

## LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF CONFINEMENT AS SOCIAL AND SPATIAL ANOMALIES. EAST-WEST SIMILARITIES

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*Abstract: As we already know, literature cannot exist without reality, different mentalities or ideas. These are clearly seen just like in realist novels, but they can also be observed by a small number of people who can read between the lines.*

*Although we live a free life and strive to be a big happy family, to have intercultural and interracial friendly relationships, this paper wants to show the problem of seclusion, confinement and their expressions in literature.*

*The starting point as well as the reason for this article is the unusual news which appeared on kotaku.com at the end of August, this year, about "bocchi seki" - the special lunchroom seats for lonely people at Kyoto University. They made possible for a kind of isolation; you can't see the person in front of you. Side dividers were also being claimed, which is a bit strange, concerning the reasons why students loved those seats: "If you are sitting at a big table by yourself it's like you don't have any friends and that is embarrassing," said one 22 year-old male student. "When I don't have much time or I'm in a hurry, the lonely seats are convenient," said a 22 year-old female student."*

*This paper will focus on some approaches of extreme confinement in literature. All these texts of interest have the same main characteristic - confinement has a particular influence on space. The so called „safe environment” created by man, in the end turns into a trap that won't release its source. Isolation is perceived as cubes or circles where people live in. When they can't let go of these surroundings, they end up carrying them and developing monstrous spaces like Samuel Beckett's cylinder or Vincenzo Natali's huge rubik cube.*

*As I already mentioned some names, it shows that the problem of isolation exists both in the Eastern as well as the Western world, so my examples were chose accordingly.*

*The Eastern works, to be more specific the Japanese ones, are marked by the image of hikikomori, a recorded contemporary problem (teenagers and young adults are refusing to live in society and instead they choose complete isolation ). Even though a similar category doesn't exist for the Western part of the world, a couple of its literary characters have similar manifestations when it comes to texts that involve isolation. Also, western works talk about the social dimension and show monstrous communities and spaces born out of confinement and miscommunication.*

*Keywords: extreme confinement, „safe environment, trap, monstrous spaces, miscommunication*

“Here is the reverse of my sovereignty:  
If I'm my own master,  
I'm also my own obstacle.  
I'm the only one responsible for  
The happiness or the misery that tempt me.”  
Pascal Bruckner<sup>1</sup>

The main tendency nowadays is to promote the image of the big happy family, an almost utopian perspective, whose sole purpose is to eliminate all kind of problems of the

<sup>1</sup> Iată și reversul suveranității mele: dacă îmi sunt propriul stăpân, reprezintă însă și propriul meu obstacol, sunt singurul răspunzător de fericirea sau nenorocirea care mă încearcă. (P. Bruckner)

group. So we can talk about exceeding cultural and racial misunderstandings including those questions concerned in leveling the differences between various or even opposite groups. The main expression of this perspective is the image of a paradise-world; everything mirrors complete harmony. Although we perceive this infusion of fulfillment, joy etc. deep inside, under that happy mask is nothing else but isolation and miscommunication. This kind of perspective is usually seen as an anomaly, in all its perceptions: bizarre, nonconventional, even absurd. However, the phenomenon is isolated, often rejected, to protect the mask of a beautiful and peaceful world, although it lies on the basis of that so called paradise-world.

Talking about isolation, there are two main categories: one is the choice of the person, self-isolation/ confinement, on the other hand is the one induced by society, or different institutions. In some of the cases, we can also find a mixture between this two. We don't deny the need of being alone, those moments of intimacy, but there is a very fragile border between such a basic need and the trap of a person's own borders, limits, reclusion which turn into a cage.

The most alarming signs about confinement are coming from the Oriental world, which seems to be exhausted by the social game. An edifying example is from reality, not literature, which is much more alarming. I'm thinking of a news that appeared at the end of August, this year, which talks about those special isolated seats in Kyoto: "bocchi seki" or "lonely seats" (kotaku.com). Although most people (especially students) agree with it, they are also claiming time management: they don't have enough time to talk to their classmates, or school colleagues, they're in a hurry, but the article shows us some extremely delicate problems we shouldn't ignore, or be blinded by the student's positive arguments. Shame is one of the reasons which leads to a positive accepting of "bocchi seki"; to be more specific, we talk about the shame of being lonely: "If you are sitting at a big table by yourself it's like you don't have any friends and that is embarrassing". (Ashcraft) This kind of thinking reflects the mainstream construct which expects of everyone to be social, to have friends, to be in a group etc. ; a must be which leads the world, not a personal, normal need of living among others. With all the imperatives claimed by, let's say society, the person becomes a puppet and acts just to accomplish those requirements. In consequence, he can't take any responsibility for his actions, even that of sitting alone at a big table, just because he wants to. It's not random that the philosopher Pascal Bruckner, in one of his books- *Temptation of innocence*- talks about a special behavior, a strange way of acting nowadays. People are running from responsibility, any kind of responsibility and they still act like children who are expecting to be forgiven for all the bad things they've done.

The most important idea of the article is well kept until the end: „Kobe University has also installed its bocchi seats, helping students avoid uncomfortable dining hall experiences. Now, if only they'd install side dividers so that lonely diners don't have to rub elbows with the people next to them." (Ashcraft). Which means the phenomena is spreading quite fast, also they want to improve those seats with side dividers which instantly evoke in the reader's mind the image of a cube, a total isolation with all the possibilities to become permanent.

Why or what made this possible are the commonly asked questions by those who react somehow to this phenomenon. One of the possible explanations is given by Hannah Arendt, who explains in her book *The Human Condition* most of the reasons and the transformations suffered by human beings in the process of conversion: "homo faber" becomes the ordinary

"homo laborans". She thinks that we are living the crisis of decentering which is the consequence of the technological boom. That means we've lost the connection with the environment, and even the Earth became a simple ball and had lost one of the most precious characteristics: to be our home. Pascal Bruckner has a similar view: "Thrown from the protective shell of tradition, custom, rules, he discovers himself more vulnerable than ever." (Bruckner, 30)<sup>2</sup>. Also, he speaks about a new system which claims the separation of a person (is now central) and his old habits, society etc. which brings a huge difficulty in adaptation. He refuses the old but he doesn't have something new as a foundation of a new world. He's trapped, so he acts like a baby, he's totally irresponsible and always blaming others for what's happening. Hannah Arendt gives another finality with two subclasses: some are hyperactive (they are going to work until madness, take their deserved weekends off and vacations etc.) the others will refuse everything, they start isolating themselves, and here we are, back to our story of interest. From all those theories we can conclude that isolation can be mostly negative - those who isolate themselves are refusing the world they've created themselves. We can also speculate the idea of a positive outlook of isolation like a rebellious positioning, but this is hard enough.

It's easier now to understand why in the twentieth and twenty first centuries we have a lot of literary manifestations of confinement. We can mention here *Tokyo!* (2008) by Michel Gondry, Leos Carax, Bong Joon-ho, *Cube* (1997)- Vincenzo Natali, *The lost ones*(1966-1970) Samuel Beckett, *Omul din cerc*(*The Man in the Circle/The Circle*) (2011) Matei Vişniec or *The Box Man*(1973) Kobo Abe and the list could continue. None of them speaks about regenerative withdrawal; they are centered on impassable blockages. Bachelard has a very insightful way of saying that: "In many of its aspects, the "lived" nook refuses, hides life, restricts life. The nook is, in this case, a denial of the Universe. In the nook you don't speak with yourself. If you remember the time spent in the corner, you remember the silence, the silence of thoughts "( Bachelard, 165-166)<sup>3</sup>.

*Tokyo!* mentioned above shows exactly the self-isolation. Actually, the short-films are speaking about different types of social problems, but the most important in this moment is the short-movie called *Shaking Tokyo*. It recalls the image of hikikomori a well-known social phenomenon in Japanese world. Hikikomori are those young people (teenagers or young adults) who do nothing except sitting in their rooms. The only communication with the outside world is the internet; they don't speak with their families, friends etc. A hikikomori main occupation is to stay in his room and play computer games, or read comics. They can stay this way for years. Concerning this, we shouldn't be amazed by "bocchi seki".

The hikikomori presented in *Shaking Tokyo* is an extreme one: he doesn't play games, even the television is non-functional; the only technology is represented by the phone used to order food. He doesn't find any joy, he just lives in a total abandonment: he falls asleep during defecation, he just looks at the sunshine passing through his room. His active life consists of stacking empty pizza boxes (which he orders in a certain day of the week) and rolls of toilet

<sup>2</sup> „Aruncată din cochilia protecție a tradiției, a uzanțelor, a regulilor, ea se descoperă mai vulnerabilă ca niciodată.”(Bruckner, 30).

<sup>3</sup> „Prin multe din aspectele sale, ungherul „trăit” refuză viața, restrânge viața, ascunde viața. Ungherul este în acest caz o negare a Universului. În ungher nu vorbești cu tine însuși. Dacă-ți amintești de ceasurile din ungher, îți amintești de o tăcere, de o tăcere a gândurilor” ( Bachelard, 165-166).

paper; a lot of circles and squares (even cubes) in which he's hiding. He also reads books about traveling.

Although the hikikomori are considered nowadays the most polemic problem of the Japanese world, we can find the incipit of it in the seventies, in one of Kobo Abe's novels *The Box Man*. The confinement is similar to hikikomori's, but the box man chooses a box, he moves in with all the necessary things for survival and he goes out on the streets. "The one who plunges into such an object ceases to be a human being the moment he gets out on the street. And there is no box. He becomes a kind of spectrum "(Kobo Abe, 15)<sup>4</sup>. The reason for committing such a thing is like the hikikomori's, he is too sensitive and also lacks the confidence in other people. "It is very hard to fool a box man. When he looks outside, he can see all the lies and malice hidden in the landscape. The view has made me shake all my beliefs, tempted me to believe there is a way for people not to wander with the overt intention to make me surrender "(Kobo Abe, 44)<sup>5</sup>.

If all this happens in the Eastern world, that doesn't mean it's totally absent in our hemisphere. The oldest text I know about reclusion is Herman Melville's *Bartleby*. Between his scrivener and a hikikomori we can find some similarities. Bartley prefers to do nothing and stays in the building where he used to work, although he is dismissed by the lawyer he had previously worked for. In contrast, hikikomori aren't abandoned just like that, because of tradition, family values, embarrassment etc. He finds his place in the jail, because no one knew what to do with him. Jails and hospitals are usually swallowing this kind of unwanted people. He is very sensitive, just like the hikikomori, and the repercussion is he dies in jail (even though he could walk free) near the highest and the thickest wall, to be more precise, in a patio which leads us to a cube.

Yet, the most important is *The circle*<sup>6</sup> written by Matei Vişniec, a short text included in *Haggard theatre or The Trashcan-Man*<sup>7</sup>. This can be considered the manifest text of reclusion: "For some time now, most of the circles do not even listen to people. It would seem that there are countless people who, once inside the circle, find that they can't open the cage they entered. And they will not be able to get out. Ever. "(Vişniec 100)<sup>8</sup>

Some can't get out, others refuse to do it without a real motivation like hikikomori and Kobo's characters. Others are totally unaware about the fact they have been trapped between the walls created once for protection. So everything comes down to a society on whose streets we don't see any more people, but circles and squares who interrupt all possibilities of human interaction and communication: "A circle for two, that certainly will never exist. " (Vişniec, p100)<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> „Cel care plonjează într-un asemenea obiect își pierde calitatea de ființă umană în clipa în care iese pe stradă. Și nu e nici cutie. Devine un fel de spectru” (Kobo Abe,15).

<sup>5</sup> „Cu greu este însă păcălit un bărbat cutie. Când privește afară, el captează toate minciunile și relele intenții ascunse de peisaj. Priveliștea era făcută să-mi zdruncine toate convingerile, să mă ispitească să cred că e un drum pe care lumea nu se poate rătăci cu intenția vădită de a mă determina să capitulez” (Kobo Abe,44)

<sup>6</sup> *Omul din cerc*

<sup>7</sup> *Teatru descompus sau Omul Pubelă*

<sup>8</sup> „ de câțva timp, majoritatea cercurilor nici nu mai ascultă de oameni. S-ar părea că sunt nenumărați cei care, odată intrați în cerc, descoperă că nu mai pot să-și deschidă cușca în care au intrat. Și că nu vor mai putea ieși, de fapt, niciodată.” (Vişniec, 100)

<sup>9</sup> „Un cerc pentru doi, așa ceva nu există și e sigur că nici nu va exista vreodată” (Vişniec, p100).

It is already epic; the absence of communication increases directly proportional with the city's dimension. The more it becomes populated, the more people start acting like machines set to undergo a well-established distance from A to B, obviously in a short time to be more effective, but without looking out, with their eyes lost, absent expressions, if not downright dark.

Such a world got an appropriate representation in one of Samuel Beckett's stories *The Lost Ones*<sup>10</sup> which leads us to the skeleton of the society, its mechanism. We can't see the circles and squares, just like in the real world, but we can feel their presence. So it is about a group of people who walk in a cylinder, respecting certain rules and seeking the exit, but each one by his own way/ method. They can't communicate, collaborate, each of them has its own purpose: "Except for the outbursts of violence (this world) is as foreign to them as butterflies. Not so much because it lacks feeling or intelligence, but because of the ideal everyone fell prey to." (Beckett, p 376)<sup>11</sup>. They stay together just because of the space: the cylinder, a huge machinery. On the inside is covered in rubber to soften the sounds provided with numerous stairs and niches to be checked with the idea of finding exits. There is also periodic temperature fluctuations making bodies look like old paper and oscillations of light which cause blindness. One of the most relevant issues is population density, a very good factor in rule making: "large enough to allow you to search in vain for nothing, small enough to have nowhere to go." (Beckett, 371)<sup>12</sup>. In the beginning the governing force seems to come from the outside, but at the same time, all those people inside the drum are projecting this world for themselves. They are in the same situation as Kobo's characters who create those guarded spaces and later are not able to shake them off: "A box is apparently a simple cube with angles, but when it is contemplated from within, it becomes a labyrinth of a hundred enigmatic rings linked together. The more you squirm, the more the box that looks like an extra skin unraveling from the body creates new misleading distortions" (Kobo Abe, 229)<sup>13</sup>. We can also relate them to those of Vişniec, capable to draw the circles even with the nails and they stop needing the special chalk or the authorities support. The cylinder is nothing else but the result of hopeless seeking of an exit, the image of a doomed society. The base of this situation is the absence of communication, the absence of a real society, which places the exit in the middle of the ceiling. This point could be reached by dedicated team-work, but they prefer just to spin it, to run in circles that make possible the spinning effect, the existence of the cylinder.

Something similar happens in the *Cube* movie directed by Vincenzo Natali in 1997. If Beckett had shown us the society based on confinement like a huge drum, Natali adopts the image of a huge rubik that becomes a human trap, a deadly machinery. Here reigns sluggishness along with the lack of communication, both of them forming in fact a vicious circle, so that no one is responsible for anything: „WORTH: I make me sick too. We're both

<sup>10</sup> *Depopulatorul*

<sup>11</sup> „în afara răbufnirilor de violență le este la fel de străină ca și fluturilor. Nu este atât din lipsă de inimă sau inteligență, cât din pricina idealului căruia fiecare i-a căzut pradă” (Beckett, p 376).

<sup>12</sup> „Destul de vast pentru a-ți îngădui să cauți în van, destul de restrâns pentru ca orice fugă să fie zadarnică” (Beckett, 371).

<sup>13</sup> „O cutie este, în aparență, un simplu paralelipiped cu unghiuri drepte, dar când o privești dinăuntru, devine un labirint cu o sută de inele enigmatice legate laolaltă. Cu cât te zvârcolești mai mult, cu atât cutia care arată ca o epidermă suplimentară ce se dezvoltă din trup- creează noi contorsiuni amăgitoare” (Kobo Abe, 229)

part of the system. I drew a box - you walk a beat. It's like you said Quentin is: Keep your head down, keep it simple, just look at what's in front of you! I mean nobody wants to see the big picture. Life's too complicated. I mean, let's face it. The reason we're here is it's out of control.”(Cube) This loss of control is fatal for the characters, they all die until the end, except one, Kazan who is mentally handicapped. The rubik is a complex construction, a mixture of all the elements already mentioned above: cube, circle, square etc. This creates a place where a minimal fusion between the elements of the group has to exist, otherwise we can talk about a symbolic harakiri of humanity, that actually starts happening. This micro-society that appears like it was created in the lab (the cube itself), with its architect, policeman, doctor, prisoner, child with flashes of genius in mathematics and even the insane character, seemingly a burden to society, all fail triumphantly. The destroying element is, paradoxically, the symbol of law and order – the man who actually stepped on top of all others, just to save himself, being unable to accept the idea that only by collaborating, working in a real team, helping each other to supplement will be able to reach the only existing output. Just like in Beckett’s *Cylinder*, they don’t really communicate and in this case they are ”punished” with the death sentence, self-grinding.

For a crystal clear message at the end of the movie, Worth, the architect, in his last breathing minutes refuses to walk out the door and let everything behind because he believes there is no escape, everywhere else you will find the same thing, over and over again, that „Enormous human stupidity”. (Cube) He seems to be like Sorescu’s *Iona*, who can’t get out from inside the fish, every time he collides with the same wall, the same landscape.

Here we are, back to the same problem of refusing the given world, like hikikomori or *Bartleby* does. We can question again the legitimacy of confinement. One way is the refuse of the world, but a world where you had something to say about, so you have a part of the blame. Also, it could be seen like a profane purifying process, which fails in the absence of any belief, almost useless to mention any kind of sacredness. Therefore, the action becomes mere imitation, a buffoonery, both for the individual practicing it who only accomplishes fooling himself, and for the outsiders who are more outraged by the lack of substance. In fact, it is a form of cowardice, inability to be primarily responsible for oneself and also for your world. It is not necessary to be accepted as it is, it requires a conscious and responsible approach, even confrontation. Of all those mentioned above, only *Bartleby* adopts confinement as a form of protest, the rest seem to be about the cowardice mentioned before. Default occurs blaming each other, society, fatigue and possibly others. Self-isolation does not lead to anything else except for barren seclusion. Willy, nilly, man is a social being which requires home sharing, cohabitation. This statement instantly brings us back to the first sentence of the work that spoke of certain patterns required: You need to have friends, you must get involved, you must do etc. In some places this represents the mainstream’s bias. The collaboration I keep talking about, but something innate and not patterns that do not fit the individual, which stem from protecting their interiority. It is this anomaly results in the situations described above. Something has made man (if not all of them at least some are pretty false-hearted histrionics) to suck out all the life out of humanity: commitment, compassion or even interest in others. Selflessness, rather than a trait that strengthens man to accomplish something, leads not only to merge with the group but also becomes a mere sham, ostensibly like friendship. Today's man who chooses seclusion engages in self contemplation and fails to find an answer, or

rather sees a huge empty gap that he doesn't need to fill anymore. He becomes captive of inner and outer emptiness that designs his space. So we get to all the major elements listed above: the circle and cube, and by joining their monstrous living environments the cylinder and the huge rubik are born.

„WORTH: It's maybe hard for you to understand, but there's no conspiracy. Nobody is in charge. It's a headless blunder operating under the illusion of a master plan. Can you grasp that? Big brother is not watching you. / QUENTIN: What kind of fucking explanation is that? / WORTH: It's the best you're gonna get. I looked and the only explanation I can come to is that there is nobody up there. / QUENTIN: Somebody had to say yes to this thing. / WORTH: What thing? Only we know what it is. / QUENTIN: We have no idea, what it is. / WORTH: We know more than anybody else. (Cube). Yet they can't do anything about it, they can't change anything although they've understood the situation. The renewal of an uprooted world seems to be a crazy job and maybe this is the reason why only one character comes out alive - the mentally-challenged Kazan.

It may be related to a rejection of intellect, rationality, the pointless mechanism of algebra mentioned by Hannah Arendt, who also speaks about the ability to save, revitalize the world just by being with body and soul. "And since this biological life, which can reach the observation itself is both a metabolic process between man and nature, you might say that introspection should not lose consciousness ramifications of a lack of reality, as found within man not in his mind but his bodily processes outside material sufficient to restore the connection to the outside world." (Arendt, 256)<sup>14</sup>. This explains why hikikomori fails to leave its cube for the girl, quite cliché and cheesy, I'd say, if we let us be guided by intelligentsia. However, the issue takes on a living of its own, something really visceral, honest, able to free the person from the ballast in which he is caught in, in other words he could escape this way from the trap designed by his own hands, the reason box.

And yet, although the overall trend bears a strong apocalyptic imprint, theorists (Arendt) and artists (Bong Joon-ho) together, leave a loophole that each must find by himself. This leads to a dissolution of the bizarre spaces confronted in this paper. "Learning about love means first of all to learn to speak about love, and this is best taught by poets, novelists, philosophers." (Bruckner, 167)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> „Și de vreme ce această viață bilologică, la care se poate ajunge în observarea de sine, este în același timp un proces metabolic între om și natură, s-ar putea spune că introspecția nu mai trebuie să se piardă în ramificațiile unei conștiințe lipsite de realitate, întrucât găsește înăuntrul omului nu în mintea lui ci în procesele sale corporale suficientă materie din afară pentru a-l repune în legătură cu lumea exterioară.” (Arendt, 256).

<sup>15</sup> „Să înveți dragostea înseamnă mai întâi să înveți să vorbești despre dragoste, și asta nu se învață de nicăieri mai bine decât de la poeți, romancieri, filosofi.(Bruckner, 167)

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