

The Position of Immigrants: Belonging, National Consciousness, National and Individual Identity

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reveal the traces of national identity in two works of fiction written by first or second-generation immigrant authors; Tamas Dobozy, a Canadian writer of Hungarian descent and Hiromi Goto, a Japanese-Canadian writer. In this study, national identity is being comprised of several different components, shared by a certain group of people. The article discusses some elements of national identity, such as language, food, collective history and story-telling, which are important to the work of the above-mentioned authors.

Keywords: national identity, identity theory, immigrant literature

1. Introduction

The present paper examines the components of national identity and how they surface in Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* and Tamas Dobozy's *Siege 13*. Goto was born in Chiba-ken, Japan, in 1966, but her family moved to Canada when she was only three years old. In her novel, the question of national identity plays a central role in the characters' lives. Goto portrays three generations of women reacting differently to the questions of belonging and national consciousness. Dobozy was born to Hungarian immigrants in 1969, in Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada. The writer's parents left Hungary in 1956 as did many others.¹ In several stories from the collection *Siege 13*, he revisits Hungary during the Second World War and the post-war era. In other stories, the main characters are Hungarian immigrants living in Canada, who are first and second-generation immigrants exploring and searching their Hungarian roots.²

¹ Katalin Kürtösi, "Tamas Dobozy és a 'Fiction Prize.'" *Tiszatáj*, vol. 6 (2013), pp. 70-75. Hungarian critics like Kürtösi have cited the works of Tamas Dobozy. In her article, Kürtösi notes the fact that Dobozy heavily relies on his Hungarian origin, but also points out that Dobozy's stories address a wide international readership.

² Gertrud Szamosi, "Kettős kötésben: gondolatok a kanadai magyar diaszpóra irodalmáról." *OPUS: Szlovákiai magyar írók folyóirata*, vol. 26 (2013), pp. 11-24. Szamosi points out that

2. Defining National Identity

Dealing with national identity is a relevant issue in the light of globalization, mainly because people are given the freedom and the opportunity to move across borders for any kind of reason, such as seeking financial stability or following other family members. Inevitably, one of the results of migration in the global world is a constant challenge to one's identity. There is also the possibility of maintaining dual, or even multiple identities, each carrying a challenge at a personal level. There are three different options considering the choice of the individual as far as his or her original identity is concerned: to forget it and adopt a new national identity; to keep it and preserve it; or to keep it and at the same time adopt a new national identity. Even if it is only a temporary residency, the experience of confronting the national identity of the majority can be significant. When the residency is permanent, even the second generation of immigrants tend to share the first generation's fate. Meanwhile, identity as a research field has become increasingly popular in all kinds of discourse, be it academic texts or a speech broadcasts in the media.

In the wide-ranging attempts to define national identity, the discussion of nationalism is often considered as a key element. Kunovich cites the main points of three major theorists, Smith, Calhoun and Anderson.³ Smith proposes that national identity can be acquired through nationalism; Calhoun refers to it as “‘*categorical identity*’ made up of members who share ‘*similar attributes*’ rather than direct relationships;” and Anderson introduces his own term – imagined communities – applied to national groups.⁴ Kunovich concludes that national identity is a “*socially constructed sameness resulting from nationalism.*”⁵ According to this definition, the core of national identity is sameness. In addition, national identity is learned, or produced, not naturally inherited, and it is formed socially not by one person but by a group. In the past, many philosophers like John Locke (an English philosopher in the seventeenth century) or David Hume (a Scottish historian, philosopher in the eighteenth century) used the word identity in their works. Currently, Erik H. Erikson is considered to be the key figure in

immigrant Hungarian literature is partly the result of Hungary's historical past, and its basic elements rely on a shared tragic history.

³ R. M. Kunovich, “The Sources and Consequences of National Identification.” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 74. 4 (Aug., 2009), p. 574. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27736081>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 574.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 574.

identity studies.⁶ Certain aspects of Erikson's theory are important to the present discussion of national identity: he argues that identity is difficult to grasp, because it exists on two separate levels: at the level of the individual and at the level of the individual's communal culture. Considering Kunovich's theory of national identity as a produced group identity, national identity as well exists on the above-mentioned two separate levels: it is primarily created by a group, but it is assigned to people individually, and by this the individual's national identity is formed. In addition, Erikson proposes that identity is the outcome of the process of these two identities⁷, so the created group identity is in collaboration with the individual's own national identity, and this results in national identity. In analysing national identity, the present study also relies on Assmann's idea about the "I" and "We" identities. Similarly to Erikson, Assmann makes a distinction between the "I" and the "We" identities. Although he separates the concept, he also argues that these identities cannot be fully separate components, as they influence one another, and both of them are acquired during socialization.⁸ National identity belongs to a group and to the individual members of the group as well. They interact, and although one can investigate the national identity of a group, or the national identity of one individual, the phenomenon is created by the two at the same time. Thus, this article concerns the surfacing elements of national identity in the two books under investigation as a complex phenomenon introduced above.

As for how to identify the elements of national identity, critics concerned with national identity propose a list of components or categories of components. For example, Smith establishes five fundamental attributes of national identity: "*historic territory or homeland,*" "*common myths and historical memories,*" "*a common, mass public culture,*" "*common legal rights and duties for all members,*" and "*common economy with territorial mobility for members.*"⁹ In this analysis, I apply the system proposed by Guibernau, who criticizes Smith's theory and offers his own five dimensions of national identity: the psychological dimension stands for "*the 'felt' closeness uniting those who belong to the nation;*" the cultural dimension

⁶ Philip Gleason, "Identifying Identity: A Semantic History." *The Journal of American History* 69.4 (Mar., 1983), p. 914, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1901196>.

⁷ Ibid., p. 914.

⁸ Jan Assmann, *A kulturális emlékezet: Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrában* (Budapest: Atlantisz Könyvkiadó, 1999), p. 131.

⁹ Montserrat Guibernai, "Anthony D. Smith on Nations and National Identity: A Critical Assessment." *Nations and Nationalism* 10. 1/2 (2004), p. 133. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12158138&site=ehost-live>.

includes “*values, beliefs, customs, conventions, habits, languages and practices;*” the historical dimension refers to “*a collective memory filled with transcendental moments in the life of the community;*” the territorial dimension means “*the limits of the individual’s universe*” and also the “*tendency to feel more intensely about events happening closer;*” and the political dimension “*derives from its relation with the modern nation-state.*”¹⁰

3. National Identity: Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* and Tamas Dobozy’s *Siege 13*

In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Naoe, the grandmother refuses to forget her Japanese identity and is reluctant to adopt Canadian identity. She always mumbles words in Japanese, and as she always sits in the hall, her presence makes it impossible for the other members of the family to disregard their Japanese roots. Although there are hints in the text that the grandmother understands English, she chooses not to speak it and to reveal her knowledge of English. Arriving in Canada, the new country, the mother chooses to suppress her Japanese identity in order to fit in. She decides to raise her daughter as a Canadian and, as a result, she only speaks English, never Japanese. After a while she hardly understands what the grandmother says. In this process, mother and daughter grow apart, the daughter’s denial to preserve her original identity, and the mother’s decision not to adopt the new identity cause disruption in the family’s life. The granddaughter is raised as a Canadian due to her mother’s decision, but she is growing up in the presence of the grandmother, who clearly represents different values. Interestingly, the language barrier between granddaughter and grandmother does not result in their non-communication; on the contrary, despite the fact that they do not speak the same language, they have a unique relationship, which affects the granddaughter’s identity. As she grows up, even after the grandmother leaves the family, she attempts to find a way to be able to communicate with her grandmother and deal with the memory of the grandmother and her ancestry. The granddaughter, as a second-generation immigrant, experiences an identity crisis, a similar one to the parents, while the causes are different.

In *Siege 13* by Tamas Dobozy, second-generation immigrant characters are haunted by their parents’ heritage; they have the urge to find out as much as they can about the old homeland and their parents’ past. The main character in “The Beautician” writes his thesis on censorship in the 1950s by collecting Holló’s reports, who was a censor in Hungary at the

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 135-141.

time. The main character in “Rosewood Queens” is also haunted by the past, and her obsession is only increased by her father’s refusal of sharing. Many have chosen not to talk about the past, and even though they do not forget their Hungarian roots, they suppress it. Still, bringing up their children as Canadians does not stop the younger generations’ desire to discover their denied national and cultural heritage. In “Rosewood Queens,” the main character becomes a researcher, her special area being “*the passing of trauma from one generation to the next.*” When visiting Hungary, she learns “*a bit of language*” and searches for the stories her father never told her.¹¹ These characters struggle with a national identity crisis, as they are brought up as Canadians in Canada, but are surrounded by their immigrant parents and their friends, who share a national identity, but never talk about topics regarding the mother country when the younger generation is around. Although the younger generation has a given national ‘We’ identity (the Canadian one), at the level of the ‘I’ identity, there is another inherited but denied national identity (the Hungarian) which causes uneasiness within the characters.

In several short stories, Hungarian immigrants often interact with each other and they are represented as a cohesive community in Canada. In “Sailor’s Mouth,” “The Beautician” and “The Society of Friends,” the Szécsényi Club symbolizes this immigrant community, and not just on the actual physical level. Apart from the meetings and social events like dinners at the club, the members are also emotionally attached to the Club. When a problem or conflict arises between the members, it affects them all as a group. Clearly, the Szécsényi Club shapes the members’ idea about being a Hungarian immigrant, but it also strengthens their consciousness of being a group.

4. Components of National Identity

Concerning the five dimensions of national identity mentioned above, I will highlight three components, each having a crucial significance to the work of Goto and Dobozy’s stories. These components are language and food, which belong to the cultural dimension of national identity, and share a historical dimension too. In connection with the historical dimension, I will discuss story-telling, which is parallel to the significance of history, but it belongs to the cultural dimension.

4.1. Components of the cultural dimension: Language and Food

¹¹ Tamas Dobozy, *Siege 13* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013), pp. 182-183.

Language is present in the texts both on a visible and invisible level. On the visible level, certain Hungarian and Japanese words emerge in the text. In both texts, Japanese or Hungarian words interrupt the English text, and these words are mainly Japanese and Hungarian names for food and drinks, which do not have an English equivalent, e.g., tonkatsu, daikon, hakusai, satoimo and főzelék, lecsó, rántotthús and aszú. Another non-food example is said by a Hungarian immigrant character at the table: “*Please don’t eat like that, szívem,*”¹² where ‘szívem’ means something similar to ‘darling’ or ‘sweetheart’ in English. The Hungarian words in Dobozy’s stories seem natural in the immigrant environment; they do not cause any misunderstanding between the characters. Although the second-generation Hungarian-Canadians characters usually speak some Hungarian, it is also implied that their language proficiency is not perfect. By comparison, in Goto’s novel, the granddaughter is troubled by the Japanese words in certain situations. She has a list of ingredients for a Japanese recipe but it causes her unease, when she is unable to thrive independently. Still, her experience on this level is important, because learning and understanding the recipe’s ingredients, and cooking the Japanese food for the family guide her on the way of exploring and finding her Japanese identity.

On the invisible level, there are references to either characters speaking in a different language or something being written in a different language. As a second-generation immigrant protests, “*My Hungarian isn’t that bad,*”¹³ indicating that he did understand some parts of a conversation in Hungarian. Many immigrants decided not to teach Hungarian to their children, since their departure from the mother country seemed definite at the time, and the possibility of visiting relatives was impossible or very restricted for decades. The turning point came with the end of the Soviet Union, and after that Hungary and Hungarian roots became available again. The Hungarian language does not only appear in oral communication between the characters, but in another case, there is a letter which “*was written in Hungarian*”¹⁴ and it contains the last will of a character. She wishes to leave her possessions to the Szécsényi Club, and her choice of writing this letter in Hungarian indicates a commitment. The few foreign words and the little references to foreign languages in the texts depict how language works as an indicator: it can be the signifier of national identity, like a shadow lurking in the background, yet suggesting the presence of an old national identity.

¹² Ibid., p. 90. “Szívem” is italicized by Dobozy in the original text.

¹³ Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 246.

Language appears in Goto's novel not only as a strong mark of the grandmother's Japanese national identity, but also as a tool to convey national identity. The grandmother's figure is depicted as an old lady always sitting in a chair muttering Japanese words. She tries to pass down the Japanese identity to her granddaughter who is raised as a Canadian by telling her stories in Japanese. Although the granddaughter does not understand Japanese, she has a special relationship with the grandmother. Language can be the link to one's national identity, like in Goto's novel the granddaughter decides to learn Japanese in order to understand her grandmother. On the other hand, language barrier cannot prevent communication between the granddaughter and the grandmother, they share a special, even spiritual bond. Several conversations between them is placed separately in the text, sometimes put in brackets, showing their conversation as it takes place on an intangible level:

Murasaki: Oh, Obāchan. Am I losing my mind? I can understand what you're saying, and how can we be talking anyway?! I must be insane.

Naoe: Ara, Murasaki, that doesn't sound like the granddaughter I know and love. There are stranger things in life than two people who are close being able to understand one another.¹⁵

The peculiar relationship and communication between the grandmother and the granddaughter plays a central role in the novel, the extraordinary side of it is emphasized, and made visible. Naoe, the grandmother refers to this relationship as two people being close to one another, and this closeness stems from their common ancestry.

Apart from food as an element of national identity and a visible carrier of language, in Goto's novel food is depicted as a tool in the process of acquiring identity. Moreover, food and eating food is given a magical transformational power as if food contained traits of culture. The grandmother states accusingly that "*this Western food has changed*" her daughter, suggesting that eating a different nation's food would result in – intentionally or unintentionally – building a new identity.¹⁶ Furthermore, towards the end of the novel, eating food is assigned another 'magical' power, namely that eating Japanese food has a healing effect. At one point in the novel, the grandmother leaves the house of her daughter and sets out on an adventure. With her departure, the strong presence of her Japanese identity disappears from the life of the family, and the mother gets into a devastating shape. Then Murasaki, the granddaughter cooks Japanese food for the first time in her life, and the family

¹⁵ Hiromi Goto, *Chorus of Mushrooms* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1994), p. 130.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

sits down to eat together after a long time. After this ceremonial scene, the family members slowly find their way back to each other, and eventually the mother starts getting better. Albeit in a different way, something similar is attributed to eating national food in Dobozy's story "The Beautician." The main character, who is a second-generation immigrant, describes eating national food as a "*way of swallowing*."¹⁷ Food is therefore given a symbolic meaning, a way of absorbing an attitude, a feeling.

4.2. History as an element of the historical dimension and story-telling as an element of the cultural dimension

The central theme of *Siege 13* is coping with trauma caused by the Second World War, the Revolution of 1956, and immigration. From Guibernau's dimensions, it is the historical one which dominates Dobozy's stories, as certain moments in the history of a nation can become determinative, because, while they are shared by the members of this nation, they also shape the members' national identity. From recent Hungarian history, the two events mentioned above are those moments. They also played a significant role in the increasing number of Hungarian immigrants after the war.

Even when a short story takes place in the present, immigrant characters remember the days of the war: "*when he returned to Budapest in 1944 – months of siege, soldiers looting the city, dead bodies in the streets, starving civilians, places so devastated*."¹⁸ As Kenyeres states, "*Dobozy has a special skill of depicting all this indirectly, as if the events occurred in the mind or appeared in one terrified face, avoiding the tone of pathos*."¹⁹ In "The Ghosts of Budapest and Toronto," the story of a family runs parallel, one plotline following the family members who immigrated to Canada, and the other plotline tracing the family members who were left behind in Hungary. The disruption of the family has its long-term effect; the characters who could escape are not released entirely. Even if they choose deliberately to suppress the past, forgetting is not easy – in these stories it seems impossible. They see the ghosts of their relatives in strangers' faces. The lives of those characters who refuse to talk about the times of the war are still affected by the past. In "Rosewood Queens," the narrator's father cannot fulfil his duties as a father, and cannot build a normal and lasting relationship

¹⁷ Dobozy, *Siege 13*, p. 90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

¹⁹ János Kenyeres, "The Siege of Budapest: Hungarian History in Recent Canadian Literature." *Europe - Canada: Transcultural Perspectives / Perspectives transculturelles*. Eds. Klaus-Dieter Ertler, Martin Löschnigg and Yvonne Völkl. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, (2013), pp. 203-212.

with a woman, because his refusal to talk and share results in self-contained behaviour. The territorial dimension in these cases is closely linked to the historical dimension, because immigrant characters are entrapped in their new life space in Canada. They cannot go back to their mother country, and this fact limits their capability of exploring and learning about their hidden national identity²⁰.

In Goto's novel, instead of the historical events, the stories being told dominate the novel, whether stories inherited in the families, or Japanese folk stories and folk tales. Compared to Dobozy's stories, in Goto's novel these folk tales and folk stories can be seen as similarly determinative elements of one's national identity as the historical events. In her novel, it is the cultural dimension, manifested in story-telling, which dominates the book. In addition, it is story-telling that links the granddaughter and the grandmother. She tells stories to the child, who cannot understand her Japanese words, but eventually when she learns Japanese, she discovers the grandmother's stories and starts understanding them. Learning language works in this case as a decoding and connecting tool in the novel. In addition, Murasaki also becomes a story-teller, just like her grandmother was, which shows the deep connection between grandmother and granddaughter. Story-telling occurs on different narrative levels, as the novel itself is narrated on different levels, and at one point it turns out that the story of the three generations is told by the 'adult' granddaughter. The grown-up Murasaki tells her lover the story of her family, so the book is a modern love story, in which the immigrant story is embedded. The novel also shows how Murasaki, later in life, is still truly defined by her family's past, by her relationship with the grandmother. Thereby, the act of story-telling and creating is captured, at the level of the 'adult' granddaughter, and also in the embedded story, as the grandmother is depicted in the process of story-telling too. At one point, the grandmother says, "*this is not the story I learned, but it's the story I tell. It is the nature of words to change with the telling. They are changing in your mind even as I speak.*"²¹ The way Goto depicts story-telling as an ever-changing act with a constant effect on the

²⁰ János, Kenyeres, "Listening for the Sound of Faraway': Displacement in Recent Hungarian-Canadian Literature." *A tűnődések valósága: Írások Sarbu Aladár 70. születésnapjára / The reality of ruminations : writings for Aladár Sarbu on his 70th birthday*. Eds. Judit Borbély and Zsolt Czigányik . Budapest: ELTE BTK Angol-Amerikai Intézet, Anglisztika Tanszék, (2010), pp. 339-348. In his article, Kenyeres analyses the way in which "*Hungarian-Canadian literature mirrors the social, historical and psychological aspects of immigrant experience as appearing in the evocation of the old or new homeland.*"

²¹ Goto, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, p. 32.

listener. It corresponds to the granddaughter's search for her 'inherited' Japanese identity, as it forms her idea about herself and her family. Identity itself is always changing.

5. Conclusion

In the works under investigation, national identity plays a central role. Be it the unique relationship between the grandmother and the granddaughter, or second-generation Hungarians struggling to find out about their family's past, identity surfaces in many ways. The strongest element of national identity present in the texts is language, as it interweaves the narrations. Although on the basis of the discussed elements the components of the cultural and the historical dimensions are actively present, every discussed example shows a common feature: an interesting mixture of closeness and sameness. In this reading, Guibernau's psychological dimension – the felt closeness – appears as an indicator and a catalyst of national identity, and shows how in these fictional works the sense of belonging governs the characters' actions and lives.

Biography

Born in Szombathely in 1990, Boór graduated in 2012 from Eötvös Loránd University, completing a B. A. in English Studies with a thesis on Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. Over the years, she developed a growing interest in the literature of Victorian England and she finished her M. A. in English Studies with a thesis on 19th century prostitution and Victorian writer Elizabeth Gaskell's novel, *Ruth*. During her university years, she presented papers at the Student Research Conference held by the School of English and American Studies, ELTE, in 2012 and 2014. In 2014, she successfully applied to the Modern English and American Literature Doctoral Program. She is a member of the recently formed Narratives of Culture and Identity Research Group, where she continues her research on national identity. She plans to write her PhD dissertation on contemporary Canadian literature, but her research interests also include contemporary fiction, national and individual identity, emigration/immigration, postmodernism, memory studies, narratology, gender studies, cultural memory and humour studies.

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OPUS: Szlovákiai magyar írók folyóirata 26 (2013): 11-24.