

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY SCOTTISH WOMEN WRITING

(Review of *Scottish Women Writers of Hybrid Identity*, ed. E. Jelinkova
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It was in 1919 that G. Gregory Smith coined the term “Caledonian Antisyzygy” in order to depict the lack of organic unity in Scottish literature in particular, as well as Scottish propensity to embrace dueling polarities within one entity in general. As the concept of 'syzygy' denotes an alignment of planets, Smith's phrase could literally be translated as a misaligned, scattered arrangement. Although the notion of the unexpected merging of opposing or paradoxical cultural viewpoints, or as Martin (2009, 84) put it “the idea of dueling polarities within one entity”, is not solely unique to the Scots, it is “among the Scots that this contradiction becomes apotheosized” (Finlayson 1988, 22). In recent times, numerous arguments have been made against the prevalent practice of reducing Scottish polyphonic tradition to a mere set of binary oppositions. For instance, as a reaction to Smith's rather unwieldy phrase, Kelly (2009, 12) suggests a new critical term describing contemporary Scottish literature - 'polysyzygy', which refers to a diverse set of “multiple alignments, plural connections, a web of interlinked ideas and words” (Kelly 2009, 12).

The volume *Scottish Women Writers of Hybrid Identity* (2014), edited by Ema Jelinkova, offers a myriad of analytical interpretations of 'Caledonian polysyzygy' by demonstrating a vibrant thematic and theoretical diversity in the domain of contemporary Scottish women's writing. The contributors of individual chapters in this volume set off on a quest which is profoundly complex and intriguing. Jelinkova (2014, 9) claims that there has been “a striking expansion” in writing, reading and studying Scottish women's literary production in recent years, as well as “the reappearance of 'lost' women whose work went out earlier in the twentieth century”. Her aim in editing and publishing this collection of essays is to “convey the diversity of Scottish fiction produced by women” and, hopefully, enhance the academic interest in this field “by investigating a newly discovered Scottish tradition of ambivalence and hybridity among the women writers of Scotland” (Jelinkova 2014, 9)

After the preface, in which “debatable lands of Scottish writing” (Jelinkova 2014, 7) are briefly discussed, the volume is divided into four chapters, each dealing with diverse aspects of women writers in Scotland. In the first chapter entitled “The Horror of the Everyday: Janice

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Galloway and A.L. Kennedy”, Marketa Gregorova (2014, 13) makes a comparative analysis of Galloway’s and Kennedy’s literary outputs by focusing first on their conspicuous differences. For instance, Gregorova claims that whereas Galloway emphasized the concept of gender in her writing and perceived women as physically defined (and silenced!) by it, Kennedy writes stories that generally possess “a universal resonance that transcends the boundaries of nationality and gender”. The work of these authors is further placed within the theoretical framework of Gothic and fantasy writing. Gregorova (2014, 16) stresses that both Galloway and Kennedy are fond of the creative use of the supernatural (their characters are frequently haunted by ghosts from their personal and national past, respectively). Concealed beneath the notion of “exercising ghosts and summoning angles” (Gregorova 2014, 16), often “oscillating between Love and Death” (Gregorova 2014, 27), Galloway’s and Kennedy’s characters question gender and national identities. The probing into the certainties of the aforementioned concepts is rather effectively performed through humour, whose subversive potential is, in Gregorova’s (2014, 35) opinion, used “at strategically selected moments to relieve what would be otherwise an unbearably bleak fictional universe”. And finally, Gregorova (2014, 35) reveals a trait that binds these seemingly distant authors together: “Both writers manifest a particular penchant for mordant humour and for characters who aim their acerbic wit at themselves in the first place”.

In the same vein, in the second chapter of the book entitled “Women Crossing Borders – the Gothic and Fantastic”, Petr Antene (2014, 62) aims to illustrate the diversity of contemporary Scottish women’s Gothic and fantastic writing by focusing on the examples of two writers from two generations - Emma Tennant and Alice Thompson. Antene introduces Tennant, who has been writing since the 1970s, as an author of revisionist feminist writings of canonized male-authored texts, whereby the Gothic is used “as a powerful device to denounce social conventions that threaten the contemporary woman’s independent identity or victimize women by means of the cult of youth and beauty” (Antene 2014, 63). Antene’s focus then switches to Thompson who entered the Scottish literary scene in the 1990s. He rightfully claims that whereas Thompson’s first works reflect Tennant’s concerns by criticizing man-made myths about femininity, her later work has been increasingly varied. All the texts discussed in this chapter draw on the Scottish literary tradition, especially the concept of the Caledonian Antisyzygy that potently expresses “the multiplicity of the dynamic field of Scottish women’s Gothic fiction” and, simultaneously, seeks to establish “some shared frames of reference” (Antene 2014, 63).

Jan Horacek writes about “Cultural Diversity and Hybridity in Contemporary Scottish Women’s Writing”, in the third chapter of the book. Horacek emphasizes the complex ethnic structure of modern Scottish society, which makes it impossible to accept a generalized concept of Scottishness. He believes that understanding immigrant communities and their struggle to integrate plays a key role in understanding modern Scotland. (2014, 90) The focus of his research concentrates on the writing of modern Scottish women writers whose ethnic origins are from outside Scotland. For instance, Horacek mentions the current Scots Makar¹, Jackie Kay, in the context of racism and gender discrimination. Horacek (2014, 90) claims that in Kay’s writing, the traditional stereotypes of biologically determined gender and

¹ Makar: the equivalent of English maker, a term from Scottish literature referring to a poet or bard. Robert Burns (1759 – 1796) is nowadays popularly referred to as the first Scottish national bard. In 2004, the Scottish Parliament established the position of national laureate, entitled the Scots Makar. Edwin Morgan was then proclaimed to be Scotland’s official national poet, following in Burns’s footsteps. In 2011, the post was granted to Liz Lochhead. In 2016, Jackie Kay was announced as the third national bard of Scotland in the 21st century.

national identity are deeply spurned; instead, she encourages a notion of self-fashioned sexuality and personal history”. Horacek also recognizes that Kay’s resolute opposition to racism has been shared by Maud Sulter. Both Kay’s and Sulter’s representations of race and gender allow for “cultural diversity” (Horacek 2014, 90). Apart from the issues of gender and race, immigration inevitably entails cultural and spiritual displacement. The authors that Horacek mentions in this context are Leila Aboulela and Leela Soma, who basically plead for the reconciliation between two cultures. As a fruitful product of reconciliation and cultural dialogue, a new sense of belonging based on a combination of aspects of different cultures is, in Horacek’s opinion, potently depicted in the writing of Raman Mundair and Chiew-Siah Tei. Horacek (2014, 91) validly concludes that the contemporary concept of Scottishness does not stand for a specific type of identity but identities, but “...it has become an umbrella for a plurality of voices and ethnic influences” (Horacek 2014, 91).

In the next chapter, Ema Jelinkova discusses “Anglo-Scottish and Scoto-English Prose by Female Writers”. By relying on Flora Alexander’s term “Scoto-English writers”, which basically implies the authors’ decision to settle in different parts of Britain and leave Scotland, Jelinkova describes varied thematic outlooks in the writing of Emma Tenant, Shena Mackay, Alison Fell, Sara Maitland, Candia McWilliams, Muriel Spark and Kate Atkinson. A powerful metaphor is used here to depict the similarities in the writing of the aforementioned female writers: Jelinkova (2014, 99) insightfully states that “we may view them as John Donne’s famous ‘twin compasses’ – distant and distinct but still marking out the same territory; separate, yet undeniably yoked together”.

Finally, Marketa Gregorova encompasses hybrid identities of contemporary Scottish women writers in the last section of the volume entitled “Afterword: Charting New Territories, Forging New Identities”. She briefly summarizes the conspicuous thematic diversity present in the Scottish female writing discussed in the book and points to new creative directions inevitably inspired by current social, political and cultural trends in Scotland. The afterword section is then followed by a rather impressive bibliography that depicts a diverse range of themes presented in this volume.

Scottish Women Writers of Hybrid Identity, edited by Ema Jelinkova, represents a significant contribution to recent academic studies of the complex matter of Scottishness from the perspective of contemporary Scottish female authors. The detailed and extensive bibliography, as well as its scholarly style and content, demonstrate Jelinkova’s immaculate comprehension of the utmost topicality of this subject. Although primarily intended for scholars and students in the field of Scottish studies, this publication is warmly recommended to the wider reading audience with a keen interdisciplinary approach to literary texts. Namely, the chosen texts in this publication are adequately placed into broader historical, philosophical and cultural contexts. These broad insights, highly appreciated in scholarly research, testify to the validity of current trends in both literary and cultural studies regarding the indispensable research of both literary texts and contexts.

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