

I. LITERATŪROS NARATYVAI IR KONTEKSTAI / NARRACJE LITERACKIE I KONTEKSTY

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GISH JEN: LOOSENING THE CANYON OF THE CANON

The idea of the article is to analyse the complicated interweaving of Chinese and Euro-Atlantic literary tradition in Gish Jen's writings. Asian wing of American literature is a phenomenon that has declared its existence comparatively not long ago. The voice of Asian American writers was initially not very loud. However, at the turn of 20th-21st centuries contours of American literature began to change due to the influence of a new concept of man and world arisen in the writings of Maxine Hong Kingston, Tamezo Mori, Amy Tan, Kazuo Ishiguro, Gish Jen.

On the one hand, G. Jen's texts are written by the canons of a postmodern narrative, which implies the poetics of decentration and fragmentation of the text, irony, double code, multi-layered intertextuality. Sternian satirical dispute with literary and scientific works of his time, inherited by postmodern writers, has become one of the brightest distinctive characteristic of G. Jen's texts as well. Like other postmodern writers, she creates literary and intellectual fabric of the text into which responses to a variety of influential theories and concepts of the turn of 20th-21st centuries are interwoven. On the other hand, the writer develops the tradition of Asian literature with its emphasis on moral and spiritual existence of a man. This tradition sees a man not as a battlefield but an interplay of good and evil. This interplay may not make a man perfect, but it makes him human.

KEY WORDS: Asian American literature, short story, postmodern, stereotypes, canon.

In her article "The Female Frontier" Elaine Showalter, a respected literary critic, speculates about the future of the American novel, facing a great loss with John Updike's death, and reasonably predicts that it is impossible without women's voices: "In the 21st century, no understanding of American literature that excludes women's voices can hope to do justice to its splendor" (Showalter 2009). In her book *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (2009) (Showalter 2010), in the chorus of women writers' voices (Toni Morrison, Anne Tyler, Joyce Carol Oates, Jayne Anne Phillips, Marilynne Robinson) creating contemporary American literature, Showalter has certainly recognized the voice of Gish Jen, the author of four novels and a collection

of short stories. Paying tribute to her talent as a writer, the literary critic does not only mention her name in the same breath with “highbrow” American women writers but also makes perhaps the most important step towards the recognition of her merits, rejecting the definition of “Asian American writer”, though G. Jen is “only the second” generation of the Chinese in America, and the material and subject matter of most of her writings are traditionally reviewed by researchers in the narrow vein of Asian American discourse.

The definition of a writer as “Asian American” up till now has been regarded as some kind of a compromise, a concession to look “beyond the hyphen”: from “Asian-American” to “Asian American”. It can be understood as an attempt to include the writings of Louis Chu, Maxine Hong Kingston, John Okada, Frank Chin, Amy Tan, Don Lee, Susan Choi, universally praised by readers and literary critics, within the general context of American literature. Nevertheless, by the second half of the twentieth century it has contributed to the emergence of not only “literary” but also “critical Chinatown” in the Euro-Atlantic literary discourse: Elaine Kim’s groundbreaking study “Asian American literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their social context” (1982), which was a breakthrough in the Asian wing of American literature, has long been in sight only of Asian American literary critics. Meanwhile, E. Kim stipulates from the very beginning that the term “Asian American” is a disputable one, pointing out that it is merely “more precise” than “Oriental” (Kim 1982: iv). She claims that the first and foremost purpose of her research is to demonstrate common features as well as differences in the writings of American authors of different ancestry, including those born in America, “... within the context of a shared American experience” (ibid.). The key point of E. Kim’s study is obviously to answer not only topical but also vital question of the contemporary literary criticism: what creates this context – a common origin or a common language? Contemplating this question, E. Kim draws on Maxine Hong Kingston’s writing experience and clarifies that Kingston as well as other Asian American authors faces the challenge of preserving the artistic integrity of their writings and at the same time be understood by readers who have different cultural experiences (ibid.: ix). It is clear therefore (even though it is not specifically articulated in the work) that E. Kim’s understanding of common language is much broader than just the language of communication, and she mainly implies **literary (aesthetic) language** that can convey “American experience” shared both by a writer and a reader. Success of the writings by Don Lee, Kazuo Ishiguro, Susan Choi and Gish Jen supports this point of view.

G. Jen’s texts are written by the canons of a postmodern narrative, which implies the poetics of decentration and fragmentation of the text, irony, double code, multi-layered intertextuality. In her texts, especially in the first novels “Typical American” (1991) and “Mona in the Promised Land” (1996), scholars reasonably trace sophisticated communication with the novels of Laurence Sterne – one of the forerunners of Postmodernism. Sternian satirical dispute with literary and scientific works of his time, inherited by postmodern writers, has become one of the brightest distinctive characteristic of G. Jen’s texts as well. Like other postmodern writers, she creates literary and intellectual fabric of the text into which responses to a variety of influential theories and concepts of the turn of 20th-21st centuries are interwoven (from Structuralism, Deconstruction,

the concepts of “death of the author” and hypertext explored by postmodern writers to Orientalism, Postcolonialism, Multiculturalism and Womanism argued by G. Jen).

Moreover, the intellectual component in G. Jen’s texts is either suggestive: it recurs, repeatedly mirrors and changes modes – from the tragic to sentimental and ironic; or it can be intentionally focused and fragmented – as an emotional discussion with the theoretical, historical and literary tradition, as, for example, in the novel “Mona in the Promised Land” (1996), or in the short stories “The White Umbrella” (Jen 1984) and “Who’s Irish?” (Jen 1999).

A vivid example of this is “The White Umbrella”, one of the first short stories written by G. Jen. It can be read as a reasoning of Jacques Derrida’s “white mythology” that he understood and argued as a mythology of “the white man”, as “...a universal rational foundations of peace” (“Reason”) (Derrida 1974) (the concept later borrowed by the Postcolonial theory (Young 2004)). It can either be understood as an allusion to the colour semantics in the novels of African American writers Toni Morrison “The Bluest Eye” (1970) and Alice Walker “The Color purple” (1982) that challenges the ability of colors “belong” to any race.

However, G. Jen’s texts differ from those of Western postmodern writers John Barth, Julian Barnes, Julio Cortazar, Umberto Eco, whose sparkling polemics with theorists, who had generated humanitarian background of Euro-Atlantic space of the late twentieth century, resembles the intellectual fireworks with intellectual component sometimes to compete with the literary one. Intellectual polemic bitterness in G. Jen’s writings is softened by their richness with universal themes of love and loyalty, loneliness, friendship, dignity and compassion.

Thus, the poetics of the short story “Who’s Irish?” actually focuses on repetition and ironic literary play upon themes and constructs typical both for Asian American literature since the mid-twentieth century (Louis Chu, Toshio Mori, Hisaye Yamamoto, Jessica Hagedorn, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan) and a variety of sociological and anthropological theories, Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism, ethnic studies and Asian American literary criticism, such as mimicry, cultural assimilation and hybridization, hybrid identity and racial discrimination, etc. By building the plot of the story on the issues that have become recognizable and symbolic for Asian American discourse (“generation gap”, discrimination, and identification), G. Jen develops postmodern tradition of double coding, provoking the unprepared reader and critic to reading superficial, transparent sense.

But in fact almost nothing is Asian American in this short story – neither the mode and the narrative, nor the plot and the characters. Like there is no, even unintended, association with Ernest Hemingway’s “Cat in the Rain” in Donald Barthelme’s short story “Chablis” (1987), because it is ruined already by the first sentences “My wife wants a dog. She already has a baby” (Barthelme 1989). The text unfolds a scene of “generation gap” typical to the late twentieth century Asian American literature. Meanwhile, unlike in Asian American literature that inherited the Asian tradition of depicting reunion of “roots and leaves” there is no final reconciliation of parents and children (justified in Amy Tan’s “The Joy Luck Club” (1989) and destroying the unique for Sino-American literature satirical optics of Louis Chu’s novel “Eat a Bowl of Tea” (1961)). In G. Jen’s text, the conflict between parents and children finally is not only exhausted, but also deliberately brought to its logical

conclusion, which is manifested by the plot of the short story as well as lexically and stylistically. Implicit conflict between the protagonist with her “fierce” daughter Natalie turns into direct confrontation with her “wild” granddaughter Sophie and finishes, as a matter of fact, with the expulsion of the protagonist from her daughter’s family.

Thus, like in the above-mentioned D. Barthelme’s short story, which “sounds like” Hemingway’s writings for an inattentive reader, but presents non-Hemingway’s poetics, the theme of “generation gap” in G. Jen’s short story is argued from the very beginning. Actually, G. Jen’s story begins with memories of the 68-year old protagonist on confrontations that happened many years ago with gang members, who came for protection money. At the same time it becomes clear that she was at enmity not only with them – busboys, cooks, even her husband were afraid of her. Now she is especially suspicious about Irish so she does not try to get across to her in-laws. There has not been a single person in her life with whom she lived peacefully: she is not even able to listen to her beloved granddaughter. Hence, her tragedy is not connected with the “generation gap” but caused by her own confrontational character.

The theme of racial and cultural discrimination, raised by the Postcolonial theory wave, emerges in the story ironically-suggestively, and together with the theme of “generation gap” has become the recognizable marker due to which G. Jen’s writings are considered exclusively within the Sino-American literature. However, the theme of racial discrimination is depicted in the story in a different way. It is revealed not directly, through depiction of drama of a talent death as in a short story “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” by Hisave Yamamoto, or a complicated maze of family relationships as in the novel “Dogeaters” by Jessica Hagedorn, or undisguised arrogance of an American Embassy officer towards a junior officer as in the novel “Country of Origin” by Don Lee. It is revealed as if reflected in the mirror – through own racial and cultural prejudices of the protagonist.

Principles of cultural differentiation ingrained in the mind of a 68-year old Chinese woman distinguish only two poles of “friend or foe” in her world pattern. Disbelief, suspicion of all white-skinned Americans in the case of the Irish is even more aggravated. Being unable to understand the reasons for her prejudices against the Irish, the protagonist finds nothing better than to recall the long-standing rivalry between the Chinese and the Irish during the construction of the First Transcontinental Railroad in the United States in the late 19th century.

Intercultural conflict within the Sino-Irish family is escalated due to the fact that the Shea family is also not devoid of discriminatory attitudes towards the non-white Americans. This is best reflected in the episode with the Shea family discussing little Sophie’s brown skin in the presence of the protagonist: “They say, It seems like Sophie should be color in between Nattie and John. Seems funny, a girl named Sophie Shea be brown. But she is brown, maybe her name should be Sophie Brown. . . . nothing the matter with brown. They are just surprised” (Jen 1999: 6). The Shea family members’ ridiculous attempts to be highly civilized and politically correct excellently demonstrate their obsession with racial issues. They do not even notice that all these phrases: “color in between”, “marrying down”, or “Nattie was just as good as white” sound an insult to the intelligent, resolute, and well-

versed Chinese woman. And she stops this “Christmas-tree train” once and for all. In her younger years she protected her restaurant, pressing the painful point of her compatriots who claimed her business, with the arguments about “a filial son”. Being old she rescues the dignity of her granddaughter without further ado, using phrase destructive to every male: “Maybe John is not her father, I say one day, to stop the train. And sure enough, train wreck. None of the brothers ever say the word *brown* to me again” (Jen 1999: 6–7).

All three generations of women demonstrate stark contrast with the Confucian’s concept of a virtuous wife. The protagonist and her daughter do not agree to male dominance and determine their own way of life. Little Sophie, who derived her character from her grandmother and mother, is initiative, creative and independent. The poetics of female images in G. Jen’s writings is different compared to earlier Asian American literature (Louis Chu, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan). Reading E. Tan’ novels we speak of “*challenging stereotypes*”. One of the core poetical principals of Jen’s narrative is “*overturning stereotypes*”. It is in G. Jen’s texts that the first generation of Chinese immigrants is depicted as not only battling to survive and concerned about their own identity in a hostile environment, but also building a successful business (protagonist in “Who’s Irish?”, mama Wong in “The Love Wife”). Chinese wives are socially active (Mona in “Mona the Promised Land”), prudent, successful and take family management in their hands (Helen in “Typical American”, Natalie in “Who’s Irish?”). Chinese unmarried sister rejects the babysitting role in her brother’s family, building a successful career, and at the same time giving all the forces and means to support the unfortunate brother (Teresa in “Typical American”). American woman, on the other hand, accepts the role of the “unloved wife”, abandons her promising career in favour of bringing up children just to keep the family together, accepts meekly the humiliating nickname “Blondie” and honours the elders, being reconciled to the unchallenged leadership of her Chinese mother-in-law in their family (Jenny in “The Love Wife”).

Conclusion

The literary heritage of the writer, along with the texts of British writer Kazuo Ishiguro, is a bright illustration of conscious “loosening” of the Western literary canon. In G. Jen’s novel “The Love Wife” it is conveyed allegorically through the “Chinese versions of stories” and “Chinese versions of songs” that every Western child knows, as well as new Chinese version of Western names created by Lanlan. Thus, the Western tradition of “telling stories” acquires a different poetical paradigm and G. Jen’s texts should be regarded as a kind of reflection of Pearl Buck’s writings. Being recognized both an American and Chinese writer P. Buck gave the world a unique literary phenomenon – the novels “Good Earth” and “Sons” in which a “Chinese story” is told according to the canon of the Old Testament, with its emphasis on the secondariness of artistic, aesthetic, and hence – reticence of artistic devices.

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