

CRACKING THE GLOCAL CODE IN AMERICAN FICTION

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Abstract: The article focuses on the invariable (space) and the variable (the culture) of globalization in American fiction, in other words, it tries to crack the code of glocal. The space is analyzed from the perspective of the imaginary geography, the healthy roots, and the domestic alien. The culture, local or global, is seen through the eyes of the exponents of different nationalities that invaded the United States. The solution is either to find a thorough interpretation along with a brand new name for the literature that deals with global issues, or to give up any sort of label that overwhelms literary criticism.

Keywords: globalization, imaginary geographies, healthy roots, postcolonial writers, medievalization of cities.

For those who have lamented that globalization meant a subversive way to americanize the world, the good news provided by the wave of 90s scholars say that the effect is reciprocal – American society has been altered at its very core by globalization. The specialists who assumed that American culture was a national monolith, based on the presumption that it was the result of one single space, were confronted by the cultural historians who focused predominantly on the complexity of American cultural landscape and proved there was no such thing as singularity. Whether it had a huge impact and influenced the other cultures on a global scale, it was just because it proved to be inclusive, rather than reclusive. Concepts like cultural hegemony and cultural imperialism have been recently replaced in the American paradigm by de-territorialization and fragmentation. The theorists have embedded America in the elusive process of being both an agent and a product of globalization.

This article follows neither the idealist paths, nor the gloomy predictions about globalization. There are critics who developed an apocalyptic vision, seeing globalization as a devastating flood that would turn the consumerism into a powerful god of contemporary societies and that would sweep away the distinctiveness of local communities; others advocate for the best of it – the free flow of goods and services across the world, enabling even the poorest to take advantage of the opportunities of nowadays civilization; finally, a group of scholars think highly of its self-sustainable structure that can improve in the years to come. None of these discourses capture my specific concern. Instead, I want to focus on the invariable (space) and the variable (the culture) of globalization in American fiction, in other words, to crack the code of glocal. In a general and short definition, glocal represents the adaptation of a global product to local characteristics. The term was first coined by economists and it is used to denote how international companies, like McDonald's, Starbucks or Disneyland strive to reflect the local identity along with their global standards. But here, it means how the local space and international cultures mingle and work together to give us a spectacular result.

The space is analyzed from the perspective of imaginary geography, healthy roots, and domestic aliens. The culture, local or global, is seen through the eyes of the exponents of different nationalities that invaded the United States. Whether they were aware of it or not,

they established a connection to this place and the resulting works were neither Nigerian, Polish, Jewish etc., nor American. This connection created a common communication code that made it possible to introduce their imagination into the mainstream literature. This could be an explanation for the increasing number of Pulitzer Prizes, National Book Awards and other prestigious prizes awarded to writers of non-American origin along the past years. These authors have now become global. However, from another perspective, they couldn't be deprived of their local flavor that made them so popular among their readers. This means that the authors have focused on local traditions, customs, experiences etc. and they have emphasized the legacy they carried with them into their new dwelling place. The Nobel Prize winner, Isaac Bashevis Singer, who wrote his stories and novels in Yiddish first and then in English, is the best example of an American writer who brought the local into the global. He could be considered a glocal writer.

But as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, it goes both ways: not only has the American culture had a huge impact on globalization, but it has also been sacrificed at the altar of the global marketplace. It has adapted and resisted as well to the temptations of globalization. This can be easily noticed in literature through the works of American writers who borrowed extensively from other cultures. The American mindset prevails, it couldn't be mistaken, but neither could be the obvious presence of alien aspects, like the marvelous exotic vampires that populated the cities from the United States after they had been forced to flee Europe, Asia or even Australia. Authors like Stephenie Meyer and L. J. Smith turned the place – the North American continent – into a recipient of some of the most dangerous and strange creatures from folklores around the world. Even the Romanian vampires had a notable representation in this bunch of bloody monsters. In order to conquer the imagination of the entire planet, these novels generated a common code that appealed to more than a Western audience. This suggests that glocal literature seems to work well and moreover, it seems to be a growing trend with great success in contemporary society.

Starting from Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958), the philosophers of postmodernism defined space as fluid, devoid of substance, a simulated play – none of these ideas are related to the speculations of globalization theories. In his 1967 essay, *Of Other Spaces*, Michel Foucault coined the term Heteretopia, defined as spatial representation, a place lacking real dimensions, with juxtaposed layers and parallel functions. Human geographers adopted the concept to explain the multicultural and multiracial social environment we are living in today. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Jean Baudrillard made a clear distinction between what it is perceived and how real space unfolds, proving an inherent incoherence that leaves us with just the impression of space, as it seems so pregnant and visible, while the carcass is empty: Beaubourg – this space of delusion. More than other places, the urban space offers the best heterotopic impulses, so the scholars have oriented their studies to these polyvalent spaces. They have discovered nothing else than infinite fragmentation down to the level of primary cells, making almost impossible the investigation of the space. Umberto Eco called this process “the medievalisation of the city” in his *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986), namely, the enclaves formed within the modern cities, micro-societies that were not assimilated in time and now, they refuse to be integrated into the continuum of the urban identities.

If only postmodern space was reprimanded by its inconsistency and incongruity, yet there are scholars who warn readers against their enchantment with imaginary geographies. In *Rerouting the Postcolonial – New Directions for the New Millennium* (2010), Ana Ball and Simon Gikandi associate the imaginary geographies with geographies of faith, for *faith is not necessarily fixed within a geographical space. Such places have vague borders, a myriad of nuances and they sometimes reject their offsprings, as in the well-known case of Salman Rushdie. In his novels, the local was filtered through magical realism and the globalism of The Satanic Verses was subject to violent criticism.* His American counterpart is the aforementioned Isaac Bashevis Singer. *While for some literary critics, such controversial works pass the test of glocal; for others, these works are outside the globalization issue, they are simply fictional endeavors that should be treated as such. Moreover, these writers continuously feel the need to overlap the spaces – the place of their origin and the country that adopted them – to the point the readers can't distinguish the variable and the invariable.* Novelists coming from Islamic space are increasingly involved in tracing routes back to the origins, thus short-circuiting the meaning of space for the followers of migration from the periphery to the center. Causing more confusion, this return is due to religious beliefs which were designed to firmly root the refugee in a particular geography, even *it is a question of imagined geography.*

There have been some attempts to trace this spiritual heritage to a historical place, but it proves to be elusive and transitory, thus it cannot be confined to the boundaries of a certain place. Of course, this is the space of its origin, a space where it came into being and started to develop, but it has traveled beyond its geographical limits together with its human vehicles. So it is no longer in its virgin and unaffected state, it has changed a lot through borrowing from and juxtaposing with other traditions, styles, beliefs etc. No longer being in its raw form, it could not claim to belong to a certain space as well. A mixture like that misleads the readers' interpretation and they get to the point of patronizing the authors who fail to be “authentic” in their fiction. In her lovely speech *The Danger of a Single Story*, held at TED 2009, the Nigerian-American novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, said something very enlightening about the expectations of American readers when they happen to discover a writer like her. She stated, “(...) a professor, who once told me that my novel was not “authentically African.” Now, I was quite willing to contend that there were a number of things wrong with the novel, that it had failed in a number of places, but I had not quite imagined that it had failed at achieving something called African authenticity. In fact I did not know what African authenticity was. The professor told me that my characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man. My characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African.”

Now, to inflict such a wicked imagination on a place one never visited is the fault of colonialism, but the accounts about African people as beasts are as old as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when the first merchants tried to open a new sea route to India. It is interesting that such a childish perception has perpetuated almost unspoiled to our times. The only explanation possible here is that in the era of globalization, some people still consider some places out of its touch. As a consequence, these places are considered the contemporary Middle Ages. In their seminal articles, John M. Ganim – *Medievalism and Orientalism at the World's Fair* (2008) and Bruce W. Holsinger – *Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies and*

the Genealogies of Critique (2002) discuss the close relationship existent today between oriental and medieval spaces, as both are or were inhabited by domestic aliens, struggling to come to terms with the new scientific discoveries. The correspondence is preserved at the level of space-time: for the sake of entertainment, the contemporaries have colonized the past of Middle Ages with their imagination in movies, books, video games etc.; for the sake of their welfare, the colonists conquered the space of Oriental and African countries. Through cultural synthesis, European Middle Ages have been remodeled in the contemporary Oriental and African spaces. Bruce Holsinger and John Ganim warn us about such correspondence that puts in jeopardy both the Middle Ages and these geographical areas.

In fiction, the problem posed by these scholars is very tricky. If comparing a real geographical space with the Middle Ages as they are imagined by writers and film directors could be degrading with an obvious hint of imperialism and ideological colonialism, then confusing the reality with the imaginary in reading a text could be very dangerous for readers. To conclude, the postmodern space is volatile and erratic, the geographies of faith are conceptualized and the spaces are overlapped in fiction, while the local cultures and traditions are playfully interwoven within the new discovered patterns. But we can't assume that these spaces and their inherent cultural values could migrate massively to the imagination just because our knowledge of them has been distorted or reduced to preconceptions. The flavor of remote spaces has conquered the imagination of Western readers, but how could they seize the opportunity of a real experience when they have never visited those places? Or when their contact with such spaces is mediated by media, television, tourist agencies and so on? For those readers, such stories and discourses are similar to the fantastic realms from the fantasy novels.

For example, let's examine *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by Chimamanda Adichie and *Mockingjay*, by Suzanne Collins. Both novels center on war: the first retells the story of Nigerian-Biafran War in 1967-1970 while the latter is the third part of a trilogy, *The Hunger Games*, that tells the story of Panem War, in the future of the United States. Both novels are best-sellers, made into great movies and the authors are widely acclaimed for their creative imagination. Both novels describe the effects of war through the dynamic relationship among the characters – an emotional bond that can be destroyed by war. Both novels could be considered glocal. As an American writer, Adichie had to appeal to her English audience, fitting her writing style to the requirements of her readers, though she depicted a distant space and its so-called peculiarities. Collins had to largely cover the American space with global issues at a large extent, therefore it had a large appeal to the European audience. While *Mockingjay* is explicitly fantastic with its amazing weapons (i.e. Katniss Everdeen has a technologically designed bow with deadly arrows that function much like bombs of today) and other refined things that convince the reader this is a futuristic story, *Half of a Yellow Sun* seems fantastic to the readers as well, due to its setting, characters' reaction and the event itself – the Nigerian-Biafran War – in which the young readers have little to no knowledge.

Engaging with global pressures and opportunities, American writers have gradually shifted their interest from American fictionality to global issues. This step enlarged their vision and enriched their writings. This has become a very important movement for them, culturally and financially as well. For immigrant writers though, who have already moved from local to global when they accepted the challenge to be (re)rooted in America, the

experience was awkward. According to Deborah Madsen in her article *Un-American Exceptionalism in the Disciplinary Field: From Unmeltable Ethnics to Flexible Citizens* (2010), multiculturalism is concerned only with the immigrant's culture and literature, and not with his or her condition of an expatriate citizen, considers. Madsen is annoyed by *hyphenated naming of national affiliations, such as Japanese- or German- or Italo-American*, which increases the xenophobic cleavage between *the enduring image of the threatening unassimilated 'domestic alien'* and *the underlying reason of the United States nationalism*. Where can you find a place for native Indians as individuals, when citizens of civilized nations from Europe and Asia are considered *'unmeltable ethnic'*? So, in order that their works be assimilated, these writers have to speak the reader's language, both literally and metaphorically.

Third world diaspora escapes the label of local or global, it wanders the world in search of its existential roots: *"To have healthy roots in a new place is to be at home, but to have healthy roots in an old place is to enrich that home even further."* (Wilson, 2010:132) More than juxtaposing two different spaces and their cultural values, the authors extend their creative genius like a rhizome and this phenomenon could be easily grasped today due to network theories. Instead of binary relationship – global and local – these writers and their works are involved in a ternary system, their roots going vertically, in time and history. It is not about here and now – the new space and the new culture they acquired, in relation to there and then – the space and the culture they left behind. It is about the entire process of becoming that glocal cannot comprehend. We live in an tightly connected world, with every piece of information and experience (at least virtually) at one click away distance and we call this globalization, but we only scratch the surface, as our connections only go horizontally.

The modern countries have swept away their visible borders and now, in their attempt to consolidate their international relationships, they are becoming virtual entities, whose existence depends more and more on the connections they establish and their global recognition. If in the past, the networks provided safety by means of imperial roads, town guilds, vassal allegiances etc., in postmodernism, the individuals manipulate the networks to elude the imprisonment of their microcosmos in order to enter parallel worlds. These networks are no longer some ways to escape the fear of uncertainty, they act now in exactly the opposite way; they fascinate the masses and encourage them to break free from the imposed order. In literature, one of the most interesting examples of this phenomenon is the best-selling memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006), by Elizabeth Gilbert. After a devastating divorce, Elizabeth embarked on a travel around the world to find her spiritual, emotional and physical balance. The tangible result was this book, which addresses global problems in a global manner. After almost two years spent in Italy, India and Indonesia, she discovered the power of these networks and how they work to release us from our internal anxieties, but she followed only the horizontal paths. She approached all these cultures with a consumer mentality, one which struggles to satisfy desperate needs. As a typical American, she indulged in eating, praying and loving. Perhaps, this was the main reason why the Western world appreciated this memoir to the extent it did. She (re)rooted in neither of these cultures and places, as the immigrant writers did: therefore, she could be called a "glocal writer".

When a writer draws his or her inspiration from two or three roots, not only do the roots become lasting and robust, but their creative genius is enriched – it goes deeper, and

even their possible “glocal” vision turns into a rhizome-like perspective. The price they have to pay for being different is the reception of their books. In other words, the price they pay is the difference between mass culture and midculture, as Dwight Macdonald coined them in his famous essay *Masscult and Midcult* (1960). High culture has been replaced by midculture, closer to regular readers, but different from mass culture, recognized by “its impersonality, and its lack of standards” (Macdonald, 1983:7). To make a long story short, these writers pay the price of popularity. They don't address to high or mass readers, they produce midculture in the interstitial space between the high and low culture. In Macdonald's words, they offer “emotional catharsis” and “aesthetic experience” – these demand too much effort from masses, but conveyed with lack of high standards and in an easy to assimilate manner, providing entertainment. Besides the writers mentioned in this article, there are many others who managed to crack the code of glocal in American fiction, and they can be identified easily: they are good enough to win a Pulitzer Prize or Book Award, even a Nobel Prize, but not popular enough to create an enduring seduction among readers, as Harry Potter, Twilight Saga or The Hunger Games series did. In addition, they are not written only for young audiences.

This article is not an exhaustive analysis of this phenomenon in the United States, it just cautions that what is labelled glocal may be beyond that label. If glocal were just a label, but it keeps defining the new literature from a binary point of view. The solution is either to find a through interpretation along with a brand new name for the literature that deals with global issues, or to give up any sort of label that overwhelms literary criticism. It is also restrictive and inappropriate to maintain a binary relationship where the spaces are fluid, overlapped, fragmented and the cultures are no longer in their raw state, derived from the relative geographies of faith or imaginary geographies, subject to distorted views and or even reduced to Other Middle Ages. Indeed, globalization was affected and affected American fiction, but it couldn't catch in its toils the slippery fish of literature.

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