

Szamosi, Gertrud

## Exploring the transnational in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *We Are Not in Pakistan*

*The Central European journal of Canadian studies*. 2023, vol. 18, iss. [1], pp. 51-61

ISBN 978-80-280-0547-4 (print); ISBN 978-80-280-0548-1 (online ; pdf)

ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online ; pdf)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.80123>

Access Date: 04. 10. 2024

Version: 20240716

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



# Exploring the Transnational in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *We Are Not in Pakistan*

Exploration du transnational dans *We Are Not in Pakistan* de Shauna Singh Baldwin

Gertrud Szamosi

---

## Abstract

This paper invites a reading of Shauna Singh Baldwin's short story collection *We Are Not in Pakistan* (2007) in the context of transnational literary studies. Since Baldwin was born in Canada, raised in India, and presently lives in the United States, with her life experience and the global theme of her writings, she has become a representative figure of the transnational literary scene. Her ability to think in multiple languages and to be familiar with different cultures offers several transnational topics in her writings, like global settings, multicultural characters, cross-cultural mobility, migration, displacement, relocation, and the fluid nature of identity and belonging.

**Keywords:** transnational, displacement, identity, space

## Résumé

Cet article invite à lire et à envisager le recueil de nouvelles de Shauna Singh Baldwin *We Are Not in Pakistan* (2007) dans le contexte des études littéraires transnationales. Née au Canada, ayant grandi en Inde et vivant actuellement aux États-Unis, Baldwin est devenue, de par ses expériences personnelles et le thème de ses écrits, une figure représentative de la scène littéraire transnationale. Sa capacité à penser en plusieurs langues et ses connaissances de différentes cultures lui permettent d'aborder dans ses écrits plusieurs thèmes transnationaux, tels que les contextes mondiaux, les personnages multiculturels, la mobilité interculturelle, la migration, le déplacement, la relocalisation et la nature fluide de l'identité et de l'appartenance.

**Mots-clés :** transnational, déplacement, identité, espace



## The transnational turn

This article explores Shauna Singh Baldwin's short story collection *We Are Not in Pakistan* (2007) in the context of transnational literary studies. In the introductory part of his seminal book *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (2010), Paul Jay emphasizes that the transnational literary turn is becoming more relevant with the global increase of international student mobility, resulting in a growing number of multicultural students attending university courses in English Studies. He claims that this influential field of literary studies is situated in and shaped by the economic forces of decolonisation, globalisation, and cosmopolitanism (7–8). The author highlights that “the transnational derives its principal sense from the prefix *trans*, which is connected to a diverse set of meanings: ‘across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another’” (3). These meanings all involve some form of movement and mobility and the crossing and transcending of boundaries that are essential features of globalisation. Rebecca Walkowitz, meanwhile, emphasises the effect of globalisation on contemporary writing and criticism, with the latter examining “the global writing of books, in addition to their classification, design, publication, translation, anthologizing, and reception across multiple geographies,” since books “no longer exist in a single literary system but may exist, in several literary systems, through various and uneven practices of world circulation” (528). In addition to the production of literature, the transnational experience also bears a thematic relevance in the case of literature and how it represents transnational and cross-cultural experiences set amidst global events that shape them in the writings of authors whose own experience is, in many ways, also transnational. Contemporary Canadian literature abounds in literary figures that can be regarded as transnational, from the earlier examples of Joy Kogawa, Jeanette Armstrong, Margaret Laurence, and Michael Ondaatje to the more recently published works of Rohinton Mistry, Ravi Hage, Yann Martel, and Tamas Dobozy.

Ariana Dagnino identifies “a new generation of culturally mobile writers” as “transcultural,” who, “by choice or by life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, live transnational experiences, cultivate bilingual-pluri-lingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures/geographies/territories, expose themselves to diversity and nurture plural, flexible identities” (52). A powerful literary voice rising from North America but echoing worldwide issues is that of Shauna Singh Baldwin. Her novel *What the Body Remembers* was published in 2000 and won the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Her second novel, *The Tiger Claw* (2004), was nominated for the Giller Prize. Her first story collection, titled *English Lessons and Other Stories* (1996), depicts the struggles of immigrant Sikhs, and it won the Friends of American Writers Prize. This article analyses Baldwin's second short story collection,



*We Are Not in Pakistan* (2007). Baldwin is a transnational writer, as she was born in Canada (Montreal), raised in India (New Delhi), and presently lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, United States (Scalia).

An interview with the writer reveals that she thinks in English, Urdu, Punjabi, and French (Methot). Baldwin's ability to think in multiple languages and be familiar with several different cultures has led to her creating transnational/multicultural characters in global settings, focusing on cross-cultural issues related to migration, displacement, and the struggles of identity formation. These topics identify her work less with Canada, the United States, India, or Pakistan than with global migration and cultural belonging concerning mobility. Thus, Baldwin is a writer not rooted in a particular place but, more importantly, in some form of transnational experience.

Baldwin is frequently referred to as a postcolonial writer due to her Indian origins and upbringing, and her subject topics are often related to the period of British colonisation. While the postcolonial experience is dominantly connected to the historical experience of colonisation, and as such, it centres on the relationship between coloniser and colonised, the cross-cultural aspects of transnationalism are not restricted to the polarities of the colonial context; instead they evolve around a broader field of multicultural concerns. The transnational reading of literature offers a new context for thinking and discussing identities, and while Doyle highlights the "other-oriented" and intersubjective nature of transnationalism, she also emphasizes that instead of thinking along and juxtaposing polarities, it also aims to understand their mutually shaping and contingent relationship (Doyle). The following analysis of *We Are Not in Pakistan* provides examples of pivotal topics of transnational literature such as mobility and movement across different kinds of borders concerning migration, displacement, relocation, the problematic aspects of finding a home away from home, and the shifting nature of identities.

## Liminal spaces and identities

The ten stories of the volume are all connected to different border-crossings as they recount geographically distant, yet in effect transnational, events, like 9/11 in "The View from the Mountain," the Partition of India, commemorated in the title story, "We Are Not in Pakistan," and the first story, "Only a Button," which is set in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster. The nuclear catastrophe in this last story demonstrates, through the life of a safety engineer and his family, the complex ripple effect of transnational events with their local and global consequences. In the characters' lives, the catastrophe acts as a displacing force that initially causes the eviction of those living in the vicinity of the power station, while ultimately it leads to



the migration of Viktor and his family to America. After the catastrophe, the family is moved to a zone of exclusion in Kyev, which occupies a border zone between the contaminated area and the rest of the world, the inhabitants of which are compelled to continue their lives in this liminal space. To some extent, border zones are liminal spaces that are often forlorn and surreal places, similar to what the Chernobyl Zone of Exclusion must have been like. The anthropologist Victor Turner observes that liminality is derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning “a threshold,” and as such it refers to an ambiguous or disoriented condition where a liminal space marks the uncertain transition between where one has been and where one is going physically, emotionally, or metaphorically (94). Occupying a liminal space marks the arrival at the threshold of something new. The members of Viktor’s family are “threshold people” (Turner 95) on several accounts, as owing to Viktor’s severe health problems the family moves from one liminal place to another after they decide to leave the Soviet Union and start a new life in America.

Liminality involves a transition, an experience often in “liminal spaces between real and imagined borders” (Jay, *Global* 1). Their encounters with different liminal, border-zone experiences compel the characters to make physical and psychological transitions. The anthropological meaning of liminality refers to the middle stage of a rite of passage, which marks a stage of transition when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet transitioned to the position they will hold when the rite is complete (Turner 98). The story’s central character, Viktor’s wife Olena, has been compelled to perform several rites of passage. As a Ukrainian, she became a subject of the Soviet Empire, and with her marriage to Viktor, she was held to be an outsider by her husband’s Jewish family members. With their relocation to the US, their isolated existence in Chicago in many ways recalls the painful memory of inhabiting the Zone of Exclusion in Pripjat. With the dismantling of the Soviet Union, Olena loses all sense of national belonging: “Is she now a citizen of Ukraine or the Soviet Union?” (39). Puzzled over the shifting nature of her ethnic and national sense of belonging, Olena concludes that she will leave the decision to the American immigration office.

Having inhabited different liminal spaces that, rather than including, excluded her, Olena’s lifelong rite of passage eventually ends at her daughter’s wedding. For the occasion, she makes herself a dress in blue and yellow, “the old and new colours of Ukraine, from before and after the unthinkable” (48). Baldwin’s double-meaning reference to the “unthinkable” implies both the highly unlikely dismantling of the Soviet Union and the fatal breakdown of the nuclear power station. The new dress symbolises Olena’s last transition and arrival at the end of a lifelong journey, in the course of which she is finally reconciled with herself and finds a home away from home as she identifies herself as a Ukrainian while not in Ukraine. Olena’s metamorphosis marks the end of a strenuous process aptly described as “creative dispatiation,” a term Dag-



nino coined to specify a transformation that helps to “rehabilitate the losses resulting from relocation by creating a new identity under new circumstances” (9). The symbolic meaning of the new dress points to Olena’s new identity, which rehabilitates her formerly suppressed Ukrainian self. The personal healing of Olena is also connected to a broader context of historical healing, or metamorphosis as it were, with her daughter, Galina, marrying someone of German or Italian origins, whose great-grandfather and Dedushka were most likely on the opposite sides of the trenches during the Great War, as they fought against their countries.

The historical process of globalisation that has continuously shaped identities and cultures across borders is recognised as a vital force with the transnational turn. The transnational turn in literary studies began as the previous study fields of minority, multicultural, and postcolonial literature intersected with the emerging research of globalisation (Jay, “Transnational”). The Ghanaian-British-American transnational philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah advocates viewing globalisation as a form of cultural contamination. Appiah argues against those who claim that globalisation erases cultural differences and produces homogeneity, and asserts that globalisation creates new forms of difference (Appiah). “Only a Button” is also a story about global contamination and pollution. As such, it offers an adequate context to reveal the diverse effects of the ecological disaster. In the case of Viktor and Olena, their transition from one global power to another conflates the representative ideologies of the Soviet communist regime and that of Western capitalism as powerful sources of contamination. When Viktor’s family moves to the West, initially, they perceive their new life as a liberating experience, but soon, they discover the “big lies” of the deceptive nature of consumer societies:

So many big lies. Even in America. Nothing is free here – not health, not good education, not housing. Only they say you are free. I think they mean you can buy blue jeans, white jeans, so long as they’re jeans – this is what they call freedom. You can rent an apartment and it looks same as your neighbour’s – just like in Kyiv. You can buy a desk, a chair, a sofa, and there are ten thousand others like it in the homes of other people. And thousands sit before a TV that looks like ours. This is individualism? (40)

Since it is impossible to leave America, the couple revolts against the oppressive forces of Cold War propaganda in several ways. To maintain their roots and sense of belonging, they start reading Russian literature in English. Yet, as their English is relatively poor, this act has a subversive effect on their sense of national attachment. Officially, they continue to live in a zone of exclusion, as with the dismantling of the former Soviet Union they lost their shared national identity without the possibility of gaining an American one. Consequently, they have to come to terms with not belong-



ing anywhere. In their compelling search for new means and ways of belonging, Olena and Viktor start exploring the Jewish religion to find a place of connection.

The story “Only a Button” offers different resolutions that mark the end of the characters’ inevitable transformation. Due to severe radioactive exposure, Viktor’s liminal existence between life and death causes his slow decay and eventual death. His spouse, Olena, also experiences liminality and exclusion in several ways, but her quest ends on a happy note at their daughter’s wedding. Compared to her parents’ personal and social traumas, Galina, the daughter, swiftly adapts to the new circumstances and finds home in America. These examples exhibit the various ways and means the different generations acquire to cope with the effects of relocation and cultural differences.

## Transgressing borders

The voluntary or enforced transgression of different borders is another recurring theme in Baldwin’s stories. “Only a Button” explores the impact of these subversive movements on the personality of the characters. Building and dismantling psychological borders between different cultures, races, and religions feature as the central themes of the story “This Raghead.” The plot revolves around an American character, Larry, who is initially convinced that he lives “in the best country of the world” (180), despite the many prejudices he has developed against other peoples; “frogs” (the French), Jews, black people, Mexicans, and most importantly towards Dr. Bakhtiar, the “terrorist-looking” doctor, who earns the nickname “raghead” for wearing a headdress. The retired Larry was fighting the Good War and is an ardent churchgoer who never misses a Sunday mass. After experiencing major health problems, he becomes a patient of the cardiologist Dr. Bakhtiar, yet he constantly suspects that he is a “goddamn immigrant,” “gay,” or a “terrorist,” and that “maybe the raghead kills Americans slowly, turning up the heartbeat, turning up the pace, till millions of hearts drop dead from exhaustion” (184). As a result of the changing circumstances, Larry is forced to transgress his own barriers when, one day, he suffers a severe heart attack. With the doctor saving his life, Larry is compelled to overcome his racist attitudes: “As he is wheeled off the ambulance, Dr. Bakhtiar comes forward. Warm brown hands buttress Larry’s cold clammy hand. Right this minute, Larry needs this raghead’s skill, his experience and all his compassion. So this time, Larry doesn’t pull away” (190).

“The View from the Mountain” portrays the paradoxical influence of rapid globalisation that, on the one hand, enforces and increases human interconnectedness while on the other fostering distrust and hatred towards one another. These seemingly antagonistic forces obstruct the newly developing relationship between the wealthy



American entrepreneur Ted Grand, who builds a hotel in Costa Rica and employs the local Wilson Gonzales for the job. The profit-oriented businessman gradually learns to trust and respect Gonzales, and their relationship gently moves toward friendship. This beneficial process is violently disrupted by the events of 9/11: “Though CNN said people of many countries died in the towers” (125), the American government launches a war against terrorism that turns the “gringo” into a suspicious and bickering man who claims that “there are no friends, only interests” (128). By the end of the story, Ted is consumed by his rage and dies in isolation, with “the view from the mountain” as his only remaining company. The narrator surmises: “Maybe he could only be blown so far from his origin. Maybe he feared that if he crossed into the next circle of the world, he would lose his American shell” (131). The story portrays how transnational political events can obstruct and “pollute” personal connections; Ted Grand is so overtly concerned with protecting his “American shell” that he loses his remaining humanity. Except for the last story, the above examples represent different forms of mobility, migration, travel, and exchange. The transnational perspective foregrounds the intersubjective nature of individual subjectivities and connects, rather than divides, peoples and cultures across geographical and psychological boundaries.

## Cultural crossroads

Transnational spaces often act as crossroads where different cultural geographies and peoples meet and interact. This topic features in several stories of the collection, one of them being “Rendezvous.” Set in a Greek restaurant in America, the story portrays several transnational characters and themes by exhibiting two essentially different attitudes relating to cultural differences. One outlook is that of the Greek restaurant owner and his son; the other is exemplified by the Mexican waiter, Carlos. The young Greek waiter looks down on everyone, as he constantly refers to and takes examples from ancient Greek culture and applies them to the American context to show off his knowledge and assumed sense of individual and national superiority. Ironically, on his last visit to the mother country, his elderly father and role model decides that “Greece was too much like America now, not like it used to be” (80). The relentlessly judgemental attitude of father and son traps them both in their prejudices and feeds their discontent towards everyone and everything surrounding them.

At the same time, “Rendezvous” also portrays the syncretic intersection of cultural differences. The story’s central character is the Mexican waiter, Carlos, who develops a close relationship with an Irish guest, Mr. Jimmy, a lawyer. The two of them explore several topics of mutual interest, like similarities between the colonial attitudes of the English towards the Irish and that of the Spanish conquistadors in Mexico. Carlos





also shares with Jimmy his dream of becoming a sculptor, and while studying Greek art, he discovers that the meaning of beauty is “when each part depends on the other to create harmony” (73). In addition to highlighting the hybrid and syncretic nature of cultural interactions, the transnational literary perspective also emphasises the interrelated nature of cultural connections and the exchange of ideas and traditions, which, at their best, complement one another, as “each part depends on the other” (Baldwin 73).

The collection’s title story, “We Are Not in Pakistan,” exposes the vulnerable nature of cultural diversity and conflict on the deeply personal level of family relationships. It is set in contemporary Chicago, and the plot unfolds a culturally hybrid family composite. “Grandma’s mother was Catholic, born in Iran, Grandma’s father was an Anglo, a mixed breed left behind when the British washed their hands of India and Pakistan.” However, when he met Grandma’s mother in Lahore, “he converted from Anglican to Catholic so he could marry her” (146). “Grandma got born, grew up in Lahore, a city in India that somehow got itself moved to Pakistan,” and this is where “she met Grandpa when he was a Marine guard stationed at the American Embassy” (146). Eventually, the couple settled in the US and had a daughter, Safia, who married a Black Irishman, and they had a daughter, Kathleen. The culturally diverse and complex family tree reveals several historical and cultural dislocations. The story is narrated from the perspective of a 16-year-old teenage girl who, following her parents’ divorce, moves into her grandparents’ house with her mother. The title of the story, “We Are Not in Pakistan,” refers to the recurring “punchline” that marks the end of the ongoing debate between Grandma Miriam and her granddaughter. The grandmother tries to protect Kathleen from what she believes to be the damaging influence of Americanisation; consequently she prohibits the wearing of tankinis, tank tops, spaghetti straps, and hipster jeans, and no laptops or cell phones are allowed. Kathleen identifies with the American way of life, and similarly to her friends, “Kathleen is desperate for a hamburger, pizza, or a single mouthful of Uncle Ben’s,” but at home, she has to “swallow things with funny names like alloo cholas and eggplant bhartha, all served over an endless supply of cumin-scented rice” (141). While Kathleen admires America, for Grandma, everything is better in Pakistan, and she persistently translates or conflates the world around her with her past life in Lahore. Her attitude frustrates Kathleen to the extent that she always reminds Grandma that “We are not in Pakistan,” and in her disdain, on one occasion, she invokes her favourite movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, where “even Dorothy knew when she wasn’t in Kansas any more” (136).

These examples and the fact that Grandmother never took American citizenship identify her attitude as characteristic of many first-generation immigrants, who, by perceiving any form of difference as a threat, end up retreating to their past. As the story is set in the aftermath of September 11, it depicts examples from the point



of view of nationalist propaganda and growing prejudice towards people who look like “terrorists.” Grandma personally knows several people who were held in Detention Centres on false charges, and she is also convinced that the FBI or the CIA constantly monitors private telephone calls. Grandma’s limited perspective mirrors the American political propaganda in many ways. On one occasion, the story juxtaposes the American Secretary of State’s nationalistic speech about the “triumph of Freedom over Tyranny” with Grandmother’s mistaken perception of the American political leader as a mullah (143). The similar mindset of American political and Muslim religious leaders provides a sharply ironic criticism of both fundamentalist attitudes.

The story reaches its climax as the central characters come to a crossroads that tests their allegiance toward one another. In the aftermath of Kathleen’s deeply hurting Grandma, the grandmother suddenly vanishes. The ending of the story establishes a connection between the enigmatic disappearance of the grandmother and the arrival of a Muslim girl at school, whom everybody avoids until one day Kathleen sits next to her. The girl is wearing a white scarf with “magnet eyes ringed with kohl, like Grandma’s” (159). Following the initial confusion over their shared Iranian lineage and separate religions, Kathleen, in a moment of self-revelation, turns to the new girl: “Everyone’s connected to everyone. We just need to figure out how” (159). The epiphanic closure reveals Kathleen’s sudden understanding of her unshakeable connection with her grandmother and the other family members. Kathleen’s attachment to the Muslim girl evokes a deeper form of self-understanding that results in Kathleen’s crucial transformation. According to the German philosopher Wolfgang Iser, the essence of transnational encounters is the awareness that “we can transcend the narrowness of traditional, monocultural ideas and constraints, and we can develop an increasingly transcultural understanding of ourselves” (199).

## Conclusion

Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *We Are Not in Pakistan* portrays several critical topics of transnational literature: the complexities of mobility and movement across different borders, exploring themes such as migration, displacement, the challenges of relocation, the problematic aspects of finding a home away from home, and the shifting nature of identities. Applying the transnational perspective to the reading of Baldwin’s stories testifies to the hybrid nature of cultures and identities. By embracing different languages, traditions, ideas, and beliefs, the varied characters in Baldwin’s stories consistently grapple with personal, local, and global challenges in their quest for symbiotic relationships, all the while embracing diversity in



languages, traditions, ideas, and beliefs. This overarching theme fosters a sense of connection between the writer and her readers, who share a mutual longing for love and connection.

## Works cited

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "The Case for Contamination." *The New York Times Magazine*, 1 Jan. 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/magazine/the-case-for-contamination.html>
- Ashcroft, Bill. "Globalization, Transnation, and Utopia." *Locating Transnational Ideal*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Baldwin, Shauna Singh. *We Are Not in Pakistan*. New Delhi: Rupa. Co, 2009.
- Dagnino, Arianna. "Transcultural Writers and Transcultural Literature in the Age of Global Modernity." *Transnational Literature* 4/2 (May 2012). <http://fhrc.flinders.ed.au/transnational/home.html>
- Doyle, Laura. "Toward a Philosophy of Transnationalism." *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1 (2009). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9vr1k8hk>
- Jay, Paul. *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2010.
- . "Transnational." *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Literature*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1134>
- Methot, Suzanna. "Lives of girls and women." *Quill and Quire* 1999/9. <https://quillandquire.com/authors/lives-of-girls-and-women/>
- Scalia, Rosalia. "Shauna Singh Baldwin: Writing Through Tears." *SikhNet*. <https://www.sikhnet.com/the-arts/shauna-singh-baldwin-writing-through-tears>
- Turner, Victor. "Liminality and Communitas." In *The Ritual Process*. New York: Cornell UP, 1966, 94–131. [https://womrel.sitehost.iu.edu/Rel433%20Readings/SearchableTextFiles/Turner\\_RitualProcess\\_chaps3&5.pdf](https://womrel.sitehost.iu.edu/Rel433%20Readings/SearchableTextFiles/Turner_RitualProcess_chaps3&5.pdf)
- Walkowitz, L. Rebecca. "The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer." *Contemporary Literature* 47/4 (Winter 2006), 527–545.
- Welsch, Wolfgang. "Transculturality – the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today." In *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (eds.), London: Sage, 1999, 194–213. [https://welsch.uni-jena.de/papers/W\\_Wlensch\\_Transculturality.html](https://welsch.uni-jena.de/papers/W_Wlensch_Transculturality.html)



**GERTRUD SZAMOSI** / is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of English Studies of Pécs in Hungary. She has taught and published in the fields of Canadian, Scottish, and Postcolonial literatures. She has published articles on Margaret Laurence, Alistair Macleod, Emily Carr, and diaspora literatures.

