
LITERATURE AND GLOBALIZATION – A DESCRIPTIVE APPROACH

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Abstract: This paper aims at analysing the relationship between globalization and literature in general, using a descriptive sociological approach. What are the changes that occur in the institution of Literature due to globalization? How do people relate to books nowadays? How do the ideologies of globalization spread into fiction and non-fiction books? What are the literary trends and how do writers play into "the consumerism market" game? What is specific to literature as a dimension of consumerism? The article points out as well the major transition to online literature, on literary platforms, online libraries and blogs and focuses on the potential offered by literary translations in a global context. The paper also highlights the evolution of the academic literature towards a multicultural approach. Globalization definitely has an impact on literature, but at the same time fictional literature seems to be the most susceptible to the preservation of its national identity.

Keywords: *ideologies of globalization, consumerism, international knowledge, online literature*

Starting points

The globalization discourse has already a substantial history, especially because it is a process that makes connection with all the essential aspects of our lives: economics, politics, social behaviour, ecology and culture. Analysing this process, most individuals with an active conscience are tempted to judge it on a moral-axiological scale, in terms of positive or negative. These reactions generated two opposite argumentation lines, *for* and *against* globalization. However, this is the theoretical background, since the real globalization, with all its shades, happens *with* or *without* our explicit consent. Personally, I think that, instead of embracing the stereotypes, we should adopt a more moderate attitude, avoiding generalizations and trying to deeply understand the changes that it brings, in order to better adapt to the world we live in.

As part of the culture, literature as well is marked by visible changes, due to globalization. This paper is meant to outline some aspects of the relationship between literature and globalization from an objective perspective. Also, this is an analytical project that could always be improved, corrected and updated.

The aspects that we will try to reveal are linked to several topics: literature as a consumerism dimension, literature and the media, the online literature, new ideologies that become literary trends, translations and the untranslatable sides of any literature.

Before we pass to the main part of the article it is important to explain how we understand the concepts we use. I will refer to globalization as a polyvalent, unequal and contradictory process that we are not able to control. Globalization means: global market, global communication, access to knowledge (Internet & Media), global environment problems, 'global village' (Mc Luhan), multiculturalism, corporatism, global emergent culture (that is not exclusively American¹), limited national political actions, consumerism, the cleavage between the rich and the poor. Also, I don't use the concept of literature with its axiological meaning. I refer to fictional texts with aesthetic intentions, but also to fictional texts with an entertainment role, an area often identified with the consumption literature or

¹Peter Berger

bestsellers. At the same time, I include the scientific works, meta-discourses, essays and diaries.

Literature and consumerism

Globalization means communication and a larger access to the newest phone technology and internet. We nowadays assist, thanks to smartphones, e-books and tablets, to an increase of the number of readers. This doesn't necessarily mean an increase of the quality of what they read. Especially in urban areas, gadgets are held by most people. They are the 'seductive objects'² that some of us become addicted to. Beyond their main function, we use smartphones or tablets for playing games, taking pictures, watching movies, making notes, schedules, entertaining ourselves with hundreds of apps or reading. The question is if people enjoy the physical object more than reading. Do they like to read because of the smartphone/tablet/ e-book? In big cities, in undergrounds and public spaces people seem to read more. We are not certain about what they actually read and we are tempted to believe that it is mostly to avoid getting bored when commuting or waiting for someone. Therefore, we think most of them read light literature like best-sellers or magazines, press articles (news and leisure), fashion articles or blogs. Through the use of the internet, the text consumers can now open an article after another in a matter of seconds, page after page, with the simple touch of a screen. Despite this trend, there still are the paper-lover readers that practice a more 'ritualised consumption'³. They enjoy the sensations that the book as material object can offer: perfume, paper texture or page colour, font etc. In any shape or form people read, it is relevant that globalization changes the relationship between readers and literature. Every day are set on more and more online libraries and literary sites, literary platforms where readers all over the world can be connected and share their thoughts or opinions about books. Goodreads for instance is an online community that gained a big number of users and it is greatly appreciated, because it provides personalised book recommendations and book reviews. Also, you can join group discussions about a certain book or you can rate the book you have read. Obviously, the readers' level is variable, you can meet a variety of readers, from professional readers to people that read occasionally in their spare time or 'book eaters' that read randomly, day and night, without having any University diploma. The advantage of these communities is that they can offer a guide; they share ideas and consider books as a dynamic topic of discussion. They give you feedback when you compare your perception to others'. It is also a way of socializing: you receive notifications from friends, you set up an annual book challenge and you're always aware of the percentage to which you have managed to fulfil your challenge.

In terms of text downloading, it is easier than ever to find on the internet pdf versions of a large number of books. Some of them are for free, for others you have to pay, or you can upload your own text to be allowed to download a certain book. Blogs have become the new diaries, not being an intimate writing any more like they used to. There are specialised non-fiction blogs, where the users write about a certain passion (sport, gardening, cooking, childcare etc.), artistic blogs, literary ones, but also blogs about daily life.

In conclusion, a big change due to globalization is that the literature is moving also online. We obviously can't generalize and it is clear that there are inequalities, depending on

²Baudrillard

³The concept belongs to Peter Berger

the development stage of every area. Despite this accessibility to literature, at the same time there is a huge competition between literature and other discourses/ knowledge areas/ information sources on the internet. It depends on how educated people are, if they choose watching a movie, playing a game instead of reading online. Even if they read, we could never know for sure how many are reading literature and how many are reading about gossip, fashion, the weather or recipes. Thus, being on the same platform with all sorts of texts, doesn't make fictional literature more visible than it used to be, for those who are not interested in it. But it does to the ones that search properly. It is the person's background, his/her preferences, education and interests that make the difference. Actually, the enormous amount of information and the competition between discourses create a very tense situation for people, because they have to activate a judgment filter (assuming they have one) to decide what they listen/watch/read from the 'media jungle'. The real issue is that it is not always easy to discern the quality of the discourse and sometimes you literally can't stay apart (you can't avoid hearing the news or the commercials every time you listen to the radio). This is why I think we should introduce activities in schools related to media education. At the same time, books offer the advantage of an uninterrupted message and only the reader decides when to stop.

Baudrillard states that the consumption is a sign of social distinction. There are the elites who have access to new objects, paying for them, and by the time they become accessible to the majority, the elite looks for something else to satisfy their consumption needs. In terms of prices, literature has become probably accessible to most democratic states. There are public libraries, charity shops, book markets with cheap second hand books and book fairs. Also, a great value in democratic states is the freedom of speech. The writers are no longer followed by censorship; the literary work is seen like art and is usually judged by aesthetic criteria. Literacy is education's basis. Therefore we have access to literature and literature has access to us. Even in Romania, books have lately become more affordable.

International knowledge

Another subtopic I would like to point out is how globalization determined the development of the scientific literature. Today it is easier than ever to get in touch with certain domain specialists from all over the world, because globalization also means mobility. Universities organise conferences or congresses inviting guests seen as global citizens. Eventually, for any researcher who wishes to participate to a certain scientific gathering there is an open door. He only needs to write a paper according to the theme, submit an abstract via email and book a flight. This way, the scientific domains are updated in real time, information shared is published in academic journals and research gains more visibility, no matter where the author comes from.

I.	Oxford University (UK)
II.	Cambridge University (UK)
III.	Imperial College of London (UK)

IV.	ETH Zürich
V.	University College of London (UK)
VI.	Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (Germany)
VII.	École Polytechnique de Lausanne

Globalization changed the academic community by making well rated universities function as multicultural centres, with students from

different countries. Top students choose global when it comes to their university studies. Europe has top research centres where brilliant students from all over the world come to study by accessing scholarships or using their parents' savings.

Top rated E.U Universities, according to World University Rankings 2014-2015.⁴

At the same time, there are students programs like Erasmus or Comenius which make studying in a foreign country possible. Also Work and Travel is a well-known program addressed to students, offering the chance to work, study and also visit in the US. Regarding the way students keep/ lose their national identity, I think this point is well clarified by Peter Berger who uses the concept of 'segregation'. If these students talk in English during the lectures, act/dress/eat like others, respect a certain work ethic, on the other hand, they are able to be themselves in their private space by appearance, look, clothes, behaviour etc. The boundaries are not strictly set, they are like unwritten compromises. However, tolerance, multiculturalism and cultural dialogue are the strong premises of modern education.

Globalization ideologies and their impact on literature

When I refer to *ideology* I don't consider the pejorative Marxist meaning⁵, but all the popular ideas, and beliefs that gain global success: ecology, health and nutrition, feminism, human rights, spirituality, fitness/ martial arts/ yoga that promote a decent and balanced lifestyle. Therefore, new literature domains have appeared in book stores. And the interest for them is visible in contemporary novels as well. There are fiction authors whose books are pleading for these ideologies. Some of them illustrate very well the issues of globalization. *Tokyo cancelled* (2005), the first novel of Rana Dasgupta, a British-Indian writer, was an examination of the forces and experiences of globalization. In 2004, British author Hary Kunzru published a novel called *Transmission* presenting the story of an Indian computer programmer whose luxurious fantasies about life in America are shaken when he accepts a job offer in California. Indian author Kiran Desai wrote *The Inheritance of Loss*, a touching story placed in 1986. On the one hand, it is about the poor Indians' wish to emigrate in The Land of Endless Possibilities, with all risks of an illegal emigration, and on the other hand, it points out their attitude of rejection towards the globalized consumerist society. Emigration is an

⁴Online resources available at <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2014-15/world-ranking/region/europe>

⁵ False consciousness

important topic and it also exists in the contemporary Romanian literature (*The Little Girl who was playing God* by Dan Lungu). This book presents the drama of a girl whose parents emigrated without her. *Kinderland* by Liliana Corobca is a novel on the same subject. The pressure of the corporatist environment is well represented in *The Art of Struggle* by French writer Michel Houellebecq, whose attitude towards globalization is a completely pessimistic one. In fact, contemporary writers (conscientiously or not) reflect one of the two main lines of the discourse about globalization that I briefly presented at the beginning. Some writers use the Consumer Society as an inspiration source or as a background for characters that illustrate the drama of alienation in the 21 century. This is also the case of the main character from *The Art of Struggle* (Houellebecq), a programmer who hates the corporation he works for, who is very depressed and who can't establish any affective relationship with people. He reminds me of Meursault, the main character of Camus' novel *The Stranger*. Obviously, these types of novels come together with the anti-globalization philosophy, implicitly criticizing the globalized world and spreading ideas such as media manipulation, identity crises, control, loss of values, alienation, postmodern slavery etc.

Contemporary writers find themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea: on the one hand they want to express the way they feel, but on the other hand they want to sell their book, therefore they have to monitor the book market carefully. However, a 'bestseller' is not always what highly educated individuals call *valuable*, just as it is not always of no value. Actually, a book's value has at least two dimensions: first, it is the pragmatic value, meaning the price of the object, and second, it is the symbolic value, inside the *Field of Cultural Production*⁶, offered by the author's fame/name, number of book sales, editorial strategies etc. Whether writers choose or not to reflect in their writings the life and society of the day, the motifs and clichés of globalization can be precisely marked: a Coke can or a fast-food sandwich, a music hit (Murakami- *The Norwegian Wood*), a full metropolitan train station/ an airport, a reality-show/ a TV/ the news, a job interview/ a career, an ecologic concern (Ian McEwan-*Solar*), the emancipation/tolerance towards sexual orientation. Probably it is not by chance that in *Kafka on the Shore* written by contemporary writer Murakami, Colonel Sanders becomes a symbolic guide for one of the main characters. I suppose Colonel Sanders, founder of KFC, could be also an emblem of the globalized world.

Another aspect I want to outline is writing as self-expression, which has become very popular in the globalized world. And I don't mean literature only. There is a dynamic dialogue online about all aspect of life, including literature. Also, it is easier than ever to exist as an amateur writer by creating a website or a blog. If people like you and read you, you become a target for the advertising companies which pay you to post adds on your page. This is how finally everything turns into economics or the industry of popular success. The question that arises is: why do people have such a big need to communicate what they think? Political scientist Roman Inglehart directly linked the need for self-expression to the Post-materialist, prosperous, democratic and secular cultures. Are these cultures 'more globalized' than the others? Probably yes. He demonstrates that these societies are more likely to increase the volume of self-expression, because they crossed the 'survival' stage. This theory justifies the inequalities between cultures, making us understand why individuals coming from different parts of the world value opposite mentalities, beliefs, behaviours.

Books for mind and for money

⁶Bourdieu

One of the ascending branches of the Book Market is online sales. There are a lot of online Book Stores or online shops with a book shelf and the number visibly increases. This is interesting because it changes the status of the book from a cultural product meant for the mind and soul (a special status) to that of regular/ordinary merchandise. It may be the degree of accessibility that makes us appreciate books less. This applies in general. But, obviously, there are exceptions and one of them is represented by valuable, expensive, very rare old collectable books. However, it is not an exaggeration to state that books have become a consumer good, for literate people and probably mostly for the ones that are computer & internet literate.

Translations between loosening and keeping identities

In the study of Peter Berger and Samuel Huntington – *Many Globalizations*- the authors refer to the English language as a factor of diffusion for the emergent global culture (mostly, but not exclusively American). They analyse it through the perspective of the Chilean historian Claudio Veliz who talks about the “Hellenistic phase of Anglo-American civilization”. Therefore, English is compared to Koine Greek, which was the main vehicle for spreading Hellenistic values, for practical reasons, in a manner that was not abusive. But Berger emphasises that the use of English on such a large scale carries a set of attitudes, values, beliefs and emotional connotations specific to the emergent culture.

A recent study shows that the English language is studied and spoken in 101 countries and there are 1.5 billion English learners nowadays. Under these circumstances the translation of a writer’s book into English could be seen as the chance to come into prominence. Any writer is happy to have his work translated into a foreign language, especially in English, because a text written in English is more likely to spread and to be known in other cultures. This is how a language could act like publicity.

The complex system of translations gives us the possibility to gain access to authors from all over the world. My personal hierarchy comprises contemporary writers from South-America, Japan, India, France, England and Germany. However, any literary translation is limited by a social and cultural barrier, being, at best, a successful approximate version of an original book. Some aspects simply remain untranslatable, because people who did not experience a certain social or political reality that the book treats will not be able to represent it properly and will only partly understand its meaning. This is the case when writers choose to reflect their national culture. Also, a language carries all sorts of meanings/ sound nuances that could disappear when translated. In *After Babel* George Steiner calls translation ‘an art’, not a science. He also states that any translation is limited by the translator’s cultural background, competence and values. A professional reader has the intuition of this, and he will try to access to the original text, making even the effort to learn a new language, if he has a special interest in a certain author. However, there are popular writers who have become successful by saying very little about their culture and national identity. I wonder if Murakami’s novels actually talk about Japanese culture. Probably not. There is no Tea Ceremony there, no blossom cherry trees, instead there are aspects related to consumption and global culture. Reading Murakami, I was surprised how often and how much his characters eat. And this might sound hilarious, but I think it suggests the consumer society very accurately. Thus the cultural identity becomes problematic when writers prefer to write (for different reasons) as they were outside of their own cultures, embracing instead what is called the “global culture”. Regarding fiction literature, I believe that globalisation does not

represent a threat to national identity, so long as the authors stay true to the values of the cultures they belong to and even make it their life's goal to promote that culture.

In order to understand a culture, you have to understand its language. Any other option is the equivalent of familiarising oneself with a culture, it does not mean to deeply comprehend it. However, there are a lot of examples of small cultures that become attractive. This year I met American Professor Michael S. Jones who came to Romania a few years ago to research Blaga's philosophy and he successfully learnt Romanian. My conclusion is that globalization definitely has an impact on literature, but at the same time fictional literature, written from the insider's point of view⁷, seems to be the most susceptible of preserving its national identity, despite translations. How could a person that has always lived in a democracy completely understand a novel about the Romanian Communist Regime? Or how could a Christian understand a novel written by a Muslim or Buddhist writer? They will partly understand it and finally there will always be aspects that don't make sense. Since there are aspects that only make sense inside a culture and they can't be easily explained to outsiders. This is the point that transcends translation, and I think that, as long as writers write in their native tongues and wishing to illustrate their culture, national identity will be maintained, despite the popularity gained by the English language.

But we can't ignore the English books that have gained global success. I will only refer to two of them, given the reception phenomenon they brought on. One is represented by the *Harry Potter* series by British writer J.K. Rowling. These fantasy novels have been translated in 68 languages and their popularity increased with the movies. Harry Potter became at some point a small industry comprising books, pictures, Mc Donald's Happy Meal toys, Lego toys and computer games. Another example of worldwide success is *Da Vinci's code*, Dan Brown's novel, translated in 44 languages. Both examples approach a mythical/magical/archetypal area and I think part of the popularity is due to the myth, while the other is due to the use of English language and marketing campaigns. Considered as a sample of universal language, the myth is a challenge for the Collective Unconscious and people's inner structure is on a permanent quest for myths in all discourses: literature, religion, philosophy, economy etc.

Conclusions

In this paper we referred to globalization from a descriptive and objective perspective, analysing its impact on literature and on people's behaviour regarding reading and literature. I pointed out the visible tendency of literature towards gaining the Online and to be stored on smart devices. Nowadays, books and literature have become a consumer good with a double determination: the spiritual dimension and the economic one. Secondly, I outlined that globalization brings the Scientific Literature to a superior level by gathering researchers in Academic Global Events and by encouraging a multicultural higher education in Global University Centres. The paper also focused on showing how the ideologies of globalization reflect in fictional novels by Romanian and foreign authors. I reviewed some contemporary writers who illustrate globalization motifs or issues, implicitly criticizing it or simply using stereotypes. Regarding the idea of identity, I underlined the idea that literature will always define the identity of a culture, despite the translations which could never make it totally transparent. On the contrary, the translation diminishes fiction literature, being unable to illustrate all the emotive nuances belonging to a language.

⁷The person who assumes his culture and identifies himself with it.

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