

In Search of Multicultural Woman

Maara Haas

Qui est la femme multiculturelle? L'écrivaine Maara Haas est née au Canada de parents ukrainiens mais on l'a traitée successivement d'«étrangère» d'«ethnique» et de «multiculturelle». Dans un court scénario que Haas a écrit pour la CBC et avec du matériel autobiographique, l'auteure explore ce que signifie ce paradoxe fascinant, la femme multiculturelle.

There's a rumour going around that the French in Quebec don't know who they are. Some people are saying the Quebecois have lost their identity somewhere along Confederation Trail; even with the help of the RCMP the smartest *coureur de bois* will have a difficult task tracking it down.

I can share the French confusion and I know who is to blame for the whole identity crisis: the fashion designers from abroad.

Yesterday, feeling very Canadian in my beige, Canadian Mist trench coat, I went to meet my friend Rochelle La Roche for dinner. There was no one in the restaurant except for a newly landed immigrant woman in a bunchy peasant skirt — felt boots, maybe? — and a green-roses kerchief reminiscent of that of

Baba Podkova, who once lived in north-end Winnipeg.

"I ordered your favourite," says the immigrant woman, echoing the voice of Rochelle La Roche.

"Samoosa, those lovely East Indian perogies."

Rochelle, who lives in Montreal, is always a year ahead of the current fashions, but she wasn't getting the better of me. With a suave gesture I removed my trenchcoat, flamboyantly unbuttoning the jacket of my unisex pinstripe suit, the Malka Steinberg, high-fashion Alberta label sticking out.

"I'm missing the black gangster shirt and the white tie," I say in an offhand manner, "and the vest is from a Goodwill store, Mennonite."

Her face pink and perspiring from the warmth of her layered immigrant clothes, Rochelle leans forward in her chair to admire my suit.

"Ravishingly, erotically Legs Diamond Al Capone," she gasps.

"You look like one of those hit men in the Old Gold movies. I had a bit of trouble finding the right boots. What do you think? Genuine Japanese plastic lined with ethnic seal-skin."

"Perfect," I answer. "Those boots are decidedly, folkloristically nou-

veau Canadian, though when I first saw you in that green-roses kerchief, I thought I was seeing the ghost of Baba Podkova returned from the dead."

"Baba Podkova? You never told me about her."

"Oh, didn't I? It happened thirty years ago on a wintry night similar to this one. Baba ran away from home, leaving a note on her old-country feather pillow:

Dear Children

I am not hiding my green-roses kerchief.

I am not hiding anymore, who I am.

So goodbye.

I am going by foot to Czechoslovakia.

Don't try to follow me.

Rochelle La Roche looks troubled. "It sounds like a terribly sad story with a sad ending. What happened to her?"

"Nothing much. They found her in the most expected place, on the steps of old Saint Nicholas Church three blocks from home, with her wicker suitcase, the family Bible, and three dozen hard-boiled eggs for the journey."

I'm startled by the image of myself

and Rochelle in the obviously time-warped mirror reflecting our switch-on, switch-off identities, 1930-1980.

In that other world, as I knew it, you could tell who was who by the clothes they wore. There were only three kinds of people: the unapproachable English in fictional Harris tweeds, the French in tuques and snowshoes, and the conspicuously foreign Baba Podkovas in kerchiefs.

On the threshold of World War II and imminent change, the French and English had no trouble identifying with the newly minted word "Canadian," although no one was really sure what it meant. Second generations born of European parents were the least certain, and it was useless to ask the census taker to explain the meaning of "Canadian." He didn't acknowledge the existence of the word.

The common climate prevailing in 1940 was to emulate the anonymous French-English if you hoped to become Canadian overnight. Born Branislawski, you changed your name to Brown. If Baba insisted on wearing her incriminating old-country kerchief when strangers came to tea, you hid her in a closet until they left. Fortunately my Polish grandmother never wore a kerchief. Prone to neuralgia, she wore an imitation beaver hat all year round.

Wavering between loyalties in the schizophrenic search for an identity, I thought at times I was split in two: a picture of Queen Elizabeth riding a horse across her Scottish estate, a Ukrainian babushka kerchief tied under her chin, left me feeling hopelessly dispossessed. At the same time, I fought my parents when they insisted I speak Ukrainian at meal-times, to keep up with the language, to acknowledge my identity.

Working at the drill press in MacDonald's Aircraft, my safety measure, "CANADIANS ALL" kerchief fastening down my hair, I was radiant with the smug assurance that I was, at last, a perfectly assimilated new-term Canadian. I could write proudly, "I'll win my wings for Britain with a rivet and a wrench" and say defiantly, "Let No Man Dare to Call Me Foreigner."

A bottle of Cuban wine between

us, Rochelle and I relax, anticipating the main course of our "get-together" dinner. What I can't explain is why I'm so furious with Rochelle La Roche in her Paris version of a Ukrainian immigrant.

We lift glasses in a toast, the oblique ghost of Baba Podkova mirrored in Rochelle's smile:

"As they say in Toronto, *Dye Boze.*"

Written for the CBC show "Identities" three years ago, this story has developed into a collection of short stories centred on multicultural woman, a woman of 100 faces. Her disguises are many; too often in attempting to reinstate her own identity through identifying with others, she becomes a conglomerate and loses herself in the process.

The need to identify, to label for identification, is a Canadian obsession.

Born in Canada in the '30s, I was labelled "Foreigner." Through a misdemeanour of marriage I became Haas and wore the label of Lazechko hyphen Haas, a hyphenated citizen in my own country, not yet a Canadian. In the '60s I was stuck with the amusing label "Anglophone" ("Hello, hello, is anybody there?"). Beneath every new label was the branding-iron label "ethnic," a derogatory term identifying Bohunks, Galicians, and Yids. It was there as a constant reminder that for thousands of the so-called minorities, rejection was a great part of their Canadian birthright.

More readily acceptable is the '80s "multicultural" label, which puts in its place, at a comfortable distance, the seemingly despised word "Canadian." I accept an acknowledged multicultural Canada as inevitable, psychologically unalterable, but I am not certain what a multicultural woman might be. I see myself, today and always, as a woman, a writer, a citizen in a country that has invoked few changes aside from labels.

My father, the first pharmacist of Ukrainian origin in Canada, founded the White Cross Pharmacy, which drew people of all European cultures in the years of transition from 1918

to 1940. I absorbed this atmosphere, I sublimated the experiences into my writing.

As an artist in the Manitoba schools/communities (city, rural, and northern), I was further exposed to multicultures. Part of this experience led to the recent publication of a series of articles I wrote on native Indian creativity and native education. For the past six years I have taught creative writing in Bermuda, again exposing myself to diversified cultures.

Who or what is a multicultural woman? Is it someone who directs her energies toward other cultures in the hope of finding and making known the common denominator (humanism) to these people? If so, I am a multicultural woman.

I appreciate beautiful things. Characteristically, I might wear an East Indian sari, Inuit mukluks, a Ukrainian embroidered headband, a Chilean riding hat. Embracing all cultures externally, would I qualify as a multicultural woman? I think not, for in my acquaintance with humanists who identify with people and cultures, some wear plaid jackets, jeans, anonymous Adidas, old fisherman's sweaters, and T-shirts.

If a multicultural woman identifies singularly with her people, her culture, and independently reflects a part of the multicultural scene, I am not that woman. I've translated Ukrainian poetry into English; if I were adequate to do the same in any other language, I would do it. Though I'm familiar enough with Ukrainian, I've never written in that language and prefer English. I am constantly contesting Ukrainian critics who categorize me as "a Ukrainian poet." I am therefore not an authentic representative of the culture into which I was born.

Multicultural woman is a fascinating paradox. Is she essentially ethnic? Is she essentially an artist, a writer, into whose world the mystical essence and presence of indefinable cultures merge in the process of creativity? Is she perhaps a social worker, a woman in politics or business? Does she have to be a mother? Perhaps this monumental, exploratory issue of *Canadian Woman Studies* will give me some of the answers.