

'Za Hranetsiu' – 'Beyond the Border': Identities in Ukrainian-Canadian Literature

by Weronika Suchacka

(Greifswald University)

Migration of people has always constituted a driving force of human relations. Since the early times to the contemporary period, the mass movements of people (emigration and immigration) have contributed to the gradual but constant changes in the world's *status quo* in terms of politics, economy and social aspects. But apart from these, one may say, outward signs of changes, there is additionally another level of alternations, deeply personalised and largely individuated, but also equally important, namely the aspect of human identity. What is the nature of those alternations, and thus, what constitutes the core of the understanding of identity in the contemporary world will become the key questions raised in the project, the answers to which will be sought in the context of Canada, and more particularly one of its largest ethnic groups, i.e. Ukrainian-Canadians.

The experience of Ukrainian immigrants, but also their progeny raised in Canada, will serve as an example that illuminates this typically postmodern perplexity of generations of immigrants, namely the uncertainty about one's identity/identities and place of belonging. Moreover, the analysis of Ukrainian-Canadian experience and literature will support the hypothesis that instead of identity in its singular form, one should speak about the aspect in plural terms because identity is as vast a concept as the range of possibilities to understand it. Consequently, it will be attempted to prove that Ukrainian-Canadian authors share a postmodern view on the construction of identity (identities), emphasising in their works its multiplicity, fluidity, fragmentation, but also its ever-changing/-negotiable conceptualisation.

Additionally, the exploration of identity construction (ethnicity and gender in particular) in works by such Ukrainian-Canadian writers as Illia Kiriak, Vera Lysenko, George Ryga, Myrna Kostash, Janice Kulyk Keefer and Lisa Grekul, will expose the most common feature of this literature. The feature in question points to the fact that while the process of developing a hyphenated, Ukrainian-Canadian, identity starts at the moment the emigrants begin leaving their country, the 'home' remains a formative influence even generations later, but, at the same time, interpreting diverse aspects of identity/identities (memory, history, displacement etc.) is influenced by the immigrants' and their offspring's lives in Canada.

The oppression, marginalisation as well as historical tragedies which involved the ancestors of Ukrainian-Canadians in Ukraine and necessitated their mass exodus 'za

hranetsiu' (Bociurkiw, *Comfort Food for Breakups: The Memoir of a Hungry Girl* 47), i.e. 'beyond the border' (47) of their homeland, and the further marginalisation, prejudice and the hardships of settling experienced within the borders of Canada, clearly sings the memories of the next generations of Ukrainian-Canadians, specifically Ukrainian-Canadian writers, constituting for them an unresolved, and perhaps irresolvable, conflict of their belonging. This conflict, however, stimulates their continuous re-negotiation of their identity/identities in their works and this also makes them find themselves 'beyond the border,' i.e. trudging the shifting, borderless grounds of literary possibilities.

Quotations taken from:

Bociurkiw, Marusya. *Comfort Food for Breakups: The Memoir of a Hungry Girl*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007.