



## THE IDENTITY CRISIS OF RETA WINTERS: GENDER AND ETHNICITY IN CAROL SHIELD'S UNLESS

RETA WINTERS'IN KİMLİK KRİZİ: CAROL SHIELDS'İN UNLESS ROMANINDA TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYET VE ETNİK KÖKEN

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### Abstract

Carol Shield's novel *Unless* (2002) mainly revolves around Reta Winter's identity crisis in comparison to her past and present self. As an activist in her youth and a current writer, Reta's world turns upside down after the news that one of her daughters, Norah, unexpectedly decides to live in the street. This incident reminds Reta how much she is estranged from her past self in the journey of self-discovery and how it leads her into an identity crisis. In this research paper, it will be discussed how Reta's life changes after her daughter Norah's choice, how Alicia, one of the protagonists in Reta's novel, changes her life choices dramatically, and how Canada's multiculturalism policy is presented in life. The interconnectedness among Norah's choice of living in the street by sitting behind a cardboard sign "goodness" (after experiencing a traumatic incident), the references related to Norah's clothes and where she chooses to sit, and the relationship between Norah's traumatic event and Canada's multiculturalism policy will lead Reta to revisit her past self that she has forgotten for a very long time and will guide her to remember her old self as the other. Reta's personal trauma and Canada's cultural trauma will be analyzed in the scope of literary trauma theories by the contribution of the pioneers in this field, particularly Cathy Caruth.

### Öz

Carol Shields'in 2002 yılında kaleme aldığı *Unless* romanı, Reta Winters'ın geçmişi ile güncel hayatındaki kimlik çatışmasını konu edinmektedir. Kendi gençlik yıllarında bir aktivist olan Reta, kızlarından biri olan Norah'ın beklenmedik bir şekilde aldığı karar ile sokakta yaşamaya başlaması ile dünyası altüst olur. Bu olay, romanda ve Reta'nın kendilik yolculuğunda başladığı noktadan ne kadar uzaklaştığını ona hatırlatmakta ve kendisini bir kimlik krizine sürüklemektedir. Bu çalışmanın, Reta Winters'ın kızı Norah'nun kararı sonrası hayatına, yazdığı romandaki ana karakterlerinden Alicia'in seçimlerine ve Kanada tarihindeki kültürel çeşitlilik politikasına nasıl eleştirel bir bakış açısı getirdiği tartışılacaktır. Norah'nun yaşadığı travmatik bir olay sonrası boynuna astığı "iyilik" yazılı pankartla sokakta yaşamaya başlaması, üzerindeki kıyafetlere ve oturmayı seçtiği yere dair göndermeler ve bu olayın Kanada'daki kültürel travma ile olan bağlantısı, Reta'nın unutulmuş geçmiş kimliğine dönüp yeniden bakmasını ve kendisinin de "öteki" olduğunu hatırlatacaktır. Reta'nın kişisel travması ile Kanada'nın kültürel travması, Cathy Caruth başta olmak üzere, travma teorisyenleri ışığında incelenecektir.

*All my life I've heard people speak of finding themselves in acute pain, bankrupt in spirit and body, but I've never understood what they meant. To lose. To have lost (Shields 1).*

## **Introduction**

Reta Winter, the narrator of Carol Shield's novel *Unless* (2002), who was a human rights' activist in her youth, presently does not give importance to what she fought for in her past. After her daughter Norah decides to live on the street for the sake of goodness due to witnessing a Muslim woman put herself on fire, Reta's oppressed trauma returns after a long period. Reta's trauma is about forgetting and denying her *old self* in favour of her *new self* as an apolitical individual who is no longer interested in human rights. However, her personal trauma actually overlaps with the historical trauma of Canada. Reta is twice invader as a Canadian with British and French roots as well as a displaced French-Canadian and woman. Norah's presence on the street corner serves as a haunting image for Reta's trauma; therefore, the alienated Norah reminds Reta of the Muslim woman or the generic and ethnic others' experiences in one's adopted country. Both the cases of Norah and the Muslim woman in turn recall the otherness of Reta in her ethnic and gender identity. The Muslim woman, Norah and Reta are all the other in terms of gender and ethnicity in a multicultural Canada that has not yet fully resolved its patriarchal structure and the prejudice against the ethnic other. In *Unless*, the trauma is mainly reflected through the loss of a daughter. In this study, it will be analysed how trauma causes a loss of balance in Reta Winter's on-going life and a crisis in her identity in terms of alienation from society and ethnic and generic otherness. Reta's personal trauma overlaps with the cultural trauma in Canada. By revisiting personal history, Canada retrieves the other in history. In terms of theoretical background, this research will analyse trauma fiction and how Shield's novel is closely connected to Cathy Caruth's trauma theory in the scope of postmodernism and postcolonialism.

## **Trauma Theory**

Cathy Caruth describes trauma theory by grounding upon Freud's explanation of trauma emphasizing the fact that a traumatic event reappears after a certain period passes or any sort of delay takes place (Whitehead, 2004, p. 12). In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, during or right after the traumatic event, the traumatized person cannot grasp the situation so that he actually will not be able to locate the trauma in his/her memory or consciousness; generally after a certain period of time described as "*incubation period*", the trauma will emerge as a haunting image of an

event from one's past and it will possess one with continuous repetitions and returns (Caruth, 1995, pp. 151-7). Freud describes "*the return of the repressed*" in an uncanny way (2003 [1919], p. 241). Therefore, the imprints of the trauma are hidden within one's psyche and they get stuck as an emotional blockade in his/her past. When a triggering case takes place, a person not only deals with the current problem, he/she more importantly faces with the awakening of the imprisoned state of feelings and emotions caused by the original trauma. In relation to the novel, Norah's presence on the street functions as a haunting image for Reta's former self, the Muslim woman, and the diverse others in general. Historically speaking, Ontario region, where Reta lives within a suburb, was known as the representative of Britain as a mainstream culture because "*present-day Ontario was a British colony*" in Canadian history (Skaarup, 2012, p. 121). Reta defines herself as the representative of this culture throughout the narrative. She not only tries to forget the other in her own identity but also 'the others' in Canada in terms of their ethnicity. Her choice to live in a suburb in Ontario refers to how she distances herself from the visibility of the others. Shields creates connections among the others and Canada's postcolonial past in the scope of how they are forgotten or repressed. Theoretically speaking, it is stated that trauma fiction is interrelated with postcolonial fiction in a way that both are concerned with the issues of memory recovery, recognition of the denied and the repressed (Whitehead, 2004, p. 82). Basically, trauma covers overwhelming experiences and feelings, the recognition or remembrance of the trauma leads the individual to face with what is forgotten in his/her past self, and thereby the repressed becomes visible both from the perspective of Reta as the *individual trauma* and Canada's postcolonial past as the *cultural trauma*.

Anne Whitehead defines "*trauma fiction*" that it arises out of three interconnected contexts: "*postmodernism, postcolonialism and a post-war legacy or consciousness*" and, in postmodernist fiction, memory plays a vital role and there is a need to connect with the past. The postmodernist fiction criticizes the conception of history as a grand narrative, and it focuses upon the complexity of memory (Whitehead, 2004, pp. 81-88). In postcolonial fiction, the narrative of history is replaced with a private act of memory. Postcolonial novelists put forward the repressed or silenced individuals' stories to the reader. Reta, as a woman writer in the novel, takes a role to represent the other in her writing by creating the ethnic and generic others like Alicia and Roman, the main protagonists of Reta's novel. However, Reta allows Alicia to survive mostly within her relation to a man, Roman. Later, Reta decides to write the second novel as a distraction after Norah's appearance on the

street corner. Norah's trauma leads Reta to remember and reconsider over the problem of otherness in Canada in general and that of her otherness in the self. Therefore, Reta looks at Alicia from a different perspective while writing her second novel. The novel not only analyses the trauma of a daughter but also how it leads to return Reta's trauma about forgetting the other. Whether trauma is healed in the postmodern novel *Unless* is open to discussion.

### **The Interconnectedness of Cultural and Personal Traumas in the Novel**

Reta, as a woman writer and the narrator of the novel, is influenced by Derrida and a French feminist Danielle Westerman. Reta states at the beginning of the novel: "Too much Derrida might be the problem. I was into all that pretty heavily in the early eighties" (Shields, 2002, p. 4). Derrida's theory "deconstruction" focuses upon the binary oppositions to de-construct them. This theory of deconstruction through the concept of culturally determined gender roles for men and women can be related to the roles of being a mother, a wife, and a woman writer in the male discourse in the novel through which Reta is defined with these roles. In addition, Reta is the translator of Westerman; moreover, Westerman plays the roles for Reta as a literary leading figure as a French feminist and a literary mother. Westerman can be related to Irigaray's feminist theory that is about the deconstruction of gender roles as defining women "the other" and to Irigaray's connection between mother and daughter relationship. The article "Feminism and Deconstruction" draws attention to the definition of 'woman':

[...] woman is not-man; as such, she is "other" to that which is the norm. As one example of this, woman's sexuality has been theorized as lack because it has been conceptualized in terms of male sexuality; in keeping with this, woman has been rendered semantically passive because she has been relegated to the position of the object, not the subject of desire (Poovey, 1988, p. 55).

In regard with the position of women as the other, being lack, passive, and an object; Poovey's perspective emphasizes how vital it is to determine and describe women by not overlooking from or creating comparisons with the male perspective *but recognizing* their self-existence for reimagining a realm of female subjectivity. In the narrative, Reta is representing the generic other, and she is also representing the ethnic other in Canada as a double burden. After the long years of Reta's disregarding her past self, Norah's decision to live on the street serves Reta for the function of *rethinking* and being aware of her otherness and her role as a woman writer.

Historically speaking, the setting of the novel takes place in 1999 and 2000 that might refer to the end of a century and the beginning of a new millennium as a bridge between the past and the future. As the narrator, Reta Winters presents herself to the readers with various concepts of womanhood as a constructed role by describing herself as:

I am Reta Winters, the doctor's wife (that fine man!), the mother of three daughters, the writer [...] In our old big house, it could be said, we live the life we long ago chose: abundant, bustling [...] food in the fridge, more in the freezer. I work as a writer and translator [...] And I am the mother of Norah Winters, such a sad case (Shields, 2002, p. 43).

Reta firstly defines herself as a wife of a family physician, then a mother and finally a writer. She constructs her identity through her roles in the house and through her job. Reta defines her room where she works as an old box in the attic not even as a room (Shields, 2002, p. 50). She is marginalized in terms of the part of the house she chooses to use as a place of practising writing in the house, the attic. She is also marginalized as a writer due to her gender in the patriarchal structure. In terms of ethnic and generic otherness, it is worth noting here an intertextual link to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, where Bertha Mason is presented as "*the furious madwoman, who does not embrace the conventional ideal of femininity, which prescribes obedience and silence, and as such she remains the unknown mad Creole wife of Rochester [...] hidden away in the attic*" (Mızıkyan Akfıçıcı, 2018, p.350). The fact that Reta works in the attic of her house is emblematic of her transgressing the gender norms determined by male-oriented society. Bertha is physically imprisoned and psychologically trapped within the narrow confines of the attic by her husband Rochester who reflects the hypocrisy of patriarchy comparing his approach to Jane and Bertha who are the double victims of both patriarchy and colonialism (due to her womanhood and ethnic origin). On the other hand, Reta is presented as a writer in the attic where she creates her novel in which the protagonist, Roman and Alicia, are defined with various details referring them as 'the other'. The problematic arises when Reta presents Alicia in her first novel mainly exists in her relation to Roman because Reta does not aim to reflect the embracement of her characters' otherness. Reta traps her characters, just like her old self, within the didactics of the patriarchal thinking. As a writer, Reta's job is about creating ideologies, lives, new perspectives; however, she silences her old self that changes dramatically the whole flow of constructing her identity; thereby, she deceives herself in order to feel the sense of belonging in the

capitalist culture. As a reference to the change in Reta's mind, Reta in her second novel liberates Alicia much more than the first one; thereby, what Reta experiences with Norah elaborates and enriches to some extent her perspective upon womanhood and otherness. The readers can expect Reta to perform her role as a writer to struggle with or to create an alternative way to social and ethnic problems of the time. First of all, the writer needs to be aware of them and reflect them via literature. Nonetheless, the function of literature is replaced by consumerism in Reta's life. Even while she is performing her writing, the narrative gives the readers clues about how consumerism settles in her life and it also continues to give clues about the differences between her old and new self. In her youth, Reta was a human rights activist on the streets whereas she turns into a person who is surrendered by the consumerist elements. She goes to a bookstore "*Politics and Prose*", uses an "*Apple computer*", pays with her "*Visa card*" or orders "*a Freedom Chair*" from a catalogue. Specific references in the narration are indicative of, for the readers, how much she can be defined in the scope of the capitalist system or how the name of a bookstore may signify her past interests that she has already chosen to forget. What she left in her past and what she acquires now are reflected throughout the narration; "*Politics and Prose*" bookstore that she disregards the name of in the social atmosphere related to her old self and as an indication to the loss of her old political standpoint, "*Apple computer*" and "*Visa card*" that refers to her economic status, "*a Freedom Chair*" that ironically reflects once more her abandonment of fighting for freedom as an activist for human rights. Among all Reta's indifference to her past, Norah's trauma becomes a shock for her mother, and it leads Reta to *reawaken* about some issues she has buried in herself for a long time. Reta forgets the others both in Canada and the other in her 'self' as well that may refer to the cultural and social problems in Canadian history in terms of the ethnic and generic otherness.

Reta starts to question the reason why her oldest daughter decides to change her life. Reta actually listens everyone's speculations about Norah's choice; however, the only person in the novel is Reta herself who escapes to make a comment about the reasons. In *Conversations with Tony Morrison*, Marsha Darling, currently as a professor of History and Interdisciplinary Studies, answers the question of how the healing of trauma takes place as:

[...] no one speaks, no one tells the story about himself or herself unless forced. They don't want to talk, they don't want to remember, they don't want to say it, because they're afraid of it -which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they



are not only one, they are two, and three, and four, you know? The collective sharing of that information heals the individual -and the collective (Morrison, 1994, p. 248).

It is emphasized that the more the trauma is shared, the more it is witnessed and it comes to the place where the sense of being stuck starts to disintegrate and gradually diminish. By sharing her traumatic past, Reta is afraid of facing with her own trauma and incapable of narrating her being trapped within her trauma od denying her old self. Instead of connecting with sharing her trauma with her own words, she is able to or subconsciously prefers to ask people around her and in a way that she collects witnesses for her, and her daughter's trauma as interrelated with one another. Reta's primary purpose is not to understand the certain drives behind Norah's actions in the scope of Norah's psychology and her changed world view towards the capitalist system. It is highly probable that Reta is escaping to make any comment on purpose because she also does not want to face with her previous self; therefore, she finds herself *refusing to comprehend* her daughter's actions as a sort of retreating not to encounter her subconscious of the traumatic past. In connection with Reta's situation to distance herself from being a witness to Norah's case and her traumatic past, Laurie Vickroy indicates that "[a]nother] significant aim of trauma narratives is to reshape cultural memory through personal contexts, adapting testimonial traits to prevent and bear witness against such repetitive horrors" (Vickroy, 2002, p.5). Therefore, Norah functions not only to remind a personal trauma for Reta but also a cultural trauma for Canada. As the function of trauma narrative, this aims to lead the readers to be aware of the past and be literary witnesses to the probable traumatic events in their personal and cultural lives. Returning to Norah's choice to live on the street corner, Reta is so highly affected that this incident basically takes the role of a turning point between Reta's past and present life. Her past goes back to the times when she met with Tom. Reta describes the time they met as, "[...] liberated days Tom and I came out of, the seventies [...] Tom and I, two students sitting side by side at a human rights rally in Nathan Phillips Square in downtown Toronto" (Shields, 2002, p. 185). They met in their university years when both of them were activists. Tom even "*rebelled against the established order*" (Shields, 2002, p. 72) and was jailed due to political demonstrations (Shields, 2002, p. 141). Reta was quite radical and interested in politics in her youth; on the other hand, the middle-aged Reta becomes depoliticized and is not interested in human rights. In Canadian history, "*a number of major legislative actions paved the way for a formal multicultural society in Canada with key parliamentary action taking place in the 1960s, 1970s and*

1980s” (Shannon, 2015, p. 4). In 1977, the Canadian Human Rights Act was legislated by the parliament that allowed a specific commission to oversee the concerns about human rights in Canada in the scope of any discrimination or abuse of ethnic others in the society (Shannon, 2015, p. 6). Canada was trying to establish a system to cope with the problem of ethnical and cultural otherness. In addition, the 1960s and the 1970s were also vital for Second Wave feminist movement. In *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice*, Deborah L. Madsen (2000) describes how Second Wave Feminism fought against women’s representation as the other in the patriarchal discourse. Madsen also defines the oppression of women:

The phrase ‘double consciousness’ or double stigma describes the oppression of the individual both as a woman and as a member of an ethnic minority; or in other words, the divergent experience of what one is in oneself versus the cultural image imposed by the racism of others (p. 218).

This feminist movement refers to women as being both the generic and the cultural others. They experience a dual self-perception, and it is highly probable that the sense of estrangement within their psyche increases as a result of belonging to an ethnic minority and being a woman in a patriarchal ideology. Both the history of Canada and feminist movement create the ground to analyze Reta Winters as an ethnic and generic other in a multicultural country. Though Reta is twice doubled, Reta is not fully aware of it until Norah becomes the externalization of trauma in the street corner.

The corner where Norah chooses to sit and beg is a haunted place that has “*its own textual archaeology. [...] poet Ed Lewinski hanged himself in 1955 [...] where Margherita Tolles burst out of the subway exit into the sunshine of her adopted country and decided to write a great play [...]*” (Shields, 2002, p. 11). The place witnesses both a poet’s death and the birth of a narration –of an immigrant. Additionally, “*Norah’s corner at Bloor and Bathurst*” (Shields, 2002, p. 104) streets are known generally as where Toronto’s ethnic communities gather. The initials of the street names are the same that creates an echo in the mind of the reader. It can be perceived as a haunting image in the text as a reference to the existence of trauma just like a trauma survivor’s being stuck and immobilized in his/her emotional world until he/she can fully reexperience life. These streets are famous for the diversity of different cultures in Canada; therefore, Norah turns into a visible trauma and her existence is represented as a microcosm of all the other communities in Canada. As the street corner has a historical reference, Norah functions as a reminder of Reta’s past and her forgotten



trauma. To return Reta's youth, Reta and Tom met "at a human rights rally in Nathan Phillips Square" (Shields, 2002, p. 185). It is the same square where the Muslim woman puts herself on fire (Shields, 2002, p. 117). Therefore, the same point where Norah intervenes the immolation of the Muslim woman and starts to question her life. Norah becomes a replica of Reta's youth. The interconnected relationship among Norah, Muslim woman and Reta is about remembering the other and Reta's trauma is about neglecting her past consciousness about human rights and her responsibility as a woman writer of different ethnic roots. Reta is the representative bodily existence of her various ethnic origins in the narrative; Reta's mother is from Montreal (a Canadian province of Quebec) and his father is from Scotland.

In terms of mother-daughter relationship, there are connections between Reta/ her mother and Reta/ Norah. As Norah becomes a replica of Reta's youth in terms of questioning human rights, Reta might also be affected by her own mother's garden as a resource of her writing ability. Reta states that her love for flowers were developed from her mother (Shields, 2002, p. 147). In the article about Alice Walker's book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, women's artistic creativity is connected with the garden of Walker's mother and, as an African American woman, Walker is affected by her mother's magnificent ability in gardening (Moore, 1984, pp. 107-110). As Walker makes the connection between the creation of garden and the creation of one's artistic ability, Shields also uses the flower imagery to refer to the resource of Reta's artistic creativity as a writer. Another connection between the mother-daughter relationship can be presented in another feminist text. Irigaray's essay "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other" starts with, "With your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice. And here I am now, my insides frozen" (1981, p. 60). Jane Gallop refers to this sentence with an alternative interpretation, "[...] the translation of the French 'la glace' into 'ice' in this context would be 'mirror', thus underlining the paralyzing impact of the mother who acts as a mirror to the daughter" (qtd. in Şavkay, 2003, p. 159). Irigaray also refers to the fact that the liberation of female can be realized with a new relation to the mother (Şavkay 159). The alienated Norah on the street corner is forcing Reta to start to question her role as a mother. Reta looks from Norah's aspect that her daughter is an intelligent and beautiful girl whose mother is a writer and whose father is a doctor; however, she gets off the track (Shields, 2002, pp. 12-13). In *Carol Shields and the Writer-Critic*, how Norah's case affects Reta is mentioned as:

This family crisis exposes the political interestedness of Reta's narrative. Her desires are the effects of discourses of class and Western individualism, including second-wave feminism, yet the limits

of these discourses are concealed from her view. Her eyes are “curtained over” (58), and her blindness to the exclusion of others, such as the homeless or the Muslim, from many human rights and privileges throws her reliability into question (Beckman-Long, 2015, pp. 115-116).

Norah’s case leads Reta to eliminate her blindness of ‘the other’. After Reta starts to reawaken about and faces with the problem of ‘the other’, she is changing her perspective in her writing about representing her female character Alicia as an independent woman. Actually, before her reawakening, Reta is implicitly and subconsciously in a relation with the other through her translations of Westerman’s books, poems, and short stories. Through the finale of the novel, Reta defines Norah, Westerman, her mother, her mother-in-law, and herself as “*uncoded female*”:

[...] the world is split in two, between those who are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes for ever and ever, and those like Norah, like Danielle Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like all of us who fall into the uncoded female otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang. That’s the problem (Shields, 2002, pp. 269-70).

Reta is emphasizing the fact that the differences between women and men are encoded due to the constructed roles of women and men in a society. In a patriarchal sphere, women become the others that are displaced right after the birth. Reta defines womanhood with all the negative connotations in which women are silenced “*seal our mouths*” in terms of their thinking abilities, attributed as inadequate or disabled through the definition of “*shut[ting] down our bodies*” (as a visual representation of women within the social gaze), and finally defined as nothing in comparison with all the light metaphors that creates a perceivable and perceptible visual reality in comparison with women’s displacement by the patriarchy in the same universe, under the same sky, and the same social sphere. In general, *Unless* discusses whether this situation is different or not in a multicultural country.

Historically speaking, Canada became a nation and acknowledged itself as a multicultural nation in 1982 to embrace various nationalities as Canadian citizens. In “Multiculturalism in Canada: The Controversy of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity”, Canada’s history of multiculturalism is depicted that Canada Act, in 1982,

acknowledged the country as a multicultural nation where each individual is equal under law in terms of *equal* protection, benefit without discrimination in the scope of ethnic origin, race, religion, sex, age and more (Shannon, 2015, p. 8). It refers to the fact that Canada as a nation accepts ‘the other’ in terms of declaring itself as a multicultural nation. Shannon also states about Canada the fact that the first arrivers were the British and the French explorers, declaring eventually themselves as the founders of the country, around the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (5). Later, other European and non-European nations came to Canada and made Canada a multicultural nation that would bring some problems among them (Shannon 35). Reta, as the focus of the narration, is also representing the invaders of Canada in history because of her mother and father’s nationalities. It is stated as:

My mother always spoke to me in French and my father in English [...]  
My mother, *a pure laine* Marteau from Montreal, spoke a musical French, and my father a crisp Edinburgian English, only slightly eroded by his years in Canada (Shields, 2002, p. 147).

Both Reta’s mother and father represent two official languages of Canada and Reta, as the daughter of the implied colonizers, is also becoming the alien invader who forgets about ‘the other’. In Reta’s perception of French and British languages, it is undoubtedly narrated as “*musical*” and “*crisp*” (meaning confident) that the superiority and eligibility of the invaders are appreciated by Reta who attributes negativity to the multicultural aspect of Canada by using the verb “erode” (meaning gradually destroy/be destroyed). To some extent, Reta blames the other by disregarding her position within the society as a writer and former human rights’ activist.

As the central figure of the novel, Reta defines her identity through her house. To be more precise, the house refers to the past as the backdrop of the narration. She states that her house is a hundred years old and how she goes blank when asked how many rooms they have and she describes her Indian rug, Swedish wood-burning stove and more (Shields, 2002, p. 49). The furniture belonging to different nations can symbolize Canada’s multiculturalism in the narrative. The house also functions as a microcosm for Canada’s cultural diversity and trauma of the other. Reta mentions a few oak trees in the previous owners McGinns’ farm that have a lifelong for nearly nine hundred years in three parts: the growing, the living and the dying during three hundred years for each (Shields, 2002, p. 51). It shows the land of the house has been used for centuries. In history, oak trees were believed to be chosen

by the god, and Druid priests were using them for their sacrificial rituals (Williams, 2004, pp. 46-7). In the novel, Norah becomes the one who sacrifices herself in the name of “goodness” for the others. Reta narrates the house differently after Norah’s case:

Our house is full of rough corners that seem to me just about to come into their full beauty. I often think of how Vicente Verdú, the Spanish writer, spoke of houses as existing between reality and desire, what we want and what we already have. Probably this old house is not as lovely as I believe. My eyes are curtained over. I used to be able to see the separate rooms with their colours and spaces, but now I can’t. I’ve overvalued its woody, whorled coves and harbours, convincing myself of an architectural spaciousness and, at the same time, coziness [...] (Shields, 2002, p. 57).

Reta’s way of perceiving her house changes dramatically from being cosy to being a claustrophobic place. The diversity of colours and spaces may be a reference to the others in Canada. Reta is living in her house with all the diversity of them; however, she forgets the others that also create diversity in the country.

Reta is living in a suburb in Ontario. It can be connected to the concept of a writer in the ivory tower that is related with the artist’s seclusion from the social, cultural, and political problems of the world. Suburb is a separate place from the city with its physical distance. Reta’s role as a writer should include dealing with the problems of her time –the ethnic and generic otherness in Canada. Shields defines the concept of *otherness* with ethnicity and gender through specific characters in the narration. In Zygmunt Bauman’s book *Freedom*, Jeremy Bentham defines a prison model “Panopticon Prison” that has an observation tower in the middle of a circular prison. It also carries some similarities with the ivory tower due to its preserved distance to the cells. The individual cells are under the gaze of the ones in the tower with the help of light reflecting the prisoners’ shadows upon their cells’ wall (Bauman, 2016, pp. 17-20).

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault interprets this prison model as, “They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible [...] Visibility is a trap.” (1991, p. 200). To create a connection between Panopticon prison and the concept of otherness in *Unless*, this prison may be considered as the land of Canada and each cell might resemble the lives of individuals who are psychologically trapped to be attributed as ‘the other’. As a distinguishing difference between these two concepts,

prison model allows the ones in the observation tower to watch over the prisoners. This observation tower could also be linked with the ivory tower with their distance to the cells or the others in society. Nonetheless, the writer, Reta, in the observation tower stops watching over the social problems and reflecting alternative solutions to the readers. In the narration, Shields takes Reta from her ivory tower and puts her in a dilemma in which Reta has to face with the problem of ethnic and generic otherness through the loss of Norah. The psychologically or culturally imprisoned individuals as ‘the other’ –Norah, the Muslim woman, the ones in Africa or Mozambique– become *visible* by showing their trauma publicly.

### **Conclusion**

Reta’s trauma as a personal trauma is reflected through Canada’s cultural trauma – the other. With the loss of Norah, Reta is led through a journey in the scope of gaining an awareness of her forgotten self and of the others in Canada. As a writer, Reta is twice doubled due to her ethnic origins and being a woman in a male discourse. Reta starts to understand the generic and ethnic otherness of women while she is *reawakening* about her past self. It is stated how Norah becomes a replica of her mother’s youth according to Irigaray’s theory. The personal trauma creates a circle in the novel to make connections with memory, past, and the history. Shield’s novel will point out how much it is possible to make multiculturalism practicable in the fictional life through the characters’ otherness primarily in terms of ethnic origin, race, and sex. In history, Canada made a number of attempts to make the multiculturalism practicable; however, it turns out as a partial failure in the country. The immolation of the Muslim woman as a generic and ethnic other can be regarded as an example to this failure. After Norah and the Muslim woman, Reta starts to gain a consciousness to remember the “*uncoded female otherness*” in the society towards the end of the novel. She develops a new sense of perspective to everything around her; she does not perceive her house as a cozy place, she comprehends the otherness of women in patriarchal structure and how unfairly women struggle to exist as if fighting against attractive and spectacular fireworks, stars, and the light of Big Bang as a metaphor for patriarchy. After the witnessing of Muslim woman setting herself on fire, Norah is physically and emotionally scarred in her attempt to help her. This case brings the questioning sequence of womanhood, otherness, ethnic problems in Norah’s world and leads Norah to leave her luxurious life to live on the street corner. Norah’s stepping into questioning the system and human rights in terms of ethnic and generic otherness in a multicultural Canada brings back Reta’s trauma of

forgetting and denying her old self as a human rights' activist. Reta's main trauma is giving up her identity and belief system in order to *fit in* the capitalist and patriarchal social order. As a writer who does not fulfill her duty to provide an insight for the social problems of his/her culture or world view, Reta starts to leave her ivory tower and to be included to the women's problem as the other by stating how unfair to attribute power to the patriarchy just because of their gender. As a current woman writer, she creates an alternative perspective in her second novel; she works on her character Alicia to construct her existence *not by marrying a man* but by depending upon her own choices and existence. *Unless* provides a partial hope to the personal and cultural problems of Canada by Reta's giving a voice to the problem of women's otherness; however, as a postmodern novel, it does not bring solutions to all the problems about the other in the narrative. It aims to lead the readers into questioning what the constructed social belief system imposes and enforces unfairly upon the individuals by eliminating the variety of thinking abilities from different ethnic and generic others all around the world.

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### Summary

This article aims to investigate how Reta Winter's identity crisis, in the comparison to her past and present self, is connected with the Canada's cultural trauma in the scope of multicultural policies. As an activist in her youth and a current writer, Reta's world turns upside down after the news that one of her daughters, Norah, unexpectedly decides to live in the street. This incident reminds Reta how much she is estranged from her past self in the journey of self-discovery and how it leads her into an identity crisis. In this research, it will be discussed how Reta's life changes after her daughter Norah's choice, how Alicia, one of the protagonists in Reta's novel, changes her life choices dramatically, and how Canada's multiculturalism policy is presented in life. The interconnectedness among Norah's choice of living in the street by sitting behind a cardboard sign "goodness" (after experiencing a traumatic incident), the references related to Norah's clothes and where she chooses to sit, and the relationship between Norah's traumatic event and Canada's multiculturalism policy will lead Reta to revisit her past self that she has forgotten for a very long time and will guide her to remember her old self as the other.

Reta is not only representing the generic other, but also the ethnic other in Canada. Norah's decision to live on the street leads Reta to *rethink* and be aware of her otherness and her role as a woman writer. Historically speaking, the setting of the novel takes place in 1999 and 2000 that might refer to the end of a century and the beginning of a new millennium as a bridge between the past and the future. As the narrator, Reta Winters presents herself to the readers with various concepts of womanhood as a constructed role. She goes to a bookstore "Politics and Prose", uses an "Apple computer", pays with her "Visa card" or orders "a Freedom Chair" from a catalogue. Specific references in the narration show the readers how

much she can be defined in the scope of the capitalist system or how the name of a bookstore may signify her past interests that she has already chosen to forget. What she left in her past and what she acquires now are reflected throughout the narration. Norah's trauma becomes a shock for her mother, and it leads Reta to *reawaken* about some issues she has buried in herself for a long time. Reta forgets the others both in Canada and the other in her 'self' as well. They may refer to the cultural and social problems in Canadian history in terms of the ethnic and generic otherness.

The alienated Norah on the street corner is forcing Reta to start to question her role as a mother. Reta looks from Norah's aspect that her daughter is an intelligent and beautiful girl whose mother is a writer and whose father is a doctor. Norah's case leads Reta to eliminate her blindness of 'the other'. After Reta starts to reawaken about the problem of 'the other', she is changing her perspective in her writing about representing her female character Alicia as an independent woman.

Reta is living in a suburb in Ontario. It can be connected to the concept of a writer in the ivory tower that is related with the artist's seclusion from the social, cultural and political problems of the world. Suburb is a separate place from the city with its physical distance. Reta's role as a writer should include dealing with the problems of her time –the ethnic and generic otherness in Canada. Shields defines the concept of *otherness* with ethnicity and gender through specific characters in the narration. To create a connection between Panopticon prison and the concept of otherness in *Unless*, this prison may be considered as the land of Canada and each cell might resemble the lives of individuals who are psychologically trapped to be attributed as 'the other'. In the narration, Shields takes Reta from her ivory tower and puts her in a dilemma in which Reta has to face with the problem of ethnic and generic otherness through the loss of Norah.

In conclusion, Reta's trauma as a personal trauma is reflected through Canada's cultural trauma –the other. With the loss of Norah, Reta is led through a journey in the scope of gaining an awareness of her forgotten self and of the others in Canada. As a writer, Reta is twice doubled due to her ethnic origins and being a woman in a male discourse. Reta starts to understand the generic and ethnic otherness of women while she is *reawakening* about her past self. It is stated how Norah becomes a replica of her mother's youth according to Irigaray's theory. The personal trauma creates a circle in the novel to make connections with memory, past, and the history. Shield's novel will point out how much it is possible to make multiculturalism practicable in the fictional life through the characters' otherness primarily in terms of ethnic origin, race, and sex. After Norah and the Muslim woman, Reta starts to gain a consciousness to remember the "*uncoded female otherness*" in the society towards the end of the novel. Reta's main trauma is giving up her identity and belief system in order to fit in the capitalist and patriarchal social order. As a writer who does not fulfill her duty to provide an insight for the social problems of his/her culture or world view, Reta starts to leave her ivory tower and to be included to the women's problem as the other by stating how unfair to attribute power to the patriarchy just because of their gender. As a current woman writer, she creates an alternative with her second novel. She makes her character Alicia to construct her existence not by marrying a man but by depending upon her own choices and existence. *Unless* provides a partial hope to the personal and cultural problems of Canada by Reta's giving a voice to the problem of women's otherness; however, as a postmodern novel, it does not bring solutions to all the problems about the other in the narrative. It aims to lead the readers into questioning what the constructed social belief system imposes and enforces unfairly upon the individuals by eliminating the variety of thinking abilities from different ethnic and generic others all around the world.