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Narrating the Homeland: The Importance of Space and Place in Canadian Multicultural English-Language Fiction

Judit Molnár

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As a former graduate and postgraduate student in three Canadian literature courses, I find that Judit Molnár's latest book fills me with nostalgia, partly because her objects of analysis managed to alleviate the inevitable grinding of teeth that accompanies the reading of compulsory course material and the much dreaded shadow of deadlines. This, however, is only part of the reason. What is even more important and coincidentally takes me to the very topic of Molnár's *Narrating the Homeland* is the fact that my personal concept of home was reflected and somewhat altered by the works that Molnár puts under her magnifying glass as she ventures to discover the significance of concrete geographical and fictional locations in identity formation and the characters' attempts to find a solid foothold in their family history.

Her quest of discovery takes her to Barbados, Sri Lanka, India, Trinidad, and Italy as she joins Austin Clarke, Michael Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry, Neil Bissoondath and Nino Ricci on their return journey to their respective homelands to put a finger on how "there" is represented from the vantage point and by the standards of what is labelled "here," that is, Canada.

Molnár starts out by providing a detailed introduction to her research, in which she agrees with David Staines's claim that Canadian literature is not so much preoccupied with the locality of here anymore but with the question of "what is there" (qtd. in Molnár, 13). "There," however, is never a destination that admits of clear definitions. Ambiguity and a sense of discomfort resulting from the futility of the quest for clear answers linger over each narrative, a feature Molnár foreshadows by quoting Rieni Cruzs as a motto: "So what's the essential story? / Nothing but a journey done, / A horizon that never stands still" (7). The contrasting use of the word "essence" and the image of never standing still illustrate the lack of balance immigrant writers experience, in Molnár's understanding. Although she quotes a number of scholars preoccupied with spatiality and turns oftentimes to Michael Foucault's heterotopias,



Molnár does not subscribe to any spatial theory, but, quoting Wesley A. Kort, she believes that “the spatial theory implicit in [the works] needs to be released” (16).

Discussing Austin Clarke’s novel *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack*, she calls attention to Clarke’s ambiguous feelings towards Barbados and the contrasts he presents between the old and the new world as well as between social classes. Clarke tries to debunk the myth of Barbados as a “Caribbean Paradise” and Canada as “El Dorado” (20) by acknowledging that approaching such places through mythical idealization presents a false image. The author, instead, draws a realistic picture by observing his homeland from neutral locations, from where the chasm between rich and poor can be objectively identified. Molnár shows the ambiguity with which Clarke relates to Barbados by calling attention to the contrast between the title of his memoir and his often affectionate tone (24).

Already in this chapter it becomes apparent that Molnár makes use of a vast pool of references; as a result, she sometimes appears as a moderator who provides a context for the works of scholars concentrating on the aspect of spatiality in Canadian immigrant writing. She is in control of the direction the analyses take but credits her colleagues whose contributions to her research are relevant.

Attending to Rohinton Mistry’s *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and *Such a Long Journey* in the longest and most detailed chapter of the book, Molnár, together with Patricia Gabriel, underscores the special position Mistry occupies in Canadian literature resulting from his “double displacement” (25) – his Parsi identity makes him an endangered minority even in his home country, not to mention his minority status in Canada. She further accentuates Mistry’s importance on the Canadian literary scene by introducing him as a pioneer since his novels and short stories “open up a place for the double identities of [the immigrant] writers immersed in trans-national memories and histories newly located in a global and diasporic moment of exile and displacement” (26–7).

Molnár demonstrates that Mistry’s spaces indeed reflect on multiple aspects of the immigrant experience as he thematizes sacred, intercultural, imaginary, natural, cosmic, and social spaces. In her most insightful chapter, she demonstrates perfectly how simple stairs and drawers bear significance in the process of one’s individuation, both being symbols of close human contact and education. One of the most intriguing examples of displacement Molnár presents is the changing of place names. In her words, “the dislocations produced by the historical shift from a colonized space marked by the names of the colonizer and the new names that mark independence induce profound ruptures in memory and identity” (51).

Having introduced topography into her analysis, Molnár then highlights maps as images that bear special significance in Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*. She considers the language of geographical names central in familial and social identity



formation as signifiers of colonization and mythicizing. While Mistry's narratives are special in part because they are born from the experience of double displacement, Molnár points out that Ondaatje's stories problematize circular migration. Another similarity to Mistry's stories is that geographical places, despite being concrete physical reminders of one's past, are insufficient when it comes to attempts to anchor identities in their surface.

Neil Bissoondath's *A Casual Brutality* is the only novel in the book that does not generate a feeling of nostalgia – as indicated by the name he gives the teardrop-shaped imaginary island of his narrative, Casaquemada, a “burnt down house” (78). The need for personal space in this estranged land is crucial, as is suggested by the relevance attributed to Raj's grandfather's prayer room. This is the place of Raj's conception, birth and reading sessions, the place where he finds solitude. The religious aura of this confined room, where the most intimate, almost holy acts take place exclusively among close family members, reflects Raj's mother's longing for intimacy but stands opposed to her feeling of claustrophobia in the island. As Molnár puts it, a concrete “physical place [...] becomes almost synonymous with human spirit” (90).

In Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, Molnár demonstrates how a place can reflect a character's state of mind by highlighting how the mysterious and dark hospital building echoes the pain characters experience when inside. She underscores that places also serve to fulfill a role in explicating the moral of a story when she observes that the stable is both a locale of sexual pleasure derived from sexual freedom and retribution for the abuse of this freedom. She also suggests that the narrative's “homeland” is suffocating and the family's departure from there is inevitable.

Narrating the Homeland is an exceptional work that amalgamates views from a number of Canadianists who had focused on the subject of spatiality in Canada's immigrant literature. Molnár's book proves especially valuable scholarship as her arguments are easy to follow even without familiarity with the works she is analyzing; her superb presentation of the subject should inspire further studying of not only these but other works of Canadian immigrant fiction. Although her style is elaborate and sophisticated, the book is also a valuable source for those less knowledgeable in literary studies as well as scholars. *Narrating the Homelands* therefore deserves attention and a wide readership.