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CULTURAL REMAPPINGS OF THE WORLD: MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD* AND SHANE JOSEPH'S *AFTER THE FLOOD*

RECARTOGRAFIERI CULTURALE ALE LUMII: *ANUL POTOPULUI*, DE MARGARET ATWOOD ȘI *DUPĂ POTOP*, DE SHANE JOSEPH

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a surge in what has generally been termed “speculative fiction”, a genre that focuses on environmental, social and political apocalypse. Looking at two fairly recent novels by two Canadian authors – Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and Shane Joseph's *After the Flood* (2009) – this paper aims discuss two not only geographical but also cultural, religious and political remappings of the known world. Both novels present instances of ‘taming the human animal’, focusing on the struggle for survival after a second Flood. Starting from the gender-coded narratives, the paper will also explore the new hegemonic relations in terms of culture and religion, as well as the survivors’ attitude(s) towards nature.

Rezumat

În ultimii ani a existat o explozie a ceea ce a fost numită „ficțiune speculativă”, o specie care se concentrează pe apocalipsă, fie ea în mediul înconjurător, în societate sau în politică. Având ca punct de plecare două romane canadiene relativ recente – *Anul Potopului* (2009), de Margaret Atwood, și *După Potop* (2009), de Shane Joseph –, lucrarea își propune să analizeze două variante nu numai de recartografiere geografică, ci și culturală, religioasă și politică a lumii cunoscute. Ambele romane prezintă exemple de „îmblânzire a animalului uman”, concentrându-se asupra luptei pentru supraviețuire după un nou Potop. Pornind de la narațiunile codate din punct de vedere al genului povestitorului, lucrarea va explora noile relații hegemonice dintre cultură și religie, precum și atitudinea/ atitudinile supraviețuitorilor față de natură.

1. Introduction

Earthquakes, flash flooding and fires have been common headlines in the news over the past few years. In the context of such ecological catastrophes as Haiti (January 2010), China (April 2010), Pakistan (August 2010) or, most recently, Japan (March 2011), speculative fiction gains new dimensions and brings the human-nature relationship centre stage. It also forces us to reconsider not only our values and ideologies, but also our humanity.

Published in the same year, with a two-month time difference, Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (September 2009) and Shane Joseph's *After the Flood* (November 2009) bring the focus on our planet's vulnerability, in an attempt to raise awareness of human greed and insatiable desire for better living standards. The first and most obvious difference between the two narratives is the use of the ‘flood’ topos: whereas Atwood turns it into a metaphor – her flood is “waterless”, the result of scientific experiments gone awry and, hence, all the more dangerous –, Joseph's ‘flood’ involves pouring rain, as God's punishment for

humankind's flaws. Using two different gender-related viewpoints (two women's – Atwood vs. a man's – Joseph), both novels tell stories of survival and second chances.

2. Cultural and Literary (Re)mappings

Working on a project of a literary atlas of Europe, Piatti et al. (2008) highlight the fact that in literature, which has an endless range of possibilities to deal with space, the setting of the action may be partly or completely invented, details of two real places may overlap, or an already existing place may be combined with fictitious elements. Arguing the importance of literary cartography, Piatti contends that writers and readers alike tend to anchor the texts in the real world (of their immediate surroundings) with the aim to visibly render the geography of the literary text, while simultaneously gaining new insights into the literary piece. Literary or not, maps suggest explanations while also raising new questions.

Furthermore, the often blurry border between the real and the imaginary enralls fiction aficionados, who have followed into their favourite characters' footsteps and have thus invented literary tourism. For instance, Dan Brown's 2003 mystery-detective novel *The Da Vinci Code* has urged travel agents to organize "Da Vinci Code Walks" in Paris, London and Rome, among which the protagonist travels (Phillips 2006). The purpose of such tours is to take readers into the real, geographical location the writer describes or uses as inspiration source in his text so as to draw attention to the level of space authenticity, and to offer a closer character understanding and identification.

Although it can take many forms, the main purpose of cultural mapping is to identify a community's cultural assets and resources, to share culture and promote creativity (*Cultural Mapping Toolkit* 2011:3). Mixed with literature, cultural mapping equates exploration, the charting of unfamiliar grounds, bringing into focus a certain cultural area, broadening the perspective and contributing to a region or community's cultural development. In the context of literary dystopias, which deal with repressive and controlled societies, police states and alienation, cultural mapping provides insights into how things might be if we forget who and where we are. This is what Canadian authors Margaret Atwood and Shane Joseph also do: offering a Canadian version of a potential future for the closely connected planet Earth and humankind.

Both Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* and Joseph's *After the Flood* locate the centre of the new worlds created after the two respective worldwide cataclysms on the North American continent, more precisely in the area around Toronto, Canada. The fictional spaces of both novels straddle the boundary between real and imaginary geographies, as they draw inspiration from their surroundings but reorganize the already known spaces so as to generate a feeling of defamiliarization and otherness ('out-of-place-ness') typical of dystopian novels. However, Atwood's fictional space remains faithful to the actual geographical space around the Canadian-US border, as she draws clear-cut boundaries around the cities, meant to protect the geniuses on the inside from the larger and less educated population. Comparatively, Joseph's setting is the fictional city of Tolemac – a backward reading of another fictional and idealized city/ world of Camelot –, an island state built on and around Sunset Hill, following the flooding of both Canadian and US territories.

What both novels share is the theme of restriction or the (in)famous Canadian “garrison mentality” (Frye 1995:227). Cultural critic Northrop Frye argued that, unlike their southern neighbours, settlers to Canadian were overwhelmed by the formidable landscape and “garrisoned” themselves against it, constantly struggling to regulate, control, tame or destroy what was ‘other’. Both the *Year of the Flood* and *After the Flood* revisit the “garrison mentality”, with Atwood and Joseph’s protagonists attempting to exercise control over their bodies, thoughts and immediate surroundings, as a way of surviving ecological cataclysms and coping with change.

On the one hand, Atwood’s pre-Flood cities are referred to as “Compounds”, insulated from the rest of the world by high electric walls watched over by heavily armed guards. Inside these Compounds – self-explanatorily called “HelthWyzer” or “CryoJeenyus”, where scientists work to find cures for all imaginable diseases and experiment with eternal youth – everything is paradisiacal: luxurious homes and garments, an abundance of food and drink and an endless range of consumer goods. Outside these elitist power enclaves, life is hard, people struggle to earn their living and, more often than not, they resort to violence to solve conflicts. Nonetheless, the pandemic that wipes out almost the entire world population is concocted in one of the Compound laboratories meant to improve living standards.

In much the same way, Joseph’s pre-Flood society is characterized by isolation and “cultural ghettoization” (Patterson 2010), with people not really knowing one another although they do things together such as going to church, attending barbecues, or playing street hockey. Looking back, Samson Arthurs records in his journal: “*We never went beyond the thresholds of each other’s houses to help, unless formally invited. After all, we had been a ‘civilized society’.*” (Joseph 2009:17-18, italics in original) For Joseph’s pre-Flood people, as well as for Atwood’s Compound families, the house is a comfortable cocoon, which keeps away strangers and neighbours alike, together with their happy or miserable life experiences. Before the Flood, civilization equates individualism and egocentrism.

Yet the Flood only temporarily teaches people to come together and share food and water, as well as good and bad moments. Protected not by ramparts but by polluted ocean water, Joseph’s Tolemac seems – at first glance, at least, – a reproduction of Camelot, a city-state from which corruption, immorality and violence have been replaced by generosity, spirituality, sharing and tolerance. However, as the narrative develops and the paralleling to Camelot may suggest, we notice that evil has seeped even in this harmonious little place: restrictive legislation is not actually a deterrent against adultery, recreational sex and drugs, and things can easily degenerate into violence.

In Atwood’s novel, the community of “the Gardeners” is marginalized by the rest of the society, and the ones who manage to survive the pandemic do so precisely because they have been in isolation from possible carriers of the disease: Toby at the spa; Ren in a sealed room at the nightclub Scales and Tails. Both Toby and Ren find the strength to move on only when each of them realizes that she is not the sole survivor, that there are others who are worth getting close to, sharing and (re)discovering humanity and compassion.

Although meant to protect the insiders, such confining spaces limit the individual’s freedom and personal development, as well as the ability to choose right or wrong, thus restricting evolution. It is only when the protagonists exit such

places that protagonists become free to choose and, thus, open to change and progress.

3. Geopolitical Remappings

Atwood's literary space represents a rather small-scale map of a cityscape. There is the HelthWyzer compound, protected by several enclosures but surrounded by unenclosed "pleeblands", i.e. poor and wild neighbourhoods, such as "the Sinkhole" and "the Sewage Lagoon", or the "Big Box". The nightclub Scales and Tails, where Ren works, is the classiest one located in the Sewage Lagoon, alongside with other dubious businesses held by (illegal) immigrants. "The Edenclyff Rooftop Garden" – home to the religious community of God's Gardeners, who advocate a return to and appreciation of nature – is placed on top of a tall building in the Sinkhole neighbourhood not only in order to keep away from the violence and corruption of the streets, but also to provide better protection to insiders. At the same time, the high location, unpolluted open air and plenty of sunshine enables the plants to grow and provide the necessary nourishment for the vegetarian Gardeners.

Not far away from the compound, in the middle of Heritage Park, is the AnooYou Spa-in-the-Park, where Toby, one of the main voices in the story, goes in hiding. Surrounded by an electric fence, the Spa security is not as strict as on the Compounds. When Toby and Ren leave the spa and meet Croze, they soon reach a small park called "the Tree of Life", where in pre-Flood times the Gardeners would sell their organic produce to rich youth-obsessed Compound customers. One day and a half's walk from the small park is the clearing where live the genetically spliced Crakers. Close to the clearing is the sea shore, where Toby and Ren find four more human survivors. However specific they may be in details and descriptions, such places are hard to pinpoint geographically.

In addition to these places, which are situated in close proximity to one another and where most of the action takes place, other places on the globe are mentioned only in relation to news of the pandemic outbreak, which Ren watches on TV from her sealed off room: on the one hand, exotic countries like Brazil, Taiwan, or Saudi Arabia, and on the other, metropolises such as Paris, Berlin, or Bombay.

Comparatively, Joseph completely remaps the world after the Flood. Of the vast territory of the North American continent there are only small(er) island states organized in two larger entities (Joseph 2009:30): the Federation of Humanitarian States – comprising such city-states as Tolemac, Boston, Brunswick, Saska-Manitoba, Hampshire and Oceania – and the League of Capitalist Nations, made up of more entrepreneurial states as New Eden (which includes New York), Alberta, Michigan, the Floridas and Mexico. As already mentioned, the city state of Tolemac is built on and around a hill but, as the waters withdraw, it gradually increases its land mass to the north with the arable land of the New Settlements.

Unlike in Atwood's novel, where politics are elegantly overlooked, Joseph puts forth the issue of fundamentalism, contending that both the Humanitarian and Capitalist ideologies, promoted by the citizens of Tolemac and New Eden respectively, are confining, stultifying, preventing change and evolution. In its own way, each ideology represses the individual: Humanitarians restrict initiative and creativity, whereas Capitalists appreciate the individual only through demonstrated competitiveness, as provider and money-maker.

The “middle way” proposed by David, an otherwise passive ‘hero’, is actually the solution to overcome stagnation and facilitate a harmonious development for future generations. If David embodies the negotiation of restrictive legislation and the risky freedom of choice in Tolemac, as he struggles to keep his private and public life in balance, in New Eden Congressman Gordon and the Knights of New Eden advocate the same “middle ground”, a combination of what is best in both worlds. Although neither succeeds in winning a majority of voters, by the end of the narrative an increasing number of people become aware that positive evolution is possible only through a combination of strictness and choice.

4. Religious Remappings

What will religion be like in the future or after a world-wide disaster? Both Atwood and Joseph try to come up with solutions. For Atwood, the answer is going back to nature and learning to appreciate everything it has to offer, without the side effects of laboratory chemicals. The majority of survivors in *The Year of the Flood* are “Gardeners”, members of a nature-worshipping cult, who live, eat and sleep together in the Garden improvised on the rooftop of an abandoned building. They wear uniforms, strategically learn (urban) survival techniques, and hold dear community-oriented values and role models, whose heroism implies self-sacrifice above all. They record time not in numbers of days and months, but as sacred days that bear the names of people worthy of consecration, due to their other-oriented, scientific, conservationist and/or humanitarian work. For example, “Saint Wen Bo Day” is named in honour of the Chinese environmentalist activist, deemed “eco-hero” (Rogers 2011), or “Saint Rachel and All Birds” – after the American marine biologist Rachel Carson, whose works are regarded as essential in the advancement of the global environmental movement (Percec and Şerban 2011).

Moreover, as shown elsewhere (Percec and Şerban 2011), the new calendar devised by the Gardeners is replete with festivals: “Mole Day”, explained as “the Festival of Underground Life”, or “The Feast of Serpent Wisdom” and “The Feast of Crocodylidae”, when the Gardeners celebrate healing and rebirth, and hunger alleviation respectively, as suggested by the corresponding animal symbolism.

While Atwood’s cult proposes a renegotiation of human-nature relation, Joseph’s protagonist Samson establishes “the Church of the New Covenant”, the largest and oldest one on the island, which brings together elements of several pre-flood faiths: Christian, as well as Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu. Church-going is completed by meditation, introspection and hours of volunteer community service (house-building, hospital work, tutoring, etc.). It is during the classes of meditation that particularly young people learn to channel their excess energy and maintain a tight control over their body and sexuality, which they find hard to accept and deal with. David and Sonya almost blindly obey the rigid Tolemacian laws until each is confronted with sexual temptation. Only then do they realize that they can enjoy passion within the couple and need not look outside but reevaluate their own relationship.

Unlike Atwood’s novel abundant in holy days and celebrations, the only festival Joseph’s book mentions is “the March of the Lamps” (a reinterpretation of the Christian “All Souls Day”), when a group of mostly women and children go down on the hill-cum-heart of Tolemac, lamps in hands, to honour the dead. Singled out through its uniqueness, the meaning of this festival gains in importance if we consider that the children of this post-apocalyptic state have

developed a sixth sense of talking to the dead. The children keep in touch with ancestors through dreams or by the Waterfront Park, both of which acting as thresholds between the two worlds. Yet this communication is ambivalent since, as Patterson (2011) also argues, honouring the dead may be educational and show appreciation of their legacy and wisdom; at the same time, however, it may hinder evolution by remaining entangled in deeply rooted Tolemacian traditions.

5. Conclusion

Both Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* and Shane Joseph's *After the Flood* remap the world around (their) familiar locales, offering us two possible charts of the world in the not very distant future. In both novels, the remapping of the new world is not limited to the rearrangement of geographical space, but it triggers cultural, political and religious (re)mappings, too. As both Atwood and Joseph are Canadian authors, whose novels rechart the world with the centre somewhere in North America, both novels may be argued to offer a Canadian response in the face of calamity since they both ultimately suggest that the key for survival lies in the individuals' flexibility and openness, in their ability to constantly renegotiate spatial and relational boundaries.

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