tells a story, what matters for her is the meaning of the story, the act of telling a story, “the order how [she is] going to tell [...] the parts of the story ...” (Grace 2008: 406). In this paper I will explore how Pollock presents the story of the *Komagata Maru*, in what way she reimagines and restructures the event in the play in respect to the setting, how she reimagines characters, and how she turns facts into fiction.

Since a story can be told from many points of view, Pollock uses the image of a diamond to show different possibilities of telling a story. In “Illuminating the Facets,” an interview with Anne F. Nothof, she explains the use of the diamond image in the following way:

It’s as if truthfulness when you’re writing about life is a big multi-faceted diamond. I am standing in one place, and I am the result of a certain time and place and experience, and I have a flashlight. If I never try to expand those boundaries I can only hold my flashlight one way, shine it on one part of the diamond. By being aware of how I do see through certain eyes and in a certain way, I get to expand, I get to be able to move the light. (Nothof, 7)

By crossing the boundaries of storytelling, by seeing an event through different eyes, she expands her vision, casting a different light on the event. She rewrites and reinterprets stories, changing and re-imagining reality in a new creative way.

Pollock gives multiple perspectives on historical events, as in the case of *The Komagata Maru Incident*, and at the same time she conveys her angle of observation. She explains,

I think that I can write a story so long as I find a way within the structure of the story to acknowledge my angle of observation. I’m the result of my middle-class, white upbringing in a conservative part of the country, in a racist country, in a colonist country, next to the largest, most powerful country in the world. (Nothof, 8)

The awareness that her angle of observation might result from her personal and educational background gives rise to a different perspective than the one expected. Directing attention to the neglected aspects of events, Pollock makes her presentation of the *Komagata Maru* event in her play completely anti-racist.



*The Komagata Maru Incident* (1976) is a history play and belongs to Pollock's early plays,<sup>1</sup> along with *Walsh* (1973), another history play of that period. Both plays deal with facts, with real historical events which Pollock started researching as soon as she realized that there were things that “the historians hadn't told [her]” (qtd in Grace & La Flamme 2008: 14). Both plays deal with the peaceful settlement of the Canadian West and they both have a central character whose inner conflict is explored. *Walsh* concentrates on Major Walsh of the Northwest Mounted Police, who attempted to prevent Sitting Bull and the Sioux from being sent from Canada back to the United States to stand trial for the death of General Custer and his men at the battle of Little Big Horn. The main subject of *The Komagata Maru Incident* is the racial injustice and inhumanity related to the 1914 historical event when a group of East Indian immigrants arrived at Vancouver harbour.

On May 23, 1914, the Japanese-owned steamer *Komagata Maru* entered Burrard Inlet with 376 passengers, most of them Sikhs carrying British passports and therefore eligible for settling in Canada. In 1914, Vancouver was a “white” city and its authorities did not give permission to the immigrants to disembark. Actually, the passengers were blocked by special Orders-in-Council from the Office of Canadian immigration. One of the Orders stated that a legal immigrant had to arrive in the Vancouver harbour after a non-stop voyage from his or her port of embarkation; this, however, was impossible to make in 1914. According to the other Order, a head tax of \$200 was imposed for an immigrant to land – an impossible sum for the people on the ship. The authorities and the public sentiment were against the immigrants. As the supplies on the ship ran out, the immigrants on board, facing starvation after two months, had to leave on July 23, 1914. Only 24 of them were allowed to enter Canada.

The man who was charged with handling the crisis, inspector William Hopkinson of the Immigration Department, is the central figure of the play. He undergoes a psychological ordeal regarding the issues of racism he faces in the play. The real Hopkinson was murdered on October 21, 1914, by Mewa Singh, who was arrested and executed in 1915, by which time the events of World War I obliterated the 1914 Vancouver Harbour incident. Sherrill Grace notes that “the story of the *Komagata Maru* was not widely reintroduced to Canadians until Sharon Pollock's play opened at the Vancouver Playhouse in January 1976” (Strong-Boag, Grace et al. 1998: 86). This adds to the significance of the play in reinterpreting the event.

*The Komagata Maru Incident* has been approached and discussed from various points of view and has been given a significant prominence in respect to other Pollock's plays.

1) Sherrill Grace classifies Pollock's plays into three stages: the early plays *Walsh* to *Whisky Six Cadenza* (from 1973 to 1993), the Garry years (1993 to 1997), when she and her son Kirk Cambell founded the Garry Theatre in Calgary, and the third stage from 1998 to 2007, a more reflective, philosophical stage in which she assessed the artistic life and challenged contemporary issues (Grace 2008: ix).



While Anne Nothof in her essay “Crossing Borders: Sharon Pollock’s Revisitation of Canadian Frontiers” explains the politics of exclusion in Canada and demonstrates how Pollock shatters the myth of Canadian moral superiority by revising Canadian history, Erica Kelly in her essay “‘This is not where we live’: The Production of National Citizenship and Borderlines in Sharon Pollock’s *The Komagata Maru Incident*” interprets the whole play in terms of borders and border questions raised by the arrival of the *Komagata Maru*. Kelly argues that Pollock focuses her drama on borderlines and borderzones so that her characters are caught “between India and Canada, between sea and land, on the brink of World War One, a global threshold moment” (Kelly, 2), including the idea of border crossing which Pollock pays special attention to in the play. On the other hand, when talking about the existence of borders in the play, Nothof suggests that “borders are imposed – between countries, between individuals, in the interests of securing or protecting property” (Nothof, 81) and that the protagonists attempt to cross the border or are obliged to defend it (Nothof, 84). Both essays seem to send the same message: that the existence of borders is necessary because they raise questions and provide answers; but the idea of going beyond borders opens up the space for recreation and creativity.

Both Diane Bessai and Sherrill Grace & Gabriele Helms in their essays discuss the play in terms of opposing the dominant system. Bessai, in her essay “Sharon Pollock’s Women: A Study in Dramatic Process,” discusses the role of women in Pollock’s play, including *The Komagata Maru Incident*, and stresses that Pollock’s women challenge the system and that “there is something brave in their head-on-challenge to the system” (Bessai, 53). In a similar vein, in “Documenting Racism: Sharon Pollock’s *The Komagata Maru Incident*” Grace & Helms discuss the play while interrogating racism and sexism, and “how it exposes the mechanisms through which race and gender support the construction of a white, masculinist construction of Canada” (Strong-Boag, Grace et al. 1998: 87). At the same time, Grace & Helms’ criticism points to the important role of the play in the ongoing process of the construction of the nation. Actually, what Pollock does in the play is to deconstruct an event which is based on anti-Asian sentiments and discrimination, turning it into an anti-racist play.

While reinterpreting the event, Pollock sets the play in a brothel in Vancouver harbour with the two prostitutes and their lovers. According to Kelly, the space of the brothel provides a fitting setting for the “peripheral perspective to the main events” (Bessai in Kelly, 48) and the voices of two prostitutes, Evy and Sophie, remind us “that society silences those it marks as other within as well as without” (Kelly, 6). A brothel is part of the whole carnival atmosphere in this play where the central theatrical metaphor is the circus (Strong-Boag, Grace et al. 1998: 87), a play in which the carnivalesque figure of the Master of Ceremonies, T. S. (The System) (Strong-Boag,



Grace et al. 1998: 92), comments on, explains and directs the characters, playing many different roles and incorporating a number of public opinions. Pollock merges serious historical data with the circus in an entertaining way. By explaining how she builds this highly imaginative structure around historical fact, she says that:

With *Komagata Maru Incident* there were a number of reasons why I chose the circus. [...] When I read the newspaper accounts of the day I discovered the wonderful circus or carnival atmosphere of the dock area with the marching bands and popcorn, the apples and balloons. That is the image that began to dominate my mind. Then I thought, if this is a carnival, or circus, I could have a Master of Ceremonies. (Wallace & Zimmerman, 119)

At the opening of the play, T.S. speaks directly to the audience, setting the scene:

Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Right this way, ladies and gentlemen! First chance to view, the *Komagata Maru*! At this very moment steaming towards picturesque Vancouver Harbour! (Pollock, 113).

And when he addresses the house, he also speaks to the audience, to us:

Mr. Speaker; Prime Minister; Honourable Members! Today I am opening my heart to you. I am telling you my fears – fears that affect each and every Canadian today. ... I fear for my country, and I fear for my people. ... I am not ashamed, nor should you be, to state that this is white man's country! (Pollock, 122)

T.S. is firmly in control, pulling all the strings; he is omnipresent and, by commenting on what is going on, he turns out to be manipulative as well.

When Kelly emphasizes the fact that T.S. stands for the system and the state, that he is “the framing voice of the play” (Kelly, 4), she also stresses T.S.'s entertaining role when connecting the audience to the stage and adding to the circus atmosphere (Kelly, 3-4). Both Kelly and Grace & Helms discuss T.S. as “a politician of Mephistophelean proportions” (Strong-Boag, Grace et al. 1998: 87), who, by controlling the stage, reminds us that everything is theatre in the style of Shakespeare's “all the world's a stage.” As such it is liable to change, construction and reconstruction (Kelly, 7).

Apart from T.S., the play focuses on five other characters: William Hopkinson, the two prostitutes Evy and Sophie, and Georg, a German immigrant. And while T.S. and the circus troupe appeal to our intellect, as Grace and Helms notice (Strong-Boag, Grace et al. 1998: 94), the character of Hopkinson invites emotional identification and pity. Seeing Hopkinson as “a far finer man than Walsh” (Wallace & Zimmerman, 121),



Pollock considers him not as a despairing character but rather as “a tragic potential” (Bessai in Zimmerman, 70):

I am very fond of Hopkinson; I see him as a far finer man than Walsh. Hopkinson is a person who has a guilty secret that is used against him by people in power. He atones for his actions by the manner of his death. When he says, yes, I'll testify, he accepts fatalistically the manner of his death in the nature of a Sikh, his mother's religion. He accepts responsibility for it and, to me, that's not despairing; that's a high point. (Wallace & Zimmerman, 121)

In fact, Pollock treats the whole incident in the play by centring on William Hopkinson.

Hopkinson led a double life, as an Immigration Department official and a spy who had his own informants within the East Indian community. As mentioned, he himself was of East Indian origin on his mother's side – the part of his self that he repudiated – and throughout the play his inner conflict between his duty and humanity is displayed. As a representative of the government, Hopkinson experiences a deep racial conflict, opposing and denying the admission to the Sikhs. He conducts spying operations from the brothel against the Sikh community who want to help the landing of the *Komagata Maru* passengers. At the same time, Evy, “his” prostitute, serves as a foil to Hopkinson's figure in the play, revealing the impact of the incident on his personality. While undermining certainties about his origins and the past, Evy reveals him to be a divided man: in rejecting the Sikhs, he rejects his Sikh heritage and his past. His deepest conflict arises from the fact that he fights on the side of the government against his Sikh self.

As far as his background is concerned, Hopkinson displays a profound knowledge of India:

Hopkinson: I know India, and I know its people. When I was a child, my father was stationed in the Punjab. He had only to shout “Quai Hai” to summon a slave – a servant – no, goddamn it, a slave, to summon a slave, to scrawl his initials on a chit, and there was a felt carpet from Kashmir, brass ornaments from Moradabad, silver for pocket money, cigars, a horse, a dog, anything he wanted. Show him your brooch, Evy. It belonged to my father. Wonderful craftsmen, the natives. (Pollock, 118)

Though Evy cannot influence and change Hopkinson's opinion about the *Komagata Maru* passengers, she constantly undermines him by asserting the fact that his mother was Sikh:



Evy: And Billy's mother's brown.

HOPKINSON *throws EVY down, kneels and shakes her.*

Hopkinson: Don't say that. Don't say that! I'll kill you if you say that to me! (*slowing down his attack on her*) Evy, don't say that. Please don't say that ... (*stopping*) I ... I love you, Evy, don't say that to me ... (Pollock, 130)

At one point they confront their opposing views about the Sikhs on the ship. Hopkinson expresses his racist viewpoint, and Evy her antiracist views:

Hopkinson: All I know, Evy, is my father didn't die in the service for the world to be overrun by a second-rate people.

Evy: You don't make sense. Who's second-rate when you run out of brown people? (Pollock, 122)

Thus Pollock rewrites the whole incident by juxtaposing the attitudes of those on the side of the government to those who oppose them and who are marginalized.

In discussing Pollock's play in terms of border zones as "sites of continual negotiation and redefinition" (Kelly, 1) where Pollock questions issues of national citizenship, belonging and national identity, Kelly explains that Hopkinson "provides the most localized exploration of borders in Pollock's production" (Kelly, 4). As a "borderline Canadian of mixed parents" (Nothof, 89), who carries the conflict within himself, Kelly explains Hopkinson's "repressed identity" (Kelly, 5) which verges on the border zone. Since he could not accomplish the blending of his British and his Sikh self, he exercised white racial stands which ultimately became self-destructive. Moreover, explaining Hopkinson's death in the play, Kelly argues that "Hopkinson does not reject one half of himself for the other, nor does he achieve a utopian blending of identities," adding that Pollock leaves this character "on the border between the pieces of his identity, and suggesting that a closed border can be a deadly place to situate oneself" (Kelly, 5).

Sophie also contributes to the characterization of Hopkinson, though not as much as the Sikh woman with her child on the ship. According to the stage directions, the Sikh woman is seated behind "an open grill-like frame" which gives "both the impression of a cage, and of the superstructure of a ship" (Production Note in Pollock, 113). As Kelly points out, this woman caged on stage "challenges the border as an impossible space" (Kelly, 2). When the Sikh woman says "This is not where we live" (Pollock, 127), she alludes to the impossibility of living between borders, in the in-between space the passengers of the ship find themselves in. The Sikh woman representing all the other passengers on the ship adds to the moral perspective of the event, further maintaining the polarities between justice and injustice. The woman and the child act as victims of



the injustice inflicted upon them by the imperialist rule. In contrast, Hopkinson has chosen the side of power, though he cannot entirely live it. He denies supplies to the people on the ship and as a result of a skirmish between the Immigration party and the passengers he is struck by a lump of coal the Sikh woman on the ship throws at him, and struck down.

Hopkinson: Our policy of disallowing the supplying of the ship is sound. It weakens their morale. It's only a matter of time till they question their leadership...

T.S.: Continue.

Hopkinson: As ... conditions deteriorate, we could, at some future date, offer supplies as an incentive to leave. (Pollock, 120)

At the end of the play, Hopkinson is shot dead by Mewa Singh, who tries to exact justice on the part of the victimized and discriminated passengers.

Pollock bases her play mostly on the marginalized and discriminated group of characters, giving them a special place and role in recreating the event. While explaining Pollock's treatment of women in the play, Bessai says that women serve the function of shedding light on the male characters and undermining the dominant system. She further adds that:

In this play the women figures, although stereotypical and two dimensional as characterizations are the playwright's chief device for providing moral perspective to events as well as for contributing to the emotional dimension centered in the character of Hopkinson. (Bessai, 49)

By being the chief instrument in the play, albeit in the service of revealing the nature of Hopkinson, Pollock stresses the importance of the female characters for the play without focusing her attention on the development of their characters.

The play was written in the 1970s, at a time when racial, gender and ethnic issues were being reconsidered. At that time many important historical events were reinterpreted, including the ones which gave shape to national mythology. Pollock's revision of the *Komagata Maru* incident, by reconsidering racial and gender issues, added another important dimension to the event. Although the starting points were the facts of a real-life story, the result was a product of imagination and fiction, and that is why Pollock's play is a special contribution for the recreation of the event.

By fictionalizing documentary elements in her play, Pollock makes a connection between fact and myth in Canada's past. She "uncreates" the historical event by criticizing racial injustice done to the Sikhs in the 1914 incident and mixes a great deal of information with fiction (she sets the play in a brothel, she fictionalizes the



central figure of Hopkinson, she introduces T.S. and the circus troupe, etc.), conveying a new truth and creating a new version of Canadian identity and history. Thus, *The Komagata Maru Incident* is a historiographic docudrama, where available facts of the historical event merge with fiction. It is a play about real events that have been rewritten, dramatized and manipulated on stage. Indeed, what Pollock does in her play can be compared to Robert Kroetsch's idea of digging under the imposed layers of meanings, of unnamings and uninventing reality. If, as Kroetsch says, "we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story" (Kroetsch 1970: 63), and if it is so that "the fiction makes us real" (Kroetsch 1970: 63), then Pollock, through the process of recreation, invests Canadian identity and history with a new meaning and truth. She frees the official story of the *Komagata Maru* incident from prejudices of racial injustice and paints it in new colours, thus reimagining and creating Canada.

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