Immigration, Assimilation and Acculturation
Reflected by Modern Canadian Dramatists

So, I wrote a play about emigrants. What else is a writer with an accent to do? (Jestrovic)

The initial epitaph by Svetlana Jestrovic, a Serbo-Croatian author, now resident in Canada, very well accentuates the complicated position of the so-called “immigrant literature”. Literature written by immigrants not only transmits immigrant experiences but is also an “artistic trap” that imprisons immigrant authors in the topic and on the borderline between faction and fiction, in other words between truth and art or between objectivity and subjectivity.

It is a fact that many immigrant stories often lack objectivity, mostly due to the abundance of emotions, loss of general perspective or drawing for general observations from specific cases. On the other hand, these subjective stories may be more instrumental – especially in transmitting cultural phenomena such as acculturation, assimilation or even discrimination and their impact on day-to-day life than objective sources such as statistics, polls or analyses. Immigrant stories thus do not attempt to represent the only voice but one of many voices. Their major objective is to share experience or view or to point out a specific immigrant problem. Objective historical truth is, therefore, not of primary importance. One of the first great advocates of this way of thinking was Aristotle who in the 9th chapter of Poetics pointed out that “the historian and the poet do not differ by their writing in prose or verse [but] the difference lies in the fact that the historian narrates events that have actually happened whereas the poet writes about things as they might possibly occur” (Aristotle, 16-17). However, I am not trying to suggest that the truth is irrelevant in immigrant literature, on the contrary. Nevertheless, this “fictionalised truth” functions differently to the historical, objective truth as far as immigrant literature is concerned.

Among many authors who are interested in the subject of moving from one country to another to live there permanently are Terry Watada, a Japanese
Canadian, Marty Chan, a Chinese immigrant author, Nika Rylski, of Ukrainian descent and Raoul Varma, an Indian Canadian. These playwrights have published extensively on the issue and recently participated in the multicultural project entitled Canadian Mosaic (edited by Aviva Ravel in 1996), aimed at a Canadian readership but also at international readers and spectators. Most of the selected playwrights, even though representing the second or even the third generation of immigrants, have had a personal experience with the process of immigration, and have known intimately all the problems connected with it, such as the acceptance of immigrant or refugee status, finding a place to stay and, most importantly, finding a job.

Generally, the Canadian immigration experience as reflected by the aforementioned authors includes positive and negative experiences but also experiences of an ambiguous nature, lying somewhere in the grey area between positives and negatives. Perhaps not surprisingly, a certain negativism prevails as only a few analysed plays were comedies, namely Just a Kommedia by N. Rylski and Mom, Dad, I’m Living with a White Girl by M. Chan, and even the latter had a serious sub-plot. Moreover, few of these plays show a successful co-existence of the mainstream with marginal, immigrant culture. Indeed, co-existence is the source of many problems in these plays, for example in T. Watada’s The Tale of a Mask, or K. Longfield’s Going Down the River. Most of the plays show assimilation of the marginal culture (i.e. total submission or acceptance of the mainstream lifestyle and values, while losing their original ones, or frustration resulting form imperfect assimilation). Acculturation (meaning the acceptance of the new lifestyle, beliefs and values, while preserving the original ones) and cultural pluralism (i.e. the equality of both mainstream and marginal cultural peculiarities, with respect to both, when the mainstream culture might even benefit from the marginal one and vice versa) were the subjects of one play only (N. Rylski: Just a Kommedia).

More importantly, what is common to all of these plays is the motivation that had brought their protagonists to their new “homeland”. This motive for immigration, as many of the analysed plays demonstrate, is often based on myth rather than on facts. Protagonists’ expectations and views of Canada are generally associated with positive characteristics, such as hope for the future (specifically for a better life, social or financial improvement and political stability). Frequently, Canada is viewed as a kind of “Promised Land” or “Land of Hope”, regardless of the Big American Brother, and
emigrants expect to follow their “pursuit of happiness”. In spite of many negative experiences, for example reality, more and more immigrants are coming to Canada. Thus the myth, based on hope for the future, overcomes reality, based on obvious facts. Paraphrasing the famous idea, it could be said that it was a kind of “Canadian dream” that was bringing more and more immigrants to Canada. This oneiric attribute is evident in the words of Masato, a Japanese-born protagonist of the play by T. Watada *The Tale of a Mask*:

MASATO: You’ll like it here. We’ll have the good life. A big house. Ken-chan can have his own T.V. in his room. And we can buy a car. A luxury Toyota! Trips! We’ll go on trips and see all the things we’ve read about! Banff Springs. Disneyland in California. Dollywood! [...] Don’t you see, going to Canada fulfils all our dreams (Watada, 49-50).

Unfortunately, after their arrival to Canada, many protagonists face a rather different life. Financial insecurity, the language barrier, deracination, social or cultural isolation, often resulting in family collapse or even an extreme act of escapism – suicide – are the most frequent unfavourable details mentioned in the plays.

The social and financial insecurity is depicted the best in T. Watada’s play *The Tale of a Mask*. A young Japanese family moves to Toronto, but nobody welcomes them and they have to stay in a hostel. Such a cold welcome results in an intensive feeling of uprootedness and the loss of touch with one’s original country resulting in frustration. Masato, the husband and father loses all ties with his original Japanese culture and even refuses to eat the Japanese national dish: MASATO: “I hate that stuff [ozoni]. It tastes like paste” (Watada, 48). On the other hand, N. Rylski’s play *Just a Kommedia* depicts quite an opposite attitude towards one’s original culture resulting in vain attempts to re-establish ties with one’s original country and language. Quite comically, the rules in the summer Ukrainian camp say: “No fighting! No smoking! And no English! Ukrainian will be spoken at all times!” (Rylski, 122).

Many newcomers, and mostly their wives, often face unexpected social and cultural isolation. Women are expected to stay at home while her husbands and sons go to work or school (T. Watada, *The Tale of a Mask*). Such social and cultural isolation cuts them off from society and, consequently, results in a dramatic change of status. In the play *The Tale of a Mask* a progressive, modern career woman, a former computer programmer, is turned into a housewife.
Her frustration ends tragically in a family collapse, social, physical and emotional separation of the family, emotional chaos and, finally, in her suicide.

Language is another phenomenon that becomes a possible source of conflict and distress for immigrants. In the play *The Tale of a Mask* English becomes a wall of separation between mother (Aiko) and her son (Kentaro) as the mother is not able to communicate in the language her son prefers and is fluent in. Sometimes, the loss of one’s original language is associated with the loss of identity. Kentaro and his father prefer the English form of his Japanese name Kentaro and shorten it to the more English-like “Ken”. Aiko, who feels betrayed and cheated protests against it vigorously: “AIKO: (explodes with anger) Kentaro! His name is Kentaro! Not Ken! He is not a gaijin!” (Watada, 76).

On the other hand, the multicultural variety often results in comical or even absurd situations. The humorous confrontation of two cultures is very well depicted in Nika Rylski’s play *Just a Kommedia* when a new born baby is named “Dylan Yaroslav” (Rylski, 127), in order to please both cultures. This play also serves as an example of a cultural compromise, as it shows how “the mixture of cultural symbols, national dishes and languages at the same time divides and transcends the two worlds – Ukrainian and Canadian” (Jestrovic). The famous phrase is thus converted to a more Ukrainian-English variant “vse okay” (Rylski, 133). In Rahul Varma’s play *No Man’s Land* we may observe another aspect of cultural compromising. A young immigrant, Teja, openly expresses his loss of sincere touch with his own religion: “TEJA: Now I am a weekend Sikh. I put on the turban at the weekends only when I have to go for weekly worship. Ha. I have to keep the culture alive, you know” (Varma, 171).

The last example, especially shows a loss of touch with the original culture and religious values. Perhaps surprisingly, and regardless of the hardships they go through, all protagonists of the plays decide to remain in Canada permanently. In spite of the facts, they hope or believe themselves to be in a perfect country where one can succeed provided he or she works longer and harder, economizes and sacrifices their family and personal life and culture. This hope for a better future is well expressed in the play *The Tale of a Mask*:

MASATO: […] Ken-chan’ll have a good education with all opportunities open to him. He won’t have to go to school six days a week and then Cram school at night and weekends. His fate won’t be
sealed at eighteen when he fails the entrance exams and has to go to an inferior college. He won’t have to work 9 to 5 every day and then work overtime until 10 o’clock for some miserable little trading company that doesn’t care about its employees. He won’t end up not knowing his family. Better still, he won’t die of karoshi at the age of forty-two (Watada, 49-50).

These lines reveal a very strong belief in the new country and the overoptimistic, idealised vision, which, unfortunately, turns out ironic: Masato, the father, actually has to work all day long to make ends meet, the family lives in a small rental house, the son has to study all week long, the family hardly spends any time together and suffers from severe alienation. The family is even reduced to a nuclear family in spite of Aiko’s wish to have more children. Jeena, a Indian–Canadian protagonist in Rahul Varma’s No Man’s Land confirms this situation: “[...] I worked like a dog. Part time, full-time, overtime, all the time” (Varma, 173).

That is also one indisputable contribution of these plays. Through portraying individual fates they manage to transmit to the perceiver the bizarre situation the immigrants find themselves in: they have left their mother country for the very same reason for which they intend to stay in their new country. The dialogue between Tom and Mae, protagonists in W. Ray Towle’s play The Golden Door accentuates this discrepancy: “TOM: We can’t afford [our own home]. MAE: I could earn some extra money sewing, we could plant a larger garden, go to fewer movies [...]” (Towle, 271). Thus, as a result of their Canadian dream, the young couple are willing to tolerate economic hurdles that they were not able to tolerate in their homeland, and that actually made them leave for Canada in the first place.

From the objective historical point of view, none of these plays is free from inaccuracies. However, they do not idealise life in Canada; on the contrary, the authors’ views are quite critical of it. What is more, the final message these plays emphasise is the individual nature of human fate: one may succeed because of oneself and not just because of the fact of moving to another country. On the other hand, these plays enable the spectator (be it a Canadian, an immigrant or an international spectator) to share the experience of immigrating to a new country and thus they represent an invaluable view of Canadian culture from the outside and the inside. They also offer the audience an opportunity to share an authentic experience of immigration, going far beyond statistics and analyses.
To sum up, the selected plays by T. Watada, R. Varma, M. Chan and N. Rylski reveal an interesting constellation of fact and fiction, i.e. myth and reality. They introduce personal experience which, however, might prove more “true” than such objective and impersonal sources as statistics or factual analyses. Thus, art might open the door to objectively valid intercultural information which is invaluable for a successful co-existence of mainstream and marginal cultures.

Works Cited